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When Rhetoric Is a Lady :
Rhetorical Identity and Shakespearean Female
Characterization

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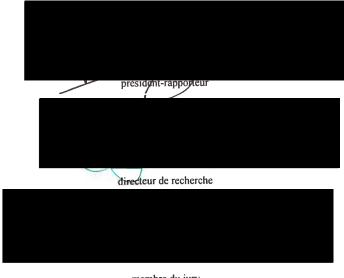
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Quand la rhétorique est une dame:
L'identité rhétorique et la représentation shakespearienne des personnages féminins

~ Résumé ~

Cette thèse explore le concept de <<l'identité rhétorique>> dans la représentation de la femme dans l'oeuvre shakespearienne. Au début de la Renaissance les femmes étaient soumises aux normes sociopolitiques de silence, de chasteté, et d'obéissance; pourtant les pièces de Shakespeare regorgent de femmes rhétoriques. Immanquablement, la femme shakespearienne défie toutes contraintes à sa liberté d'action et à sa liberté d'expression, et atteint une force qui lui permet d'avoir un rayonnement sur l'art et sur la culture.

Si l'on considère que chacune des pièces de Shakespeare forme une société de personnages fondée sur le langage, il s'avère nécessaire de déterminer la tolérance de cette société aux constructions rhétoriques qui lui sont propres. Comme soliloque féminine, la chanson et le silence sont de façon notoirement capables de déstabiliser les mondes dramatiques et de déterminer la destinée de leurs habitants. Les personnages shakespeariens de sexe féminin ne peuvent pas demeurer intacts et en effet ne resteront pas intacts étant donné leurs tendances langagières. Dans les tragédies, ces femmes meurent, tandis que dans les comédies, elles arrivent à survivre grâce à un travestisme carnavalesque. La femme rhétorique ne peut tout simplement pas survivre à la moralité de la Renaissance à moins qu'elle ne la transcende.

La théorie de l'identité rhétorique crée un domaine fécond pour la critique du personnage féminin - un domaine dans lequel on peut discuter des femmes shakespeariennes en termes de leurs rapports exceptionnels avec leur propre rhétorique. En portant son attention sur leurs réussites, échecs et ambiguïtés rhétoriques par rapport aux structures dramatiques, ces femmes ne se définissent plus par le biais d'autres personnages, ni ne se construisent-elles leurs propres caractères en s'appropriant un discours rhétorique. Plutôt elles adoptent une identité rhétorique dans laquelle les personnages *sont*, en réalité, leurs propres mots.

~ Mots clés ~

Shakespeare • Drame • Rhétorique • Identité • Personnage • Théorie
Femmes • Caractérisation • Renaissance • Genre

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When Rhetoric Is a Lady:
Rhetorical Identity and Shakespearean Female Characterization

~ Abstract ~

My Master's thesis in Shakespeare explores the notion of "rhetorical identity" in its characterization of the Shakespearean female. Women, in Early Modern England, were expected to adhere to socio-political prescriptions of silence, chastity, and obedience; yet, rhetorical women abound in Shakespearean drama. The Shakespearean female consistently defies constraints upon her speech and actions, and achieves a potency that allows her to resound in art and culture.

If each Shakespearean play is a language-based character society, it becomes necessary to determine that society's tolerance to its own rhetorical constructions. As female soliloquy, song and silence are notoriously capable of destabilizing dramatic worlds and determining the fates of their inhabitants, Shakespearean female characters cannot and do not remain intact given their transgressive speech tendencies. In the tragedies, they die, while in the comedies, they are preserved only by carnivalesque transvestism. The rhetorical woman simply cannot survive Renaissance morality – that is, unless she transcends it.

The theory of rhetorical identity opens up a unique space for female character criticism – one in which we may discuss Shakespeare's women in terms of their exceptional relationships with their own rhetoric. By focusing on their rhetorical successes, failures and ambiguities in relation to dramatic structures, these women are no longer defined by other characters, nor do they construct their own characters through the appropriation of rhetorical agency. Instead, they assume rhetorical identity, according to which their characters in fact *are* their own words.

~ Keywords ~

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For my parents,

John and Cindy Musgrave

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~ Katie

Fig.1. "Rhetorica" [Lady Rhetoric] from Gregor Reisch, *Margarita Philosophica* (Freiburg, 1503); reproduced from the Collections of the Library of Congress (Washington, DC); rpt. in Carole Levin and Patricia A. Sullivan, eds., *Political Rhetoric, Power, and Renaissance Women* (Albany: State U of NY P, 1995) v.

When Rhetoric Is a Lady:

Rhetorical Identity and Shakespearean Female Characterization

~ Introduction ~

An outspoken Renaissance woman was an unruly Renaissance woman, both in art and in life. Jane Donawerth explains that the "gender role assigned to women in Renaissance Europe" was such that "appropriating rhetoric was a particularly radical thing to do. The ideal woman was 'chaste, silent, and obedient,' to the point that she did not study the art of rhetoric" (265-6). To illustrate her argument, Donawerth presents several Early Modern woodcuts found in Gregor Reisch's encyclopedia *Margarita Philosophica* (1503), and examines attributes of the depicted figures as they signify this "cultural restriction" (266):

> Lady Grammar ["*Typus Gramatio,*" not included]... is a modest womanly figure, with her hair done up under a cap, and a sober gown up to her neck; ... she is the sort of woman humanists would like their daughters to grow up to be.... Lady Rhetoric ["Rhetorica," Figure 1][1]... is not an appropriate model for daughters: her hair is waved and flowing loose over her shoulders, her low-necked gown is made of extravagant patterned brocade, and the circle of famous rhetors surrounding her openly admire her theatricality; she is anything but modest. (Donawerth 266)

Remarkably, this representation of Lady Rhetoric supports the argument of this thesis in both symbolic and material ways. On the one hand, the drawing graphically portrays the paradox that inspired this inquiry: that of the double-edged "sword of rhetoric" which itself signifies both the art of the rhetorical female and the societal threat against her. On the other, this actualization of a concept of Lady Rhetoric reinforces, quite literally and fortuitously, the greater purpose of the project: to theorize and characterize the rhetorical Shakespearean female as a transcendent and everlasting "image of speech."

Figuratively speaking, as Donawerth suggests, the Reisch engraving imagines the female rhetorician as an undignified and wanton woman, and mirrors the prevailing

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[1] Fig. 1. "Rhetorica" [Lady Rhetoric] from Gregor Reisch, *Margarita Philosophica* (Freiburg, 1503); reproduced from the Collections of the Library of Congress (Washington, DC). See page ix.

Renaissance anxiety that "if a woman opened her mind and opened her mouth, she might very well choose to open herself in other ways" (266). In keeping with that negative characterization, the image also suggests a very punitive response to female speech (and its coextensive sexuality) in its inclusion of the flower, growing out of one side of Lady Rhetoric's mouth, which threatens to be cut off by the large sword entering from the other side; can it be her "flowery tongue" that is being removed, as inferred by what looks like blood running down her neck? Most importantly, aside from any and all apparent social judgments, the illustration features a variety of names and terms that are central to humanist learning. In between the Latin words *historia, poesis, moralia, naturas, and Leges* ("history," "poetry," "moral philosophy," "nature," and "Law") which are inscribed upon books around Lady Rhetoric, and the names of famous and ancient rhetoricians Seneca and Aristotle which appear on the mortared walls beside her, is the word *musa* – written across her bare lower neck. As the labels and their positions in this image point to their greater functions – with books and bricks as the tools and foundations of the humanist school of thought – Lady Rhetoric's classification, translated into the English "Muse" ("muse, *n.*[1]"), confers upon her a more significant power and duty than that of being a "cautionary tale" for young Renaissance women. After all there can be no underestimating the impact that a goddess of arts, possessing such "theatricality" (a term which suggests both her performative and dramatic properties), would have had on the superior imagination of one William Shakespeare. Indeed, this ambivalent representation in its entirety speaks for the prevalence of expert female orators in Shakespeare's plays, who were clearly

considered and dramatically represented as both exceptional and transgressive, both captivating and consequential during his time – and beyond it.

Given the contradictory nature of Lady Rhetoric, this thesis is concerned with understanding her complexity, her influence, and her fate as it is ultimately determined for her by social forces and theatrical standards, and with devising and applying a methodology of Shakespearean female characterization that theoretically frees the character from her traditional prescriptions of censure, blame and death. My central argument is that if we consider a character's own personal rhetoric and the effects of that language as entirely constitutive of her identity, then that figure is relieved of the critical burden of dramatic context without undermining the structural significance of that context. Each and every Shakespearean character possesses a rhetorical identity that has been purposefully crafted by Shakespeare himself, and this project is aimed at exploring the importance of that linguistic phenomenon in its creation of potent and lasting images of women in literature and culture.

Whether or not Shakespeare ever saw Reisch's illustration of Lady Rhetoric, he was undoubtedly taken with the notion of the expert female orator. Lady Rhetoric abounds in Shakespearean drama. Karen Newman inadvertently explains her widespread presence by asserting that, in the absence of any overarching narrative, "[c]haracter is required in drama because action requires agents" (1). Newman here underscores the necessity of characters' words and actions in the development of a dramatic plot. Significantly, whenever a prominent female character turns out to be rhetorically gifted, she has a massive impact on the course and outcome of her play. After all, can we suppose that Macbeth would have killed Duncan without the coaxing

of an "unsex[ed]" Lady Macbeth (*Mac.* 1.5.48)? Would Antonio not have been one gruesome pound lighter without the "quality" of Portia's "mercy" (*MV* 4.1.190)? Would Othello have been so quick to love and to condemn Desdemona without her "downright violence and storm of fortunes" (*Oth.* 1.3.245)?[2] Of course, these are just a few famous and rather obvious examples of consequential female eloquence in Shakespeare, but they are enough to command critical attention to the capacity of female rhetoric to destabilize the social world of a play and determine the fates of its various inhabitants.

Consequently, the critical impulse in treating Shakespeare's women is to focus on their rhetorical agency, and to gauge their purpose and usefulness in terms of the effects that their speech has on other characters and on the drama itself. In so doing, we let them tell us who they are. A very serious problem arises, however, when it comes time for social judgments to be made. In *Reading Shakespeare's Characters: Rhetoric, Ethics, and Identity*, Christy Desmet explains the moral consequences of "subordinating character to plot" – a theory rooted in Aristotle's *Poetics*:

> Action… is performed by agents who exhibit ethical tendencies that place them somewhere along a continuum of virtue and vice…. When character is considered as a by-product of plot, drama is closely related to ethics: Dramatic agents have ethical character so that we may judge their actions as we judge men at the end of their public lives. (4-6)

The Aristotelian theory of ethical character will be further evaluated in Chapter 1 for its role in creating the conditions of Lady Rhetoric's existence. At this point, it is useful in its suggestion that having broken the rules of appropriate female conduct, Lady Rhetoric simply cannot win out in the face of Renaissance moral scrutiny. She cannot, that is, unless she transcends it.

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[2] All Shakespeare quotes have been taken from various, individual editions of his plays. Please consult the Bibliography to reference the specific publications of the plays used for this project.

In an attempt to discuss Lady Rhetoric's fate and her theoretical escape in more structural terms, I defer to certain insights found in prior studies on the Rhetoric of Character. Giorgio Melchiori argues for Shakespeare's expert creation of an "over-all," play-specific "linguistic structure" – an "aesthetic whole" to which all of the characters adhere in order to "effectively communicate" the drama (61-2, 71). Melchiori calls this the "Rhetoric of Character Construction," indicating how it shapes characters by means of distinctive and familiar linguistic patterns (68) – particularly without any overarching narrative that would convey specific character qualities and actions (62). While this approach to characterization is rather two-dimensional in its suggestion that a given character is singularly defined by its own manners of speech and physical movements (122), it is nonetheless effective in its advancement of the notion of a language-based "character society" in each Shakespearean play – one in which all characters, for the sake of action, are complicit in the rhetorical construction of identity. Melchiori also opens a door to Karen Newman's expanded notion of "action" as it refers to plot advancement, and her exploration of the rhetorical devices that serve to deepen a character by giving it a third dimension – an "inner-life" with external effects (1-2). Her "Rhetoric of Consciousness" (121) suggests that characters, in speaking of themselves and examining their own conditions, compel us to explore them beyond their "syntactical" and "paradigmatic" categories – as motivated, conflicted, developing persons. (2-4).

If we choose to consider each Shakespearean play as something of a language-based "character society," it becomes necessary – particularly in the case of female characters – to determine the integrity of that society, or rather, its tolerance towards its

own constructions. In other words, we need to figure out who, in that play, actually gets to *be* who they say they are. Which characters get to survive and remain intact? While their rhetoric of choice varies from soliloquy, to song, to silence, rhetorical women in the tragedies – including Lady Macbeth, Desdemona, Cleopatra, Tamora, Lavinia, Cordelia, and Ophelia – are fated, across the board, to suffer and die for their social and verbal crimes. In the comedies, female rhetoricians – including Portia, Viola, and Rosalind – are allowed to live happily ever after, but most of their public speaking is done while disguised as men, and that fact magically serves to excuse them from any moral scrutiny.

What is required then, in positing a theory of rhetorical identity that supports and explains the strength of Shakespeare's female characters, is one figure that provides a loophole in these dramatic laws – that is, a comic heroine who speaks and strives to achieve her own ends, but whose female identity and integrity is never hidden or compromised in that process, and whose character life is not sacrificed for any greater dramatic purpose. Desmet supports this assertion and suggests a solution:

> A substantial amount of work has been done on the subversive effects of cross-dressing in Shakespeare's plays, but the problem of identification is most interesting not in those plays that put their heroines into breeches but in those featuring female characters who exhibit erotic and verbal power without changing costume or sexual identity. *Venus and Adonis*, *Measure for Measure*, and *All's Well That Ends Well* all feature females who combine sexual appeal with a command of oratory, and all examine the unequivocal effect of female rhetoric on men. (137)

Venus and Isabella are indeed two spirited and powerful Shakespearean female characters, who both manage to withstand the Renaissance paradox of embodying both eloquence and femininity. One might argue, however, that they are somewhat lacking in the contextual support that would create metadramatic, theoretical possibility out of

their exceptionality. The mythological content of *Venus and Adonis* positions that work and its heroine in a supernatural morality – one that cannot provide a proper standard for Renaissance judgments. While *Measure for Measure* does provide that standard, and crucially redirect this rhetorical inquiry towards more tragic Shakespearean females (in Chapter 3), the play serves more immediately to trouble prevailing notions of crime and punishment, with Isabella providing the body and voice of mercy in a revolutionary challenge to male judicial standards (Desmet 144-5). While all three of the works cited by Desmet indeed "examine the unequivocal effect of female rhetoric on men," only *All's Well That Ends Well* examines the unequivocal effect of male rhetoric on the female.

While Reisch's Lady Rhetoric provides a hieroglyphic sort of inspiration for this project, *All's Well That Ends Well*'s Helena provides its central paradigm. Indeed, Helena represents the theoretical loophole in Lady Rhetoric's paradoxical condition. I submit that Helena's character and her relationship with language, embodied by the character Parolles, opens up a unique space for female character criticism – one in which we may discuss Shakespeare's more tragic women in terms of their extraordinary relationships with their own rhetoric. In examining the rhetorical successes, failures, and ambiguities of Shakespearean females, and how they relate to dramatic structures, we give them critical and theoretical independence from the rhetorical constructions of their character societies – those that would serve to bind them, and seal their fate in our imagination. Using this methodology, we create the conditions whereby these women are no longer defined by other characters, nor are they responsible for constructing their

own characters through the appropriation of rhetorical agency. Instead, they assume rhetorical identity, according to which their characters in fact *are* their own words.

My initial chapter develops my concept of rhetorical identity and the dramatic character as a critical hybrid of the following branches of theory: firstly, Aristotelian dramatic theory, which underscores the inextricable and ethical relationship between character and plot in tragedy, thus constructing the exceptional rhetorical female as a tragic device; secondly, Barthesian semiological theory, which emphasizes the essential functioning of language in the articulation of reality and the self, the primacy and plurality of the text, and the rhetoric of the image, thus encouraging the concept of the dramatic character as being solely made up of his or her own speech; and finally, Modern Identity theory, which argues for the realignment of the modern moral code away from theistic definitions and towards more personalized classifications. Charles Taylor, in *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity*, posits that "[a] self exists only within… 'webs of interlocution'" (36) – that is, that identity is defined through speech relations. In so doing, he enables a theory of dramatic characterization based on rhetoric, rather than action.

This combined theory is textually advanced, in the remaining chapters of this thesis, through rhetorical character studies of the outstanding females in certain Shakespearean tragicomedies and tragedies. Chapters 2 posits Helena as the model of rhetorical identity, and Chapter 3 examines Isabella as another figure who withstands the rhetorical-female paradox, but whose more controversial and troubled character effectively bridges the gap between comic and tragic women and thus encourages the examination of some of Shakespeare's most resounding and doomed female characters;

the chapter subsequently treats the darker and more provocative identities of *Othello*'s Desdemona and of Lady Macbeth, whose eloquence ultimately trumps the issues of violence and corruption that otherwise define their characters.

Through their various, complex relationships with rhetoric, these four female characters achieve large and lasting identities that oppose and overpower their dramatic characterizations as evil, or false, or weak women – classifications which correspond directly and ironically to the force and frequency of their speech. Juliet Dusinberre writes, "the plays of Shakespeare... dramatize worlds in which women are and were freer beings than the misogyny and disempowerment narrative suggests" (xii). We cannot go back and save Shakespeare's tragic women from their required deaths, nor can we erase the need for his comic women to put away their breeches and restore the patriarchal moral and social order that subjugates them. We can, however, focus on the comprehensive rhetorical identities that make these female characters exceptional – in celebration of their images, their influence, and of the knowledge that Shakespeare is in charge when rhetoric *is* a lady.

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~ Chapter 1 ~

Towards a Theory of Rhetorical Identity

Language most shewes a man: speake that I may see thee. It springs out of the most retired, and inmost parts of us, and is the Image of the Parent of it, the mind. No glasse renders a mans forme, or likenesse, so true as his speech.

~ Ben Jonson, *Discoveries Made Upon Men and Matter*, c.1641

The idea that speech constitutes the man, and substantiates his character, is by no means a groundbreaking one in terms of Renaissance theory or literary criticism. Rather, the concept seems to have pervaded Early Modern thought and art to the point of acquiring commonplace status, both as a socio-cultural assumption and as a critical subject. The title page of the 1641 edition of Jonson's *Discoveries*, from which the above epigraph is taken, declares its miscellaneous contents to "have flow'd out of [Jonson's] daily Readings; or had their refluxe to his peculiar Notion of the Times." Jonson's "peculiar" (contemporarily understood to mean "particular") conception of the linguistic formation of the figure of man thus constitutes a remark upon a certain trend or theme in Early Modern literature, and Jonson's astute observation and articulation of a widespread social belief. In positing and constructing a theory of "rhetorical identity" in relation to Shakespeare's characters, I endeavor to refocus critical attention upon that widespread, disregarded notion of verbally-constituted character as it informs, and is itself enhanced by the generic association between spoken language and character identity in Early Modern drama. With the goal of explaining a distinct literary phenomenon – and not with a view to any sort of "bardolatry" – I mean to theorize the "peculiar" force, vitality, and endurance of Shakespeare's female characters as both the function and the proof of Shakespeare's expert and intentional deployment of rhetoric in the construction of character.

Of course, the statement and theory that "[l]anguage most shewes the man" cannot be thought to implicitly include, contain, or account for the identity of the Early Modern female, as the average woman was rarely seen or heard in public during the age being remarked upon by Jonson, and indeed during most prior and subsequent periods in history. Remarkably, both in spite of and because of that reality, women's rhetorical theory has become an increasingly popular and relevant focus of study throughout the past twenty years. In *Rhetoric Retold: Regendering the Tradition from Antiquity Through the Renaissance* (1997), which constitutes a "remapping" of the earlier (i.e. Classical, Medieval, and Renaissance) histories of the practice and discipline of public speaking, Cheryl Glenn explains that the rhetorical theory attributed to any given society is indicative of that society's power structures and, coextensively, its gender dynamics:

> Rhetoric always inscribes the relation of language and power at a particular moment (including who may speak, who may listen or who will agree to listen, and what can be said); therefore, canonical rhetorical theory has presented the experience of males, powerful males, with no provision or allowance for females. In short, rhetorical history has replicated the power politics of gender, with men in the highest cultural role and social rank. And our view of rhetoric has remained one of a gendered landscape [...]. (1-2)

Recognizing that "women have been closed out of the rhetorical tradition... of vocal, virile, public... men," Glenn seeks in her study to "regender" that tradition by locating female rhetoricians in history and celebrating their cultural contributions (1, 2). Glenn's is a feminist, historiographical effort to revise our narrative of human rhetorical development to include the voices and accomplishments of women. In a similar exercise in theoretical reintegration, Jane Donawerth's *Rhetorical Theory by Women before 1900: An Anthology* explicitly "documents a great diversity of women's rhetorics

across many cultures... because no women were included in the anthologies of the rhetorical tradition" (xiii). To account for women's categorical, historical exclusion from rhetorical education and public speaking, Donawerth significantly broadens the definition of the term "rhetoric" – classically understood and primarily defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as "[t]he art of using language [either spoken or written] so as to persuade or influence others" ("rhetoric, *n.*[1]") – to encompass "the art of communication" in all forms of discourse, including composition and letter writing (xv). These and other current works and collections have sought to situate and authenticate the place of women in the male rhetorical tradition, and to retroactively construct a female tradition by reclaiming the rhetoric(s) of women as their own.[1] It is with the utmost respect for these scholars and their pioneering studies, which are crucial in underscoring the gender discrepancy in rhetoric, that I position my own rhetorical theory of Shakespearean female characterization along a very different axis – a decidedly non-feminist and perhaps even patriarchal one, and thus one which is necessarily more in keeping with Shakespeare's time.

I contend that any rhetorical theorization of the Early Modern female – human or literary – must be grounded in the premise that women who engaged in public speaking were necessarily engaging in a male activity, and trespassing upon male territory. In his introduction to *Rhetoric, Romance, and Technology* (1971), Walter J. Ong describes that "[r]hetoric at its most impressive peak [in the Renaissance] was

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[1] In the introduction to her anthology, Donawerth provides a comprehensive list of scholarly accomplishments in the field of feminist rhetorical theory and history, including: Carole Levin and Patricia A. Sullivan's *Political Rhetoric, Power, and Renaissance Women* (1995); Andrea A. Lunsford's *Reclaiming Rhetorica: Women in the Rhetorical Tradition* (1995); Cheryl Glenn's *Rhetoric Retold: Regendering the Tradition from Antiquity Through the Renaissance* (1997); and Christine Mason Sutherland and Rebecca Sutcliffe's *The Changing Tradition: Women in the History of Rhetoric* (1999) [xiii].

heroic and masculinizing through its association with puberty rites" (14). As the third leg of the Western disciplinary *trivium* of grammar, rhetoric and logic (or dialectic) – which formed the cornerstone of the European educational system from 1400 (and possibly earlier) through to 1800 – Renaissance schoolboys, including William Shakespeare,[2] were rigorously instructed in the art of rhetoric using the classical treatises of Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian (Vickers 17; Murphy 357-63). Ong accounts for the systematic exclusion of the women from the studies of rhetoric and Latin – a social reality which helped shape the discipline as a masculine form of and forum for "ceremonial war":

> Until Romanticism matured, rhetoric as a formal discipline was studied as part of the study of Latin... When Latin gradually disappeared and concomitantly schools began to admit girls, formal rhetoric also disappeared... Used only by males and under the sway of the old oral dialectical-rhetorical tradition, Learned Latin was a ceremonial polemic instrument which from classical antiquity until the beginnings of romanticism helped keep the entire academic curriculum programmed as a form of ritual male combat centered on disputation. (14-15, 17)

Thus, any female appropriation of the art of rhetoric in Early Modern society was tantamount to her physically wandering beyond the private, domestic sphere to which she was relegated, and into the masculine, public realms of politics and war – it was an aberration, and a violation of gender-appropriate behavior. For a woman to speak out at all, she had to be speaking the language of men. That precept contains, for this and any thesis, distinct dramatic and literary significance, as any discussion of the rhetoric of Shakespeare's female characters must itself be rooted in the knowledge and recognition that the female figures in a play are essentially male creations, who speak male-

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[2] William Shakespeare (b.1564 – d.1616) is generally believed to have attended Stratford-upon-Avon's grammar school – the King's New School – the curriculum of which was based largely on the study of Latin and the major classical writers (Greenblatt, *Will* 25-8).

designated phrases and speeches, and exist and operate according to executive male decisions and instructions. Indeed, the inherent masculinity of dramatic female speech is further reinforced and compounded by the fact that female roles were performed by young boys on the Renaissance stage – yet another site of public speaking and activity to which women were barred access.

This project is therefore not intended to examine Shakespeare's rhetorical female characters as being antagonistic towards Early Modern male standards and structures, for how can they be so when they are the embodiment of those male principles? I am also not concerned with treating these figures as being outstanding from Early Modern female typology, for I would argue that the exceptional vibrancy and ahistoric, metadramatic resonance of Shakespeare's women speak very much for themselves – which is precisely the point. After all, to gauge female rhetorical agency and its dramatic effects as a measure of female subjectivity is rather futile when that agency is male-authorized and sanctioned; such a liberal, evaluative process in fact ensures that female character identity remains forever conditional in its dependence upon male authorial will and purpose, which we can never definitively establish or prove as being "progressive" or "feminist." However, to observe and appraise female characters according to what they are – that is, their own speech – is to acknowledge the male artistic intention behind their distinctive character constructions, and then to evaluate them individually based on the quality and force of their own language. Using this methodology, character identity is determined through an analysis of that character's relationship with his or her own rhetoric, as well as their rhetorical development and/or disintegration over the course of a play. Ultimately, the great

benefit of such a reading practice is that it is inclusive, for every single speaking character necessarily has a rhetorical identity, regardless of their class or gender. Furthermore, it creates an alternate dimension for the audience/reader/critic's appraisal of character, and a formal standard for it, as characters are now assessed not just according to who they are or what they do, but for their own rhetorical proficiency – that is, their respective rhetorical strengths, weaknesses and ambiguities, and how those serve to reinforce and uphold their individual identities within and beyond their character societies. If all rhetoric is male, then gender ceases to be a significant category or a distinguishing factor in the process of rhetorical characterization – that which ultimately requires the acceptance or condemnation of any given character based on his or her own "word."

Admittedly, if we recall the image and notion of Lady Rhetoric, it becomes somewhat paradoxical that our theory of rhetorical identity is both gender-inspired and gender-blind. However, such is the nature of rhetorical identity: it contains its own theoretical contradictions. Defying any polarizing classification as a "fixed" (core) or "unstable" (dialectic/diachronic) conception of identity, rhetorical identity in fact contains both of these modes, or states of being. Rhetorical identity is a process, a dialogue between the two actions that form it: 1) *constitution*, which I am arguing is rhetorical, and 2) *interaction*, which occurs when that rhetoric is received and interpreted by its intended audience. In other words, rhetorical identity theorizes the manner in which a character is 1) made of language that 2) serves to persuade an audience to sympathize or empathize with him or her. The *OED* defines "identity" as "[t]he quality or condition of being the same in substance, composition, nature,

properties, or in particular qualities under consideration; absolute or essential sameness; oneness" ("identity"). We can say, then, that the rhetorical identity of a dramatic character is "fixed" in the sense that it is always made up of the same words, and that it is also "unstable," in that its rhetoric necessarily contains its own perlocution, or potentially persuasive effect.[3] In recognizing the manner in which rhetorical identity is simultaneously grounded in its own linguistic structure, and also able to be considered apart from that structure, we move towards an understanding of how the Shakespearean female character is both dramatically doomed and theoretically free, and how that theoretical freedom contains both female objectivity and female subjectivity. By reading and assessing Shakespeare's female figures as rhetorical models, their particular examples combine to suggest and support a theory of their own creation and persistence that ultimately serves to re-categorize and degender them. In essence, they become the key proofs of a much broader rhetorical theory that they themselves establish.

Because they both construct and reflect one another, the rhetorical Shakespearean female character and the theory of rhetorical identity contain the same ironic condition: both are simultaneously rooted in structure, and reaching beyond structure. Consequently, like the Shakespearean female figure, the theory of rhetorical identity may be considered as one that is built upwards and which extends outwards from its own solid foundation in the form and structure of drama. The following chapters of this thesis will engage in rhetorical character readings of Shakespeare's females which highlight the phenomenon whereby they formally and imaginatively transcend the male system – the deeply-entrenched organization of social and cultural

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[3] *Perlocution* is one of three types of speech acts – along with *locution* and *illocution* – considered by J.L. Austin in *How to do Things with Words*, Lecture VIII, p.101.

activities and precepts – that dictates their existence. The rest of this chapter will serve to erect the theory of rhetorical identity, from the ground up, using a particular set of methodologies as its building blocks – from the Aristotelian dramatic principles that explain its initial conditions, to the Barthesian semiological concepts and theory that redefine and renegotiate its structural status, to the more modern philosophical understanding of identity, put forth by Charles Taylor, which provides us with a contemporary, ideological justification and support for the notion of rhetorical identity. By recognizing how similar in composition the theory of rhetorical identity and its corroborating figures are, we begin to see how their association serves to theoretically liberate the female character by lifting her up and out of the male scheme that confines her and condemns her for her social and verbal transgressions.

At the heart of this study is the generic regulation that the rhetorical female character is not permitted to persist or to survive as such in Shakespearean drama; as a matter of literary and dramatic fact, to be a rhetorically-gifted female in a Shakespearean tragedy is a crime punishable by death. The question is, why? Why was it necessary for Shakespeare, who so vividly imagined and rendered expert female orators, to ultimately negate those representations? A practical and relatively sound explanation is that Shakespeare, in order to ensure the popularity and the fiscal success of his plays, was bound to please and/or appease his Early Modern viewers by always upholding, in the end, their basic social values. In other words, a rhetorical female character was a thrill, but not a threat, as long as she was put in her place – or rather, silenced – at the end of the play. Taking Shakespeare's contractual obligation to satisfy his audience one step further, I would suggest that the lifting up and cutting down of a

rhetorical female character would have been an inherently spectacular and tragic event; that is, it would have made for very good theatre. In keeping with that line of thinking, one might then argue that, for a Renaissance playwright, the slaying of a powerful and eloquent female would have been considered a very effective ingredient for a successful tragic plot. Such a speculation begs for an increased understanding and awareness of the principles that govern the narrative emplotment of Early Modern drama, and of what significance plot has in predetermining how Shakespeare's characters are rhetorically constructed.

Building a theory of rhetorical identity for Shakespeare's characters may be considered in part as an effort to assess and acknowledge the extent to which Shakespearean character development was influenced by classical poetics. In the introduction to their collection of essays, *Shakespeare and the Classics* (2004), Charles Martindale and A.B. Taylor explain that while Shakespeare is known to have had only a grammar-school education, "[k]nowledge of the ancients which the humanists called the *studia humanitatis* informs his work throughout" (2). Written in 4th century BC, Aristotle's *Poetics* is widely considered to be one of the most significant texts rediscovered by the Renaissance humanist movement, and one of the most influential documents ever produced on the subject of aesthetics. While Shakespeare may not have read the *Poetics* itself, scholars agree that he would have digested and absorbed much of the Greek and Roman tragedy and comedy – and would therefore have been predisposed to many of the classical formal techniques – that Aristotle was referencing and cataloging in his seminal treatise on the principles of drama. Supporting an Aristotelian theorization and interpretation of Shakespearean character is Christy

Desmet's belief that "[t]he *Poetics* is a crucial text in the history of Shakespearean character criticism; through its connection with the *Rhetoric* and Aristotle's writings on ethics, it is also relevant to classical and Renaissance representations of ethical character" (4). In its pivotal examination of tragedy, the *Poetics* underscores the inextricable and ethical relationship between character and plot (*muthos*) in the genre, and in so doing explains both the paradoxical condition of, and the possibility in the exceptional rhetorical Shakespearean female, who is designed and deployed as a sensational tragic device.

Essentially, the Aristotelian dramatic principle that the moral quality of the character forms the drama – and vice versa – crucially predetermines the fate of that character in Renaissance, or neoclassical, dramatic structures. A tragedy is a manipulative enterprise, and by its very dramatic form and purpose is designed to seek and hopefully secure the engagement and the emotional investment of its audience. A tragedy therefore must present its viewers with a plotline and with characters that are, in a word, convincing. In Chapter 6 of Aristotle's *Poetics*, a tragedy is defined as "the imitation (*mimesis*) of an action that is serious, complete, and substantial. It uses language enriched in different ways, each appropriate to its part [of the action]. It is drama [that is, it shows people performing actions] and not narration. By evoking pity and terror it brings about the purgation (*catharsis*) of those emotions" (McLeish 9). With the aim of provoking certain emotional responses (*pathos*) in its audience, and without the benefit of any overarching narrative or omnipresent narrator, a tragedy relies heavily upon the "enriched language" of its "people" to successfully convey its own purposes, and to compel its viewers to invest themselves in the action. In this way,

dramatis personae acquire their characteristics and speech patterns based on what specific language the plot requires, at any given point, in order to be properly transmitted and catalyzed.

It is important to note here that "enriched language" cannot be taken to mean "rhetoric" per se, even though rhetoric is technically a heightened form of speech, and a more ornate type of language. In fact, Aristotle immediately specifies that "[b]y language which is 'enriched' I mean metrically organized speech and song, and by 'each appropriate to its part' I mean that some parts are spoken and others sung" (McLeish 9). These specific instructions – that language must be both "organized" and "appropriate" in drama – more than suggest that the type of language used by a dramatist must accord with and enhance the action that is being put forth at any point, so that the action is well-received and accepted by the audience. That stipulation lends itself to the basic dramatic principle that words must be carefully selected and grouped, and appropriately delivered in a play in order for the audience to be convinced or pleased, and ultimately satisfied. If "rhetoric" is the effective use of language, and/or persuasive speech itself, and characters are the necessary vehicles of the language that is meant to sway an audience, then dramatic characters are in fact rhetorical vessels, or containers of rhetoric. Aristotle describes the manner in which dramatic figures are indeed characterized by their rhetoric, and by the individual choices that they attempt to explain and defend with their speech:

> Plays imitate actions first, character second and reason third. By 'reason' I mean the ability to express the range of options in each situation and to choose the most appropriate. In tragedy, this comes in the spoken dialogue; in life it is what politicians and trained rhetoricians do… Just as character reveals the moral status of people making deliberate choices about courses of action where none are obvious (for if no choice is to be

made, no character is required), so reason is revealed in a speech where someone argues for one side or another, or utters an informed opinion of any kind. (11)

In other words, characters are required to "sell" what they do, which means that plot (*muthos*), character, and rhetoric are inextricably bound together – and, arguably, equally important – in drama. Furthermore, the generic interdependency of these elements has implications for the moral assessment of dramatic character. As Desmet asserts, the Aristotelian theoretical relationship between character and plot is such that "[w]hen character is considered as a by-product of plot, drama is closely related to ethics: Dramatic agents have ethical character so that we may judge their actions as we judge men at the end of their public lives" (5-6). This basic understanding of ethical character is crucial in reminding us that characters generally end up being "good" or "bad" because the greater drama requires them to fill those roles; once slotted into those categories, characters' dramatic fates are sealed, and so they are rewarded and punished accordingly. However, significantly complicating the judgment of characters and their actions – which is to say, their placement along the ethical "continuum of virtue and vice" (Desmet 4) – are the necessary efforts of all characters to justify what they do, and to reinforce their own position, as well as the audience's favor, through rhetorical means.

While a character may be deemed "good" or "bad" on the basis of its virtuous or vicious actions, those binary classifications do not necessarily hold when the judgment of character becomes an aesthetic evaluation. There is an inherent tension in the conjunction of classical poetics and rhetoric – of dramatic structure and the art of persuasion – that may be qualified as the crucial space that is formed, and which exists,

between the practical *purpose* of rhetoric and the actual *effect* of rhetoric. More simply put, it contains the possible success or failure of rhetoric to persuade – and to delight – its intended audience. It is an aesthetic, interpretive space which is ultimately under the audience's jurisdiction and subject to its scrutiny, but which the playwright attempts to manipulate and control through his art and craftsmanship. In drama, and in literary studies, as in a courtroom, much depends upon argument and persuasion, and upon the ability of rhetoric to achieve its desired result – particularly when that rhetoric has an effect upon the way a given character is perceived and judged. That rhetorical contingency is what forces the ethics and aesthetics of drama – which are structurally necessitated and intertwined by plot – to part ways, and it is what allows characters to shed their dramatic roles and fates and to embody their individual rhetorical identities.

Remarkably, it is the fusion and not the separation of ethics and aesthetics that is the subject of Desmet's study which has, more than any other text, inspired and influenced my own theory of rhetorical identity; in *Reading Shakespeare's Characters*, Desmet crucially reestablishes the importance of rhetoric in the creation of ethical character in Shakespeare. However for Desmet, Aristotles's discussion of ethical character is problematized when he introduces, in Chapter 13, the concept of the tragic hero – an "intermediate kind of personage, a man not preeminently virtuous and just, whose misfortune, however, is brought upon him not by vice and depravity but by some fault, of the number of those in the enjoyment of great reputation and prosperity" (Desmet 6; Bywater 2325). The notion of a morally-ambiguous and complicated figure that evades ethical classification blatantly contradicts Aristotle's prior definition of

characters as being basic imitators of good or bad actions, and emphasizes Aristotle's

awareness of the importance of verisimilitude in the composition of dramatic character.

With the response of the audience (*catharsis*) in mind, Aristotle writes that "pity

is occasioned by undeserved misfortune, and fear by that of one like ourselves"

(Bywater 2325). By indicating that "some great fault on [the character's] part" may be

used to arouse pity and fear in the audience, Aristotle paradoxically privileges character

over action and reinforces the ability of a more lifelike and "human" character to

transcend a plot and be considered apart from it. Desmet glosses over this "second,

more familiar account of character and catharsis [in the *Poetics* which] underlies the

readings of traditional character critics from Samuel Johnson to A.C. Bradley" (7). She

writes:

> The hero's imperfections, in the second case, are necessary to the
> mechanism of catharsis: Neither a hyperbolically virtuous hero nor an
> unjustly successful villain would encourage catharsis. Aristotle's new
> tragic hero, both good and imperfect – like us – begins to free himself
> from the restrictions of his plot and to call for psychological
> identification rather than ethical judgment. (7)

Character criticism of the Johnson and Bradley (and more recently, Harold Bloom)

variety, known largely for treating Shakespeare's robust characters as if they were real

people, has been dismissed by many Shakespeareans as being ostentatious and

speculative. Desmet, by contrast, seeks to firmly ground the Shakespearean character in

its own ethical identity and development, and in its own literary and socio-historical

context:

> The rhetoric of characterization, by submitting the chaos of an
> individual's life to extreme categories of virtue and vice, necessarily
> fictionalizes character. The speaker shapes his subject's life to pass a
> final judgment on him: He both describes and creates a character,
> chronicles a life and fabricates a fiction. But because rhetorical forms are

> public and traditional, the verbal structures of epideictic oratory reflect
> the truth of social judgment. (81)

If, at one end of the spectrum of character criticism, we have Shakespeare's characters being wholly extracted from their dramatic context, and at the other end we have them being permanently embedded in linguistic and social structures, a theory of rhetorical identity serves to respectfully recognize those opposing reading practices, and to reconcile them, without compromising the integrity or purpose of either one. Rhetorical identity is an aesthetic methodology with ethical origins. To assess a character's rhetorical identity is thus to understand the structures and forces that fashioned it, and then to let it exist and function apart from its own foundation. Much in the way the parent nurtures and raises a child in his her own image, and that child eventually becomes an independent adult, the playwright designs characters that will always reflect his intentions, but which eventually become entities that are separate from their dramatic source.

I have described and argued for rhetorical character identity as a process – both of rhetorical constitution and interaction, and of character evolution beyond structure. If we recognize that these aspects of character identity are all activities, then the poetics of drama, from which characters originate, are also inherently active, and therefore cease to be restrictive. In his "Emplotment: A Reading of Aristotle's Poetics," Paul Ricoeur provides a very useful set of ideas and terms for understanding the unfixed nature of Aristotelian poetics. According to his reading, "the adjective 'poetic' (with its implied noun, 'art')... alone puts the mark of production, construction, and dynamism on all the analyses, and first of all on the two terms muthos and mimesis, which have to be taken as operations, not as structures" (33). While Ricoeur asserts that the *Poetics* is "a

treatise on composition, with almost no concern for anyone who receives the result"
(48), he also argues that emplotment and mimesis – the cornerstones of Aristotelian
dramatic discourse – are purposeful and effective doings that essentially incorporate
their own reception:

> The *Poetics* does not speak of structure but of structuration. Structuration
> is an oriented activity that is only completed in the spectator or the
> reader… Catharsis is… a purgation – which has its proper seat in the
> spectator. It consists precisely in the fact that the pleasure proper to
> tragedy proceeds from pity and fear… Yet this subjective alchemy is
> also constructed *in* the work *by* the mimetic activity. It results from the
> fact that the pitiable and fearful incidents are, as we have said,
> themselves brought to representation. And this poetic representation of
> these emotions results in turn from the composition itself. And in this
> sense, the dialectic of outside and inside reaches its highest point in
> catharsis. Experienced by the spectator, it is constructed in the work. (48-
> 50)

The circularity of Ricoeur's concept of dramatic "structuration" – which argues that the
tragedy and the spectator's emotional response to it are in fact mutually creative – is
crucial in formally reestablishing the drama as a medium of communication between a
text and an audience, and even more specifically, as a dynamic linguistic system, with
built-in transmitters, which are the characters; receptors, which are the spectators; and a
message, which is the tragedy itself.

The active relationships between the composition and communication of drama,
and between the rhetorical constitution and interaction of dramatic character, can also
be understood as more practical configurations and applications of the *language/speech*
correlation that subtends the modern semiological studies of French literary and social
theorist Roland Barthes. In 1916, Ferdinand de Saussure's *Course in General
Linguistics* based a general science of signs, or semiology (also called semiotics), in
part on a hard distinction between language (*langue*), as the conventionalized,

underlying system of signs in a society, and speech (*parole*), as the individualized articulation and externalization of that system. Saussure also expanded that science to include all basic systems of signification, of which structural linguistics would form only one part, and in so doing laid the groundwork for the school of structuralism that would influence academic thought and work on the subjects of language, culture, and society throughout the 20th century. As a precursor to the post-structuralist movement, Barthes sought to reassess the "dichotomic concept of *language/speech*" as being instead a dialectical one, and to renegotiate the predominance of language in all systems of communication (*Elements* 13).

For Barthes, linguistics is not a branch of semiology, as in Saussure's estimation; rather, semiology is branch of linguistics, and the study of how language articulates the world and the self. Barthes' *Elements of Semiology* (1964) constitutes a bold inversion of Saussure's revolutionary distinctions, as well as a redefinition of semiology to include more modern views and forms of media:

> Now it is far from certain that in the social life of today there are to be found any extensive systems of signs outside human language… It is true that objects, images, and patterns of behaviour can signify, and do so on a large scale, but never autonomously; every semiological system has its linguistic admixture…. Semiology is therefore perhaps destined to be absorbed into a *trans-linguistics*, the materials of which may be myth, narrative, journalism, or on the other hand objects of our civilization, in so far as they are *spoken* (through press, prospectus, interview, conversation and perhaps even the inner language, which is ruled by the law of the imagination). (*Elements* 9-11)

For Barthes, every type of sign – including the image – contains a measure of language, and semiology becomes a broader science of signification, which he qualifies as an active, verbal process. While Barthes, like Saussure, distinguishes language as a "social institution and a system of values" (*Elements* 14), he does not compartmentalize or set

the speech act apart from its originating and informing body of language, for in his view, "language is at the same time the product and the instrument of speech: their relationship is therefore a genuinely dialectical one" (*Elements* 16). Beyond how it literally "realizes" language, Barthes favors speech as being *the* reifying force in the outward establishment of subjective identity:

> In contrast to the language, which is both institution and system, speech is essentially an individual act of selection and actualization; it is made in the first place of the 'combination thanks to which the speaking subject can use the code of the language with a view to expressing his personal thought' (this extended speech could be called discourse), and secondly by the 'psycho-physical mechanisms which allow him to exteriorize these combinations.' (*Elements* 14-15)

In his affirmation of the speaking subject's ability and tendency to choose the words that best express his own thoughts, Barthes emphasizes the "capital importance" of the "combinative aspect of speech" in individuating a person (*Elements* 15). Relating to this thesis, the concept of speech as a "combinative activity" (*Elements* 15) is both rhetorical and identifying in its effects, as any process of verbal decision-making necessarily involves a conscious effort to choose sequences of words that will most effectively represent and communicate the self.

With its overall emphasis on dynamic structures, Barthesian theory is particularly accommodating of a concept of rhetorical identity. By re-evaluating the Saussurian distinction between language and speech as the relationship between an underlying linguistic system and practical social and cultural event, Barthes facilitates the application of his terms to the dramatic character, which can then be seen as being rooted in text, but constructed, and therefore solely characterized by his or her own speech. Also supporting the notion of verbally-constituted and dramatically-

independent character is Barthes' most famous essay, "The Death of the Author," in which he argues that "[l]inguistically, the author is never more than the instance writing, just as *I* is nothing other than the instance saying *I*; language knows a 'subject,' not a 'person,' and this subject, empty outside of the very enunciation which defines it, suffices to make language 'hold together,' suffices, that is to say, to exhaust it" (145). Separate from the authorial intention which both adheres to and dictates the structure of the play, it is the speaking character – the otherwise-empty, enunciating subject – that maintains the integrity of the text (or drama), and of its own individual identity.

Further ensuring that these dialectics are directly transferable and relatable to a theory of rhetorical identity for the dramatic character is Barthes' exposition on the "Rhetoric of the Image," in which he attempts to ascertain how the image, with its linguistic and iconic components, produces signification. Asserting that "all images are polysemous," or containing multiple meanings ("Rhetoric" 38-9), Barthes argues for how such composite messages can be variously received and interpreted, and yet remain linguistically and compositionally "anchored" ("Rhetoric" 38). He writes:

> The image, in its connotation, is thus constituted by an architecture of signs drawn from a variable depth of lexicons (of idiolects); each lexicon, no matter how 'deep,' still being coded, if, as is thought today, the *psyche* itself is articulated like a language… The variability of readings, therefore, is no threat to the 'language' of the image if it be admitted that the language is composed of idiolects, lexicons, and sub-codes. The image is penetrated through and through by the system of meaning, in exactly the same way as man is articulated to the very depths of his being in distinct languages. The image is not merely the totality of utterances emitted… it is also the totality of utterances received… ("Rhetoric" 47)

Barthes' theoretical acceptance of a "variability of readings" for a single, albeit complex language recalls the aforementioned contingency of rhetoric – the aesthetic

space between the purpose and the effect of rhetoric – and the fact that however rhetoric is received, it is still carefully selected and employed, and therefore still combines and coheres in a single fashion in the imagination. This last passage from Barthes is also useful in that it conceptually unites "image" and "man" in a self-defining process of utterance and articulation. He in fact goes on in his essay to group all efforts at signification and identification into one formal, rhetorical category:

> Rhetorics inevitably vary their substance (here articulated sound, there image, gesture or whatever) but not necessarily by their form; it is even probable that there exists a single rhetorical *form*, common for instance to dream, literature and image. Thus the rhetoric of the image... is specific to the extent that it is subject to the physical constraints of vision... but general to the extent that the 'figures' are never more than formal relations of elements. ("Rhetoric" 49)

Dramatic characters – as rhetorical objects, as speaking subjects – are essentially formal figures, begging to be individually examined and identified as the intricate, verbal images that they are. While those images may not "speak" to every viewer in exactly the same way, that does not change the fact that they were built to look, sound, and act in certain ways. In other words, while a character – or rather, the image a character projects – is formally independent from the person who constructed it, it simply cannot be free from its own dramatic or textual design, its own verbal substance, or its own invariable subjection to character assessment and judgment.

Despite any and all attempts to theoretically liberate the character from its literary text or social context, dramatic characters are inevitably and generically required, for the sake of plot and action, to be judged in one way or another. Barthes reiterates the manner in which "the image" is structurally, and therefore socially and morally, encumbered:

> The text is indeed the creator's (and hence society's) right of inspection over the image; anchorage is a control, bearing a responsibility – in the face of the projective power of pictures – for the use of the message. With respect to the liberty of the signifieds of the image, the text has thus a *repressive* value and we can see that it is at this level that the morality and ideology of a society are all invested. ("Rhetoric" 40)

Certainly, the moral and ideological forces of a society influence the production and the reception of a text, thereby restricting the "projective power" of its corresponding images. The images of Shakespeare's rhetorical female characters are perhaps the best examples of this in that moral and social judgments of their rhetoric serve to curb their character lives, and to limit their "projective power" – or rather their capacity to be transgressive or progressive – within their character societies, and in Early Modern society. Subject to the ethical judgments of their societies, rhetorical women are considered to be vice figures, are deemed bad, and are punished. What is at stake then, in the endeavor to create and apply a theory of rhetorical identity to Shakespearean female characterization, is a critical shift from the ethical judgment of character behavior, to the aesthetic evaluation of character rhetoric. Such a shift involves connotational realignments for the terms "good" and "bad" – away from being moral intimations of "virtue" and "vice," or "right" and "wrong," and towards being aesthetic categorizations of what, in art, seems to be "pleasurable," "favorable," or "compelling," and what is considered to be more "distasteful," "offensive," or "inaccessible" to a beholder. Far from being falsely dependent on the subjective value-judgments of individual spectators, the assessment of the rhetorical identity of a character involves searching for the evidence of craftsmanship in that character's speech, and for any possible discrepancies between the purpose and the effect of his or her rhetoric;

essentially, it serves to distinguish a character's dramatic *fate* from his or her rhetorical *legacy*.

Of course, an argument in favor of a shift in character criticism from the ethical to the aesthetic is distinctly modern in its ideology. To claim that Early Modern characters ought to be considered apart from their ethical origins and stigmatizations, and judged according to the quality of their own speech, seems rather essentialist and ahistoric; and yet, there is something universally viable – something inherently truthful – about a theory that rhetoric is, and always has been, self-identifying. Ong writes that "[o]rality is a pervasive affair… From antiquity through the Renaissance and to the beginnings of romanticism, under all teaching about the art of verbal expression there lies the more or less dominant supposition that the paradigm of all expression is the oration" (3). Recalling that "[a]ll human culture was… initially rhetorical in the sense that before the introduction of writing all culture was oral," Ong asserts that "human thought structures are tied in with verbalization," and that "[r]hetoric clearly occupies an intermediary stage between the unconscious and the conscious" (2, 11-12). Further supporting the notion that public speaking develops and characterizes the self is Charles Taylor's seminal work of moral philosophy, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity*, in which he posits that identity is defined through speech relations:

> [O]ne cannot be a self on one's own. I am a self only in relation to certain interlocutors: in one way in relation to those conversation partners who were essential to my achieving self-definition; in another in relation to those who are now crucial to my continuing grasp of languages of self-understanding – and, of course, these classes may overlap. A self exists only within what I call 'webs of interlocution.'…It is this original situation which gives its sense to our concept of 'identity,' offering an answer to the question of who I am through a definition of where I am speaking from and to whom. The full definition of

> someone's identity thus usually involves not only his stand on moral and spiritual matters but also some reference to a defining community. (36)

In Part I of *Sources of the Self* – "Identity and the Good" – Taylor endeavors to relocate the establishment of identity from the realm of communal ethical conduct to that of individual utterance, and to realign the modern moral code away from theistic definitions and toward more individualized conceptions and articulations of what is "good." In so doing, Taylor validates a more open-minded, subjective, aesthetic interpretation and evaluation of human character – one that values personal expression – and in so doing inadvertently enables a theory of dramatic characterization based on rhetoric (aesthetics), rather than action (ethics).

Remarkably, much in the way the theory of rhetorical identity is both rooted in and reaching beyond structure, Taylor's efforts to establish a theory of modern identity are predicated upon the realization that "the path to articulacy has to be a historical one," and that "[w]e have to try to trace the development of our modern outlooks" (104). According to Taylor, "[s]elfhood and the good...[or] selfhood and morality" are "inextricably intertwined themes," but "[t]he understanding of the good as a moral source has... been deeply suppressed in the mainstream of modern moral consciousness, although it was perfectly familiar to the ancients" (3, 92). However, in conceding that "[t]he original form of this affirmation was theological, and it involved a positive vision of ordinary life as hallowed by God," Taylor must contend that "modern naturalism not only can't accept this theistic context; it has divested itself of all languages of higher worth" (104). Indeed, in keeping with his chronicling and presentation of a modern code of ethics that shapes identity, Taylor expressly uses the term "good" in a "highly general sense, designating anything considered valuable,

worthy, admirable, of whatever kind or category" (92). In large part, *Sources of the Self* constitutes an effort to reconcile identity with morality by diversifying and expanding their respective definitions, and hence their relationship; Taylor writes that "[i]n fact, our visions of the good are tied up with our understandings of the self... We have a sense of who we are through our sense of where we stand to the good. But... radically different senses of what the good is go along with quite different conceptions of what a human agent is, different notions of the self" (105). Ultimately, for Taylor, "[a]rticulacy is a crucial condition of reconciliation," but it is the articulation of the good which poses the greatest challenge to the moral conflicts and identity crises of modern culture.

The theory of rhetorical identity redefines what an audience thinks of as being "good" about a dramatic character. If we consider that selves exist within, and are fashioned by their respective "webs of interlocution," then dramatic characters have two "defining communities" (to borrow the terms from Taylor's taxonomy) within which they must articulate their own morality: their own character societies, and their metadramatic societies, which include their spectators, readers, and critics. Both of these communities are in fact rhetorical, judgmental spaces, where identity and viability hinge upon the persuasiveness of speech. Taylor explains that "articulation(s) of the good" will have varying degrees of success, depending upon the receptivity of a community to a given articulation, and upon the quality of its delivery:

> Some formulations may be dead, or have no power at this place or time or with certain people. And in the most evident examples the power is not a function of the formulation alone, but of the whole speech act. Indeed, the most powerful case is where the speaker, the formulation, and the act of delivering the message all line up to reveal the good... A formulation has power when it when it brings the source close, when it makes it plain and evident, in all its inherent force, its capacity to inspire

our love, respect, or allegiance. An effective articulation releases this force, and this is how words have power. (96)

As the coming chapters will demonstrate, the articulations of rhetorical Shakespearean female characters meet with numerous challenges, and have varying degrees of success within their respective character societies. In the tragicomedies (*All's Well That Ends Well*, *Measure for Measure*), they are more appreciated and allowed, even if they are not explicitly acknowledged as such by their male counterparts; in the tragedies (*Othello, Macbeth*), those articulations are feared and/or disregarded, and always reprimanded, and eventually silenced. Ultimately, the question of the female character's fate in a Shakespearean play relies upon the extent to which her rhetoric is valued within her dramatic world; most frequently, in that realm, it falls upon deaf ears. The same cannot be said, however, for the world inhabited and experienced by the Shakespearean audience; within that community, Helena, Isabella, Lady Macbeth, and Desdemona are not only very well heard, but have a tremendous capacity to inspire love, respect, and allegiance, and in fact they do. They do so because their rhetorical identities overpower and outlast their dramatic ones, to the point where we can say, without question, that while Shakespeare's females may not be virtuous characters, they are nothing if not exceptionally *good* ones.

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~ Chapter 2 ~

Helena: Paradigm and Possibility

All's Well That Ends Well (1602-3) constitutes nothing less than an extensive Shakespearean commentary on the possibility that is created not just when a woman speaks, but when she actualizes and develops a relationship with speech itself, thereby learning how to use it effectively and, most importantly, to her own advantage. In providing the character of Helena with a certain other figure, one perfectly-named Parolles (an obvious, nomenclatural synthesis of the French *la parole*, meaning 'speech,' and *paroles*, meaning 'words'), Shakespeare masterfully infuses his heroine with the rhetoric required to get everything she wants, the way she wants, and then actually get away with it in the fictional world of *All's Well*. Pivotal to this entire thesis is its assertion and upfront examination of Helena as an entirely exceptional and "divinely gifted" Lady Rhetoric, who expertly and openly navigates the linguistic world of *All's Well That Ends Well*, avoiding all censure and punishment, in the ultimate fulfillment of her deepest desires. As the consummate transgressor of both dramatic and societal rules, Helena and her relationship with language provide the narrative model for this project's understanding and theorizing of rhetorical identity.

We would do well to recall, at this point, one thing we can know for sure about Shakespeare: he did not write in a vacuum. If we are going to discuss exceptional, speaking Renaissance females, then we cannot disregard the fact that the most outstanding and inspirational Lady Rhetoric of Shakespeare's time was prominently positioned upon the throne of England. Carole Levin and Patricia Sullivan write: "In the Renaissance – as in any period – most women belonged to family units and had roles as wives, mothers, daughters, and widows…. There were also, of course, some exceptional women who found more public arenas for their gifts and ambitions…. The Renaissance

was a time of women in public roles – of queens…" (5-6). Well educated, well respected, and holding the highest public office of a powerful, leading nation, Queen Elizabeth I provided the supreme example of a woman's capacity during the Renaissance.

Philippa Berry explains that at the time of Elizabeth's assent to the throne in 1558, even the Puritan John Calvin – albeit eager to support her Protestant reign – publicly modified attacks made against prior Catholic monarchs on the basis of their femininity by claiming that "there were occasionally women so endowed, that the singular good qualities which shone forth in them made it evident that they were raised up by Divine authority" (69). Of course, because the society under her remained acutely patriarchal, Elizabeth was (and is) considered to be the exception to its gender rules – rules that she was far more concerned with manipulating than changing (Berry 61). As a matter of fact, Elizabeth I translated seamlessly into the art of her time because she never failed to appear as a perfectly-played part and a carefully-constructed image. If she was anomalous and marvelous, it was because she made herself so. Carole Levin writes, "Elizabeth I was very skilled at how she represented herself and her authority as monarch. She was able to capitalize on the expectations of her behavior as a woman and use them to her advantage; she also at times placed herself beyond traditional gender expectations by calling herself king" (1). Though her own personal motto was "Semper Eadem" – "Always the same" – Elizabeth's success as a monarch was the result of how "fluid and multi-faceted her representations of herself were" (Levin 2).

To fend off attacks against her femininity, Elizabeth shrewdly presented herself as having two bodies: a *body natural* that was gendered female, and a masculine *body*

politic" (Levin 122). In order to command respect and adoration for the former, she shunned all suitors and declared herself to be "married to her people," thereby encouraging idealized worship of herself as a perpetual "virgin queen" (Dreher 17). To promote and support the latter body, she conducted her career as a "Renaissance prince," frequently referring to herself as "prince" in public (Dreher 17), and once famously declaring herself in possession of "the heart and stomach of a king" (Neale 308-9). Throughout her career, which spanned Shakespeare's younger life, Elizabeth maintained control over her own iconography by paying strict attention to her rhetoric and her conduct at all times. Levin relates that "even in her most casual, seemingly spontaneous remarks, Elizabeth was playing a role, aware of how her audience would respond" (131). According to Beryl Hughes, "no other English monarch had such an obsession with her own stage management" (39).

In "Shakespeare's Comic Heroines, Elizabeth I, and the Political Uses of Androgyny," Leah Marcus suggests that "there are remarkable correlations between the sexual multivalence of Shakespeare's heroines and... the political rhetoric of Queen Elizabeth I" (137). Also referring to the comedies, Levin asserts that "it is the non-cross-dressed heroines who expand gender definitions – who as women act in powerful ways that might, like the actions of the queen, be called 'male'" (127). During the crucial first scene of *All's Well That Ends Well*, the "Elizabethan" qualities of Helena's character are made quite apparent, beginning with her shrewd intellect. At the outset of the play the King of France is deathly ill, and the Countess of Rossillion has become guardian to an orphaned Helena, whose recently deceased father was a much respected and renowned physician to the monarch. The Countess fondly describes Helena's good

nature and solid potential – which apparently contradict her own son Bertram's qualities – to the old lord Lafew: "I have those hopes of her good that her education promises. Her disposition she inherits, which makes fair gifts fairer... She derives her honesty and achieves her goodness" (1.1.30-1, 34-5).

As a matter of fact, Helena's intelligence usurps her own "honesty" in the very first instant that she speaks. Helena has been crying, and the Countess, assuming that she is mourning her father, encourages her to collect herself "lest it be rather thought you affect a sorrow than to have" (1.1.41). Helena replies, "I do affect a sorrow indeed, but I have it too" (1.1.42). Though this phrase seems to be a claim on the part of Helena that that the affectation of an emotion does not necessarily preclude its being felt, we become aware during the first lines of her first soliloquy that her crying has indeed involved a certain pretension: "I think not on my father, / And these great tears grace his remembrance more / Than those I shed for him.... / My imagination / Carries no favour in't but Bertram's. / I am undone!" (1.1.67-9, 70-2). Right from the start, Helena's words betray her character's innate understanding of doubling in language and in life, as well as the capacity of speech to manipulate a social situation. However, she does not yet recognize the possibilities in those concepts and skills, or her potential to appropriate them. Indeed, Helena is introduced as a woman utterly bereft and hopeless in her unrequited love for the apparently undeserving Bertram. Her speech indulges an "idolatrous fancy": "'Twere all one / That I should love a bright particular star / And think to wed it, he is so above me... / Th'ambition in my love thus plagues itself" (1.1.73-5, 78). Helena's language here is distinctly and ironically reminiscent of the tropes voiced by Sir Philip Sidney's "star-worshipping" Astrophil, and as such

immediately suggests Helena's ability and willingness to adopt male rhetoric.[1] Her speech then takes an unexpected (though non-coincidental) sexual turn with a jarring phrase – one whose striking juxtaposition reveals an even deeper desire in Helena: "The hind that would be mated by the lion / Must die for love" (1.1.79-80). Further lessening the possibility of linguistic coincidence in this scene, this revelation of Helena's libido and biological imperative to procreate – which may or may not be drastically influencing her affections (but that is another thesis) – is swiftly followed up by the first entrance of the lewd and flagrant Parolles.

The importance of Parolles in the overall structure and purpose of *All's Well* simply cannot be overstated. His name, as one might imagine, is indicative of his disposition and comic role within his character society, but only slightly suggestive of his pivotal function in the metadrama of the play. Even the divisive Harold Bloom covers his bases in explaining the character of Parolles; to Bloom, Parolles is both a "splendid scoundrel" *and* "the spiritual center of *All's Well That Ends Well*" (346, 349). In a nutshell, Parolles is an obnoxious, ridiculous, and garrulous man about court who, over the course of the play, accosts Helena; thoroughly offends and disgusts almost every other character (even the fool); negatively influences Bertram to abandon his wife and responsibilities and run away to war and into another woman's bed; and in the end is tricked by Bertram and two French lords into revealing his unequivocal willingness to betray his comrades and his country in order to save his own skin. Literally, Parolles is a generally offensive pseudo-courtier and mock-soldier who presents a certain threat to

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[1] Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella* is considered one of the greatest of the Elizabethan courtly sonnets. It exemplifies Petrarchan style and conventions. The name Astrophil translates from the Greek words *astro*, meaning "star," and *phil*, meaning "lover," while Stella comes from the Latin word for "star" (*Norton*, 482-98).

the moral order of the French world depicted in *All's Well*. However, he is also, most ironically, a *literal metaphor* – that is, he is a walking and talking figure of speech. In fact, bypassing any semantic disjunction between "speech" and "words" in the French-English translation or in the context of the play, Parolles is also *metonymic* in nature, for he *is* figurative language.

These alternate capacities implied in Parolles' name, and their greater significance for *All's Well*, require some explanation. Russ McDonald describes the representational and self-referential qualities of Shakespeare's writing:

> Shakespeare's language functions as a symbolic register, an instrument for recording, transmitting, and magnifying the conditions of the fictional world that the play represents – the conflicts, affinities, and changes occurring among the persons who inhabit it. In fact, dramatic speech or poetic language conforms admirably to the figure that critics call a symbol because it both represents or symbolizes something else, and yet commands attention as an entity itself. (6)

McDonald draws upon the work Sigurd Burckhardt who, in *Shakespearean Meanings*, explains metaphors and puns as invaluable poetic tools which serve to "corporealize language, because any device which interposes itself between words and their supposedly simple meanings calls attention to the words as things" (28). In terms of its fictional world, *All's Well* is indeed linguistically characterized, in the sense that it is riddled with the rhetoric of speech. In a straight reading of the play, one cannot miss the abundant uses of the terms "speak," "words," "say" (often in close conjunction with "hear"), "tell," "communicate," and "disclose." I posit, therefore, that because the character of Parolles is "corporealized language" indeed, or more specifically, "corporealized speech," that any critical imperative to look for the symbolism in his language, and the language of those who interact with him, becomes intensified to the

point where we are literally examining characters' relationships with their own rhetoric. Marion Trousdale describes the self-reflexivity of Shakespearean figures of speech:

> When looked at in terms of verbal art, [Shakespearean metaphors] suggest within the plays themselves a language that is often much more explicit about its own function than we expect fictional language to be; expressive as the speeches often may be, the analytic structures as such establish another frame of reference in addition to the dramatic, the discursive, rational one of their art. (20)

As the embodiment of verbal communication, Parolles proves to be far more integral to *All's Well* than the meddling and amusing subplot feature that he seems to be. In fact, Parolles' name declares his purpose: to embody the speech of any character with whom he interacts.

According to this rhetorical awareness, it is no coincidence that the critical scene that Helena and Parolles share at the outset of the play (Act 1, Scene 1) is technically the scene in which Helena speaks the majority of her character's lines (Rothman 189). While Helena immediately recognizes Parolles for the rogue that he is, she is also aware that he is Bertram's friend, and is strangely drawn to him as if she thinks he might have some important knowledge:

> …Who comes here?
> One that goes with [Bertram]. I love him for his sake;
> And yet I know him a notorious liar,
> Think him a great way fool, solely a coward.
> Yet these evils sit so fit in him
> That they take place when virtue's steely bones
> Looks bleak i'th'cold wind. Withal, full oft we see
> Cold wisdom waiting on superfluous folly. (1.1.86-93)

"Superfluous folly" (Parolles) immediately imparts his "cold wisdom" (metaphorical insight) onto "virtue's steely bones" (Helena), as Parolles gives Helena a royal greeting: "'Save you, fair queen!'" "And you, monarch!" she quips. "No," Parolles replies. Helena

also denies the title: "And no" (1.1.94-97). Jeremy Richard argues that this "opening exchange emphasizes the gap between language and reality," and that "[the] admission that the world of courtly compliment is out of place for these two speakers sets the tone for the dialogue, one in which insult scarcely remains beneath the surface" (148). This is true to a certain extent, but I would argue that the honesty in this exchange and the explicit nature of the ensuing discussion serve to stimulate Helena's awareness of the power of rhetoric to bridge the gap between language and reality. Crucially, she is beginning to realize that saying something can actually make it so – that rhetoric is a tool that she might, like a queen, very well use. So while Parolles may provide the outrageously offensive next line – "Are you meditating on virginity?" (1.1.98) – Helena does not rebuke him as one might suppose a maiden would. Instead, she pursues the conversation with absolute vigor, and a newfound cunning: "Ay. You have some stain of soldier in you: let me ask you a question. Man is enemy to virginity; how may we barricado it against him?" (1.1.99-101).

Of course, Helena's assertion that she wishes to protect her virtue rather contradicts her privately expressed desire to "be mated," but it displays Helena's desire to push the boundaries of her own speech without seeming to – to say one thing and mean another, on purpose. Jules Rothman describes this development: "…Shakespeare has Helena change character. From a sweet girl in love she switches over to a court lady ready to bandy bawdy" (191). After some witty and salacious repartee on the subject of defending and losing virginity – including references to men "blowing up" (impregnating) virgins and virgins, in turn, wishing to "blow up men" (militarily speaking, but Helena's double entendre is obvious) (1.1.106-10) – Helena boldly asks

Parolles a straight question: "How might one do, sir, to lose it to her own liking" (1.1.129). Under any other circumstances, such a question would be appalling, only this conversation with Parolles has clearly enabled Helena to speak her mind and to openly consider not only what she wants (to lose her virginity), but the way she wants it (with Bertram). Parolles' best advice to Helena is to do away with her virginity as soon as possible, because "the longer kept, the less worth," for "old virginity, is like one of our French weathered pears: it looks ill, it eats drily" (1.1.131-2, 136-7).

As Helena begins to see the potential of her own character in a kaleidoscopic new light, her language adjusts to suit the revelation. Employing the oxymoronic conceit of Petrarchan courtly love poetry, Helena reveals her objective – not unlike Queen Elizabeth's – to embody diverse roles in a quest for admiration and favor. She informs Parolles:

> Not my virginity yet:
> There shall your master have a thousand loves,
> A mother, and a mistress, and a friend,
> A phoenix, captain, and an enemy,
> A guide, a goddess, and a sovereign,
> A counsellor, a traitress, and a dear... (1.1.140-5)

With increasing determination, Helena expresses her will to rise above her station in life among "the poorer born, / whose baser stars do shut us up in wishes," (1.1.58) and, significantly, the conversation moves from the zodiac into the mythological as Parolles is called away:

> PAROLLES. Little Helen, farewell. If I can remember thee, I will think
> of thee at court.
> HELEN. Monsieur Parolles, you were born under a charitable star.
> PAROLLES. Under Mars I.
> HELENA. I especially think, under Mars. (1.1.163-7)

Mars is at once the planet and the Roman god of war, and Parolles associates himself with the symbol in an shameless effort to bolster his own image as a warrior and hunter. Also, Susan Snyder draws attention to Parolles' addressing of Helena as "Helen": "[From this point on] Shakespeare continues to use 'Helen' in the rest of the play's dialogue, in prose as well as in verse... The preference... suggests that an association with Helen of Troy, the most famous bearer of that name, was becoming important to him" (271). Snyder recalls the mythic Helen – beautiful and desired, the reason for the Trojan War – and explains that while Shakespeare's Helen "ironically inverts [that] prototype... she can claim in her own way a status as Venus' protégée, not indeed as desired object but as desiring subject" (272).

Parolles and Helen are thus Mars and Venus colliding, only with a twist: Parolles is naturally lying about his own symbolic disposition. Helena goes on to mock Parolles' cowardice in battle as proof of his having been born under Mars "when he was retrograde": "You go so much backward when you fight... But the composition that your valour and fear makes in you is a virtue of good wing, and I like the wear well" (1.1.172, 174, 176-8). Parolles is indeed left with no clever response: "I am so full of businesses that I cannot answer thee acutely. I will return perfect courtier, in the which my instruction shall serve to naturalise thee, so thou wilt be capable of a courtier's council" (1.1.179-81). Parolles is suggesting that he will return to 'school' Helena in the ways of sexual conquest, only she needs no further lessons from him. Not only is she now fully aware of what she wants and how to get it, she has also clearly outwitted her own master in this encounter, suggesting that Venus and Mars – body natural and body politic – are now united in her.

With spoken language conferred upon her, Helena is now the hunter. By the time Parolles takes his leave of her and gives his last pearls of wisdom – "Get thee a good husband, and use him as he uses thee. So farewell." (1.1.185-6) – Helena does not even need to be told. Her soliloquy – spoken in fourteen lines of seven rhyming couplets (a complete sonnet), and suggesting a miraculous injection of language and power – reveals the complete transformation of her character from a desperate, ignorant maiden into a confident, determined woman:

> Our remedies oft in ourselves do lie,
> Which we ascribe to heaven. The fated sky
> Gives us free scope; only doth backward pull
> Our slow designs when we ourselves are dull.
> What power is it which mounts my love so high?
> That makes me see, and cannot feed mine eye?
> The mightiest space in fortune nature brings
> To join the likes, and kiss like native things…. (1.1.187-194)

Regardless of the challenge of social status, Helena's "intents are fixed and will not leave [her]" (1.1.200). Armed with her own rhetoric and self-awareness, she will go about getting her man. Once their exchange is done, Helena and Parolles part ways, and except for a few brief encounters which serve dramatically to relay information between characters and generally guide the plot, they move separately throughout the rest of the play. However, while their relationship is conceived in this interplay, it is not singularly defined by it. Indeed, the effects of this "speech infusion" are potent and far-reaching, and not entirely separate from the realm of language itself – that which, we recall, Parolles also represents.

Over the course of the play, Helena uses practically every character at her disposal, to some degree or another, in her quest to pin Bertram down. At every turn, her thinly-veiled rhetoric is both earnest and modest, and is thus entirely persuasive. At

no point does she disguise herself as a man to facilitate her social progress. She convinces the Countess of her integrity and humility in her love of Bertram by proclaiming her endeavor to "deserve him" (1.3.171), and in so doing gains complete financial and emotional support of his own mother in all her endeavors. She then wins over the trust of the ailing King of France as "Doctor She!" (2.1.75) by promising that, with her late father's medicinal gifts, "Health shall live free and sickness freely die" (2.1.166). Recalling her revelation of the "remedies [that] oft in ourselves do lie," she refers to her proposed "remedy" for the king as her "art" (2.1.135, 156) – a clever choice of words which, amidst her flowery entreaty, alludes to the cure as being verbal in constitution. Using select language, she convinces the king to accept her care and subsequently obtains the right to choose Bertram as her husband in spite of his own fierce will and disdain. When Bertram runs away to war after their marriage and attempts to seduce the maiden Diana, Helena earns the sympathy of the girl's mother and negotiates their involvement in the execution of a bed-trick, which "[i]n fine, delivers me to fill the time, / Herself most chastely absent" (3.7.33-4). Towards the end of the play Helena is mostly missing and has barely any lines because, of course, Parolles is nowhere nearby; instead, the fruits of her labours speak for themselves, as the supposedly impossible written conditions for Bertram's return are met – in Diana's delivery of the family ring "which shall never come off" Bertram's finger, and in the revelation of the coming "child begotten of [Helena's] body that [Bertram is] father to" (3.2.50-2). In the final scene, Helena appears to claim her husband, and Bertram – having been "doubly won" by language and circumstance – instantaneously surrenders and promises to "love her dearly, ever, ever dearly" (5.3.305). Symbolized in the

unborn child are the union of man and women, and the restoration of moral and social order in the play. Within the fictional world of the drama, Helena and her rhetoric have single-handedly engineered the final outcome of the play. While that might be considered paradoxical by Renaissance social standards, we recall that "all's well that ends well" in this fictional society, and so there is no harm, no foul.

Yet the question remains: how is *any* social acceptance of this unabashed Lady Rhetoric even possible? Significantly, Parolles does not get off quite as easily as Helena in *All's Well*. Just as the wayward Bertram is tricked into assuming his proper place in the order of things, so is Parolles – that great delinquent – set up to take a fall. For the greater part of the play, Parolles' comic character is robust, serving to keep his surroundings in a carnivalesque state. He banters constantly with the lord Lafew and the fool Lavatch, both of whom see right though his grandstanding, parasitic ways. He coaxes Bertram to flee all of his familial duties and run off to war, and when away, he encourages his friend to commit adultery. He is referred to as a "vile rascal," an "infinite and endless liar", and a "poor, decayed, ingenious, foolish, rascally knave" (3.4.84; 5.2.24-5; 3.6.10). He is manipulative, licentious, and a terrible influence on Bertram. Yet, in "A Vindication of Parolles," Rothman questions Parolles' supposed villainy: "Is he a genuine Vice, malevolent and odious?" (183) Despite his faults, Parolles simply does not seem to be inherently evil, but only mischievous and humorous. So why exactly must he be punished? As Rothman explains, "[a] pact exists between the playwright and the audience, in that the stock figure of the braggart soldier – and Parolles is one – must be realized in humor and ineffectuality. As a braggart he

must be gulled and/or beaten – and Parolles is" (184). Indeed, Parolles is socially, morally, and dramatically bound to pay for his delinquency.

However, given the simultaneously vital literary functions of Parolles' character as comedic villain and symbol of language, I submit that Parolles' bad behavior is not the only reason for his downfall. Metadramatically, the fate of his character signals the reduced rhetorical capacity of speech, and the disarmed state of language at the end of *All's Well That Ends Well*, and it is these adjustments which ultimately allow this comedy to satisfy its own structural and social prerequisites. Away at war, Parolles' comrades begin to suspect that he is dishonest, and worse, capable of being disloyal to them. To trick him, they capture and blindfold him and pretend to be enemy soldiers who do not speak his language. Afraid of torture and desperately unable to communicate, Parolles begins to divulge army secrets and sell out his own officers with ironic accusations of lying and cowardice. Having revealed his true colours, a blindfold is removed from Parolles' eyes, and he is "undone" (4.3.270). In what is arguably his funniest moment, Parolles laments his sealed fate: "Who cannot be crush'd with a plot?" (4.3.272). Jeremy Richard argues that this instance contains Parolles' pathos and "tragic awareness" – that "language is unmasked as a faulty medium for conveying truth" (155, 146). I would argue that it is actually a sendup to the play's Master Craftsman – a comic reminder of Shakespeare's hand in all structures dramatic and linguistic.

Problematically, in transgressing the barrier between the play and reality, Parolles now undermines the integrity of the fictional world in *All's Well*. Shakespeare must, therefore, neutralize the braggart – the evidence of his own artistry that is now far

too obvious by dramatic standards – to further honor his "pact" with the audience and give them an ending befitting a comedy. With the blindfold off, Parolles sees the error of his obnoxious, conniving ways. Grateful for his life, he decides to reform:

> Captain I'll be no more,
> But I will eat, and drink, and sleep as soft
> As Captain shall. Simply the thing I am
> Shall make me live. Who knows himself a braggart,
> Let him fear this; for it will come to pass
> That every braggart shall be found an ass.
> Rust sword, cool blushes, and, Parolles, live
> Safest in shame: being fooled, by fool'ry thrive.
> There's place and means for every man alive.
> I'll after them. (4.3.278-87)

In deciding to live "simply" as a man and a fool, Parolles surrenders his metaphoric role (as "speech") to his metonymic and literal ones (as "language," and a dramatic character) – a gesture that represents not the failure of language, as Richard argues, but the *deflation* of language. The world of *All's Well* is now free to settle down, and all characters may assume their rightful positions in the moral and social order, and the Renaissance audience can be pleased. The reformed Parolles can be a fool in the King's court, courtesy of Lafew. Bertram, also reformed, can be a loving husband, a father, and a responsible royal. Helena too can be what she always wanted to be – Bertram's beloved wife and the mother of their child. However, in the tradition of the Shakespearean "problem comedy," even though all seems well, the imagination has been purposefully and cleverly disturbed. Helena's agency has gone unpunished and her identity is intact. Helena's rhetoric, which she acquires from Parolles (as "speech") and then masters, does the work of manipulating the characters around her to achieve her goals and fulfill her desires. At the same time, Parolles (as "language") creates the

linguistic and social conditions for Helena's ultimate survival as a *feminine* female rhetorician at the end of *All's Well*.

It is ultimately Helena's unique relationship with language that allows her to resist the standard fate of Lady Rhetoric, thus encouraging and enabling a theory of rhetorical identity and Shakespearean female characterization based on her example. Certainly, *All's Well That Ends Well* provides a particularly hospitable literary environment for her character and goals. It is a play full of strong language, strong women, and strong purpose. Susan Snyder, in the Oxford Shakespeare edition, notes Robertson Davies' observation that "the Countess is the only female character to open a Shakespearean play... if we except the First Witch in *Macbeth*, [which] suggests the importance of women and their initiatives in this play" (79, fn. I). Helena, in the image of Queen Elizabeth I, is exceptionally gifted, and Shakespeare is the Calvinian "Divine authority" that has graced her with the rhetoric to thrive within her drama and outlast it. As the King of France says to Helena as she woos him into her care, "[m]ethinks in thee some blessed spirit doth speak / His powerful sound within an organ weak" (2.1.171-2). However, Christy Desmet explains that, on the level of character criticism, "a skeptical analysis of Helena's encounter with the French King, one that keeps in mind her romantic goal, suggests that she insinuates herself into a male political hierarchy by adopting and transforming its discourse" (159). Desmet's insight crucially reaffirms the practical significance of Helena's symbolic journey for this project. After all, in dramatic, literary, and scholarly worlds alike, exceptions to rules do not change those rules by divine authority alone, but through the methodology and praxis they inspire.

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~ Chapter 3 ~

Bridging the Comic-Tragic Female Gap:

Isabella, Desdemona, and Lady Macbeth

Measure for Measure (1603) is considered to be one of Shakespeare's "problem plays" – a distinction it shares with *Troilus and Cressida* (1601-2) and *All's Well That Ends Well* (1602-3). While critics have differentially included a variety of other plays in this category, they have widely observed and agreed that, after 1600, Shakespeare's comedies adopted a much more serious tone and began to debate problematic, contemporary social issues onstage through their action and characters; resistant to their own generic definition and classification as either comedies or tragedies, these plays formed a sub-genre of Shakespearean drama that came to be critically acknowledged and dubbed as "tragi-comedy." The *OED* defines a tragic-comedy as "[a] play (or, *rarely*, a story) combining the qualities of a tragedy and a comedy, or containing both tragic and comic elements; sometimes *spec.* a play mainly of tragic character, but with a happy ending" ("tragi-comedy"). In adhering rather strictly to these amalgamated generic requirements, *Measure for Measure* serves as a pivotal break from Shakespearean high comedy – one that ushers in the most creative and prolific period in Shakespeare's production of tragedy. This chapter will examine this generic shift from a rhetorical perspective, by examining three female figures – *Measure for Measure*'s Isabella, *Othello*'s Desdemona, and Lady Macbeth – who are all "problematic" in their outspokenness, and who together form a bridge between Shakespearean comedy and tragedy, thus demonstrating the crucial influence that dramatic genre has on the construction and the identity of the rhetorical female character.

While Isabella is both extremely able and highly encouraged to apply her rhetorical skills – and to speak publicly as a woman in *Measure for Measure* – hers is essentially a rhetorical service that is employed by the men around her to achieve their

own goals. Regardless, she is both eloquent and effective in her character society, and the combative nature of her speech signals an inherent conflict between the morality and independence of her own character, and the controlling male world within which she is forced to function. Desdemona, as both the object and the agent of rhetoric in *Othello* (1603-4), struggles against a host of and male wills and voices to participate in the construction of her own character identity. While her words are ultimately unappreciated and unheard by her male counterparts, Desdemona's rhetorical efforts are not in vain, in that they fashion a spirited, loyal, honest, and sympathetic character who, in her martyred death, rises symbolically above the unjust dramatic circumstances that kill her. Lady Macbeth in turn represents perhaps the most vivid and sensational example of how destructive female rhetoric can be to a character society, and how self-destructive that rhetoric can then be for the female character herself. Going against everything that is deemed natural and appropriate for a woman – both rhetorically and socially – Lady Macbeth becomes the ultimate transgressor and subvertor of Early Modern gender roles, to the point where her character's speech and self achieve a figurative androgyny in *Macbeth* (1606). While she must, and indeed does suffer and die for her violent misdeeds and gender-role contravention, the image of Lady Macbeth retains an astonishing potency which is arguably unparalleled among Shakespeare's leading ladies. The disparate rhetorical identities of these three female figures force us to examine the dramatic conditions that bring them into existence and shape them, and to appreciate how they manage, against all structural odds, to persist as aesthetically-marvellous characters.

With its own contradictory themes of lust and chastity, immorality and ethics, punishment and mercy, death and marriage, and with its own solemn, dramatic progression resulting in a relatively jovial denouement, *Measure for Measure* rather exemplifies its own generic crossbreeding – its plot entailing the following sequence of events. A young, chaste, and virtuous maid, about become a nun (Isabella), is forced to plead with a pious, tyrannical deputy (Angelo) for the life of her brother (Claudio), who has been sentenced to death for having pre-marital relations with his now pregnant, common-law fiancé. When Angelo presents Isabella with a villainous proposition – her virginity given to him in exchange for her brother's life – Isabella and Vienna's noble Duke, who disguises himself as a friar in order to observe the judicial goings-on in his kingdom, plot and toil to expose Angelo's corruption. Angelo's downfall is secured by way of a bed-trick involving his former betrothed, Mariana, whom he once wrongfully abandoned, and is finally forced by the Duke to marry. The play ends with the Duke's proposal of marriage to Isabella, which is met with a critically-provocative silence. Remarkably, as the central figure in this problematic, tragicomic tale, Isabella's rhetoric itself tends to bestride the generic gap between comedy and tragedy, and to incorporate the tension between those two dramatic forms in their varied acceptance and treatment of the rhetorical female. While Isabella is initially praised for her rhetorical proficiency, and is encouraged to speak openly and publicly as a woman throughout the play, her manner of speech is necessarily limited and directed by male objectives and instruction, and her speaking ultimately serves the play in re-establishing the male social order – which may very well include, in the end, her own wifely subservience. Regardless, her

speech is the undisputable catalyst of *Measure for Measure*, and as such begs to be examined for its own rhetorical strength.

"The tongue of Isabel," as the Duke of Vienna calls it (4.3.105), inspires no shortage of admiration for the men in Isabella's character society. Indeed, every single one of the principle male figures in the play recognizes and defers to Isabella's rhetorical proficiency as a force to be reckoned with – and to be employed. From prison, Claudio instructs his friend Lucio to seek out his sister to aid him in his current, dire situation; in so doing, he describes her extraordinary abilities in the realms of rhetoric and logic:

> This day my sister should the cloister enter,
> And there receive her approbation.
> Acquaint her with the danger of my state,
> 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; beside, she hath prosperous art
> When she will play with reason and discourse,
> And well she can persuade. (1.2. 173-84)

It is worth noting here that, while Claudio praises Isabella's speaking as a "prosperous art," he also attests to a "prone and speechless dialect" in her youthful demeanor that has the capacity to "move men." This recognition of her persuasiveness in silence as well as in speech is crucial in signifying that Isabella is, by her very nature, compelling and convincing; it also suggests that Isabella is inherently commanding of her own rhetoric – that is, that she embodies it. Unfortunately, Isabella is unaware of her own innate rhetorical gifts, for when she is asked by Lucio to use her "fair prayer / To soften Angelo" (1.4.69-70), she does not realize what means she has to help her brother:

> ISABELLA. Alas, what poor ability's in me

> To do him good?
> LUCIO.   Assay the power you have.
> ISABELLA. My power, alas, I doubt. (1.4.74-6)

In the instant of expressing her own reservations and insecurity, Isabella leaves herself

vulnerable to Lucio's manipulation of her rhetoric. He instructs her to beg like a

woman:

> Go to Lord Angelo
> And let him learn to know, when maidens sue
> Men give like gods; but when they weep and kneel
> All their petitions are as freely theirs
> As they themselves would owe them. (1.4.79-83).

Lucio is here suggesting that Isabella will be most effective in persuading Angelo if she

displays her feminine emotionality and subservience before him. Significantly, while

that implication might seem to degrade her, it also ensures that Isabella is not merely

being permitted to plead her case publicly as a woman, but that she is being explicitly

ordered to do so.

Act 2, Scene 2 of *Measure for Measure* comprises a rhetorical stand-off between

Isabella and Angelo, and the verbal encounter during which the true dispositions of

these two characters are revealed. Instead of basely begging for her brother's life in a

"womanly" fashion, Isabella engages in a lengthy judicial debate with Angelo as to the

nature and severity of her brother's crime, and as to the importance of mercy in the

administering of justice. Isabella initially attempts to win Angelo's favor by mirroring

his values and admitting her own genuine disapproval of her brother's behavior. She

then asks quite simply for her brother's otherwise-good person to be disassociated from

his criminal act:

> There is a vice that most I do abhor,
> And most desire should meet the blow of justice;

> For which I would not plead, but that I must,
> For which I must not plead, but that I am
> At war 'twixt will and will not...
> I have a brother is condemned to die.
> I do beseech you, let it be his fault,
> And not my brother. (2.2.29-34, 35-6)

When Angelo asserts that he cannot "[c]ondemn the fault, and not the actor of it" (2.2.37), Isabella, according to her own moral code, cannot help but concur that Angelo's is a "just but severe law" (2.2.41), and in fact she is ready to leave her argument there. However, with Lucio coaching her from the sidelines, and telling her that her entreaty is "too cold" (2.2.56), Isabella takes a new approach, and shifts her argument into a description of clemency as a divine and Christ-like deed – one that would flatter Angelo in his performance of it:

> No ceremony that to great ones longs,
> Not the king's crown, nor the deputed sword,
> The marshal's truncheon, nor the judge's robe,
> Become them with one half so good a grace
> As mercy does...
> Why, all the souls that were forfeit once,
> And He that might the vantage best have took
> Found out the remedy. How would you be
> If He which is the top of judgement should
> But judge as you are? O, think on that,
> And mercy then will breathe within your lips
> Like a man new made. (2.2.60-3, 73-9)

She asks Angelo to rethink the gravity of her brother's crime: "Who is it that hath died for this offence? / There's many have committed it" (2.2.88-9). When Angelo refuses to "show some pity" (2.2.100), Isabella resorts to scorning him, by way of a series of illustrative analogies and metaphors, for what she considers to be his blatant abuse of his deputed power and office: "O, it is excellent / To have a giant's strength, but it is tyrannous / To use it like a giant [...] Great men may jest with saints; 'tis wit in them, /

But in the less, foul profanation [...] That in the captain's but a choleric word, / Which in the soldier is flat blasphemy" (2.2.108-10, 128-30, 132-3). In continuing to berate and badger Angelo for his undeserved arrogance and unnecessary strictness, Isabella incurs Lucio's continued coaxing and praise of her in his asides to her, to the point where he expresses his perceived certainty that "[Angelo] will relent" (2.2.126).

Isabella's rhetoric does indeed have a tremendous impact on Angelo, but not the kind that she anticipates. Intrigued by her persistent pursuit of his leniency, Angelo asks her why she is imposing "these sayings" upon him (2.2.136), to which she responds with a final appeal to his own human nature:

> Go to your bosom,
> Knock there, and ask your heart what it doth know
> That's like my brother's fault; if it confess
> A natural guiltiness, such as is his,
> Let it not sound a thought upon your tongue
> Against my brother's life. (2.2.138-43)

In this instant, Angelo experiences something of an epiphany, which comprises not an intellectual response to Isabella's argument, but a physical reaction to her argument*ation*. He is "moved," not by Isabella's cause, but by the way she uses her words: "She speaks, and 'tis / Such sense that my sense breeds with it" (2.2.144-5). Angelo's physical or sexual "sense" is in fact ignited by Isabella's common "sense." While he is not at all predisposed to accept the case she makes, he is effectively seduced by her rhetoric, and the lust he feels as a result ironically proves the validity of her claim, as well as the force of her language. Angelo, to whom the Duke refers as "[a] man of stricture and firm abstinence" (1.2.12), is at once consumed with a "desire to hear [Isabella] speak again" (2.2.181), and to destroy her virtue.

That Angelo reacts to Isabella's rhetorical victory over him by attacking her chastity is not at all surprising in theoretical terms. Dympna Callaghan asserts that in Early Modern England, "[c]hastity, silence and obedience were the three cardinal and synonymous feminine virtues" (79). If we consider that the opposites of these traits would have been "three cardinal and synonymous feminine sins," then for a woman to be outspoken was for her to be disobedient and unchaste. Desmet confirms this speculation with her claim that in "exhibiting modesty by being voluble, Isabella is a living paradox" (148). Angelo is unable to reconcile himself with "this virtuous maid / Who subdues [him] quite" (2.2.188-9), and so he feels compelled to destroy her integrity and chastity by debunking her own logic. Isabella, having argued against her brother's confinement and death sentence by claiming his sin to be a commonly-committed one, must now contend with being expected to commit that sin in order to redeem her brother. Being forced, in Act 2, Scene 4, to choose between her chastity and Claudio's life, Isabella claims that "it were better a brother died at once / Than that a sister by redeeming him / Should die for ever (107-9). In an effort to trap her, Angelo exposes the hypocrisy in her current stance on extra-marital sexual relations:

> ANGELO. You seemed of late to make the law a tyrant,
>   And rather proved the sliding of your brother
>   A merriment than a vice.
> ISABELLA. O pardon me, my lord, it oft falls out
>   To have what we would have, we speak not what we
>   mean.
>   I something do excuse the thing I hate
>   For his advantage that I dearly love. (2.4.115-21)

This exchange reveals the impossible position in which Isabella has been placed, and the reality that, in speaking out on behalf of brother, her honor and her treasured values

have been compromised. Angelo backs her even further into her corner by reminding

her that she is in fact a woman, and should behave like one:

> I do arrest your words. Be that you are,
> That is, a woman; if you be more, you're none.
> If you be one, as you are well expressed
> By all external warrants, show it now
> By putting on the destined livery. (2.4.135-9)

In the Oxford Shakespeare edition of the play, N.W. Bawcutt glosses this passage as

Angelo's assertion that he will "take [Isabella's words] as security"; that if she tries to

be or do more than that of which a woman is "naturally capable," then she is no woman

at all; that if she is the woman she is "clearly shown to be by all of the evidence of her

outward appearance," then she must wear the "uniform of frailty which women are

destined to wear" (2.4.135-9 fn.; *Measure for Measure* 144). I argue that, given the

juxtaposition of the tropes of speech and sex in this play, and in the Isabella/Angelo

scenes in particular, Angelo is here asserting that he has the power to stop ("arrest") her

womanly speaking altogether; that if she attempts to speak out anymore ("be more"),

then she is no woman at all; that if she is as well spoken ("well expressed") as she

appears to be, then she must duly surrender her right to her own chastity. In response to

Angelo's sexual double-talk, Isabella immediately responds that "ha[s] no tongue but

one," and "entreat[s]" Angelo to "speak the former [simple] language" with which he

once addressed her.

For the rest of the play, Isabella embarks upon a quest to protect her own

chastity and, having no other choice, she trusts in the men around her – that they will

help her to preserve her personal integrity. As each one ultimately betrays her, her

resistance against their will to dominate her reverberates in her speech and, finally, in

her silence. In confessing her terrible predicament to Claudio – whom she believes "hath... in him such a mind of honour" (2.4.180) – he fearfully begs her to sleep with Angelo to save his life. Utterly disgusted that her own brother would "be made a man out of [her] vice" (3.1.141), Isabella launches into a hateful tirade against him:

> Take my defiance,
> Die, perish! Might but my bending down
> Reprieve thee from thy fate, it should proceed.
> I'll pray a thousand prayers for thy death,
> No word to save thee. (3.1. 146-50)

Realizing that Claudio will not defend her as she has defended him, Isabella decides that she will no longer speak on his behalf. Notably, after this heated verbal exchange, Isabella is immediately called over by the Duke, who has been listening on in his friar disguise. He tells Isabella: "I would by and by have some speech with you. The satisfaction I would require is likewise your own benefit" (3.1.158-60). Unbeknownst to Isabella, the "satisfaction" that the Duke "require[s]" is not only the exposure and downfall of Angelo, and his own reestablishment as the moral and rightful authority figure in Vienna, but the eventual taking of Isabella as his wife. In allowing herself to be "directed" by the Duke (4.3.134) – both in the execution of the bed-trick involving Mariana, and in the final scene where she, as instructed, "accuse[s] [Angelo] home and home" (4.3.141) – Isabella is successful in securing her chastity and her good reputation; however, she is also duped by the Duke, during that entire process, into believing that her brother has been murdered, and that, in spite of all of the horrors that have befallen her, she will ultimately be allowed to "have" her "general honour" (4.3133). In his book, *Speechless Dialect: Shakespeare's Open Silences*, Philip C. McGuire recounts two pivotal incidents in the final scene of *Measure for Measure*, in

reaction to which Isabella remains oddly silent: the first, when her brother is revealed as being alive; the second, after the Duke proposes marriage to her (78). When the Duke reveals a living Claudio to the court, he says to Isabella:

> If he be like your brother, for his sake
> Is he pardoned, and for your lovely sake,
> Give me your hand and *say* you will be mine,
> He is my brother too – but fitter time for that. (5.1.493-6)

McGuire suggests that there is a "potential ambivalence" in Isabella's final decision to remain silent, particularly in light of the fact that, in that same final scene, Isabella finds the compassion within her to speak on Angelo's behalf for Mariana's sake. Remarkably, regarding Angelo's evil purposes, she argues that "[h]is act did not o'ertake his bad intent" (5.1.451); in response the acts and intents of her brother and the Duke, she says absolutely nothing at all (78). McGuire writes:

> The silence between Claudio and Isabella may be tantamount to a retraction of the bitter words they had earlier exchanged or – to pose another possibility – that silence may signify a continuing rupture in their relationship… [It] coincides with the silence with which she responds to the Duke's initial proposal of marriage… Isabella's silence is all the more striking because the Duke phrases his marriage proposal as a call for her to assent with words as well as with a gesture… (79)

That the curtain falls on a silent Isabella is certainly no coincidence, considering that Isabella has, for the entire play, betrayed her own personal tendency towards silence – as evidenced by her life-decision to become a nun – in order to rhetorically serve her male counterparts. In choosing, finally, *not* to speak, Isabella asserts both her will to remain independent, and her true identity as a chaste servant – not of any man, but of God.

To decipher the rhetorical identity of the character of Desdemona is to understand the peculiar nature of her character society, and the rhetorical forces that are

at work against her in her character world. Indeed, *Othello* is perfectly suited to a discussion of the rhetoric of character because of the manner in which societal and individual rhetorics get twisted up together in a discourse of appearances[1] in the play, thereby convoluting the entire process of rhetorical characterization. In support of the "bridge" I am attempting to build for the rhetorical female between the dramatic genres, Susan Snyder has argued that *Othello* is a tragedy built upon a "comic matrix," meaning that it initially employs the conventions of comedy – including mismatched lovers, elopement, misplaced objects, drunken brawls, and an impossibly evil Vice figure – and then evolves unexpectedly towards a tragic resolution (5). In keeping with this air of the twisted and unpredictable, any attempts by characters in *Othello* to identify themselves and each other are necessarily confounded by the various rhetorics that make up the play's character society. This condition destabilizes the entire society – promising disorder and terrible consequences for a supposedly "Honest Iago" (2.3.158), and an apparently "noble Moor" (2.3.121) – meaning that its worst implications are for the "virtuous Desdemona" (3.1.33), whose character paradoxically operates just outside of the main discourse of the play, while still figuring predominantly in its tragedy. Throughout *Othello*, Desdemona is subjected to a wide variety of rhetorical constructions of her own character at the same time as she is endeavoring to participate in that process by employing rhetorical devices of her own – namely soliloquy, dialogue, and even silence. Tragically, these various and opposing constructions result in further diversification and confusion concerning the true nature and identity of her character, and Desdemona's dual-function as a rhetorical object and agent is ultimately

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[1] My development of the term "discourse of appearances" is rooted in Melchiori's references to a "dialectic of seeming versus being" in *Othello* (68,72).

too divided and paradoxical a role for her to balance, or to survive. Nonetheless, in spite of how her male counterparts attempt to negatively characterize her, it is Desdemona's own rhetorical efforts which ring most true in *Othello*, and leave the audience feeling certain that she *is* the honest and loyal wife that she says she is.

As I have indicated, *Othello*'s "aesthetic whole" (Melchiori 71) is devoted to a discourse of appearances. Iago's early admission, "I am not what I am" (1.1.66), and Othello's late request, "Speak of me as I am… / Of one that loved not wisely but too well" (5.2.338, 340), provide the framework for a society obsessed with perceptions of character and their verbal renderings. With far fewer speeches and exchanges than these two main characters, Desdemona is technically more of a figure in this discourse than a factor. Notably, the fact that she is so "free of speech" (3.3.187) is considered among her greatest "virtues" as they are outlined by Othello (and obviously expected of women in that society [3.3.186-8]). Having fewer opportunities to actively participate in the main discourse, Desdemona's character is frequently ascribed to her – which is to say that she is often objectified by the rhetoric of the men in her character society. While this condition is to a certain extent understandable, it is nonetheless problematic in the world of *Othello* where nothing is allowed to be what it seems.

Over the course of the play, Desdemona collects "linguistic signifiers," or types of characters that oppose one another.[2] As rhetorical object, she is portrayed as an inert possession *and* as an active driving force; as an innocent victim *and* as a devious whore. Indeed, the first impulse of the men around Desdemona is to refer to her as if she were a mere possession. In fact, the language they use to describe her imposes such passivity

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[2] These terms are explained in, and borrowed from Harold Fisch's article entitled "Character as Linguistic Sign" (593-4).

on her that she often seems like luggage (Orlin 178). Bewildered by her initial departure, Brabantio demands of Othello: "O thou foul thief, where hast thou stow'd my daughter?"(1.2.62). She is described as "transported" to the Moor (1.1.123), and "ta'en away" by him (1.3.78). At the Venetian court, the Duke orders Iago to "[f]etch Desdemona hither" (1.3.120), and for the trip to Cyprus, Othello "assign[s]" his wife to Iago's "conveyance" (1.3.281). Ironically, this widespread treatment of Desdemona as possession is undermined by the agency that is at other times attributed to her. Before Desdemona arrives at court to testify, Othello describes to the Senate the 'appetite' she brought to their courtship – how she would "seriously incline" (1.3.145) to sit and listen to the tales of his adventures, and always "come again, and with a greedy ear / Devour up [his] discourse" (1.3.148-9). He portrays Desdemona as present, aware, and even active in the wooing process – as having given him "a world of sighs" (1.3.158) and openly desired "such a man" (1.3.162) as him. Othello seems to be attesting to their union as a 'marriage of the minds': "She lov'd me for the dangers I had pass'd; / And I lov'd her that she did pity them" (1.3.166-7).[3] Othello's description of Desdemona to the Senate paints her not just as a willing participant but a driving force in their marriage, and clearly contradicts other constructions of her as an inanimate object. The notion of her agency, or rather her influence over Othello, is most inflated when Iago declares, "Our general's wife is now the general" (2.3.286). And nowhere is the irony of these opposing constructions more striking than in 2.1, where Cassio refers to Desdemona as "our great captain's captain" (line 74), infusing her image with power,

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[3] Several critics – including Mary Beth Rose and Lena Cowen Orlin – have used this and other parts of Othello's rhetoric to support their studies of Desdemona as warrior figure; we will explore how Desdemona herself contributes to that image shortly.

only to strip it away in the next line by explaining how she has been "left" in Iago's "conduct" (line 75).

Desdemona's function as rhetorical object exposes her to another, more serious set of opposing constructions – those of 'innocent victim' and 'devious whore.' Before she steps in to prove otherwise, Desdemona's father presents her as "a maiden never bold, / Of spirit so still and quiet that her motion / Blush'[s] at herself" (1.3.94-96), and "[s]o opposite to marriage, that she shunn'd / The wealthy curled darlings of our nation" (1.2.67-8). He rages, "She is abus'd, stol'n from me, and corrupted, / By spells and medicines bought of mountebacks" (1.3.60-1), insisting that she must have been drugged by Othello to behave so totally out of character. It is ironic that our first ideas of Desdemona should be those of an innocent maiden who has fallen victim to the "foul charms" (1.2.73) of an evil apothecary. After all, not only is that the image she most ardently projects in her own rhetoric, it is – considering the explicit and purposeful effects of Iago's "medicine" (4.1.43) – the image that *seems* to be the most appropriate to her character. Of course, that irony is itself subverted by the fact that Desdemona is also rhetorically constructed as woman capable of some deception. In learning of her active role in their elopement, Brabantio warns Othello: "Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see: / She has deceiv'd her father, and may thee" (1.3.288-9). Iago later echoes this warning: "She did deceive her father, marrying you; / And when she seem'd to shake and fear your looks, / She lov'd them most" (3.3.207-9). Those warnings are fertile ground for the most corrosive treatment of her character as a "whore," particularly after Desdemona decides to conceal the fact of her missing handkerchief in order to placate her husband. As Othello's faith is increasingly undermined by Iago's

insinuations of Desdemona's infidelity, his formerly controlled rhetoric disintegrates, becoming "starting" and "rash" (3.4.75), and the language he uses to describe her deteriorates. The once "gentle" (1.2.25), "fair" (2.1.173), "lady" (1.3.115), and "wife" (1.3.233) Desdemona is now referred to as "chuck" (4.2.23), "devil" (4.1.230), "cunning whore" (4.2.88), "procreant" (4.2.27), "public commoner" (4.2.72), and "impudent strumpet" (4.2.79). With not even her own father to recommend her, Desdemona is left with little defense against this verbal thrashing and its implications.

As a rhetorical object, Desdemona is fashioned into various, opposing characters – some more potent and toxic than others within her male-dominated character society. Simultaneously, as rhetorical agent, Desdemona endeavors to participate in the construction of her own character and employs certain devices to that end. In soliloquy, Desdemona presents herself as a something of a soldier, while her dialogue functions to uphold her reputation as a gentlewoman. When all other words have failed her, Desdemona resorts to the rhetoric of silence in a final, desperate, and ironically successful attempt to construct herself.

If Othello presents their union as a marriage of the minds in the first act, Desdemona most certainly echoes that notion in her own soliloquies. In fact, Desdemona's few poignant speeches are littered with soldierly rhetoric and references to herself as a kind of warrior spirit, and Othello himself hails his wife as his "fair warrior" (2.1.173). Before the Venetian senate, Desdemona testifies as to militaristic nature of her first feelings of love for Othello, and her profound allegiance to him in his life and duties as a soldier – those which she claims the right to share with him:

> That I did love the Moor to live with him,
> My downright violence and storm of fortunes

> May trumpet to the world...
> I saw Othello's visage in his mind;
> And to his honours 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 the war,
> The rites for which I love him are bereft me,
> And I a heavy interim shall support
> By his dear absence. Let me go with him. (1.3.244-46, 248-55).

According to Mary Beth Rose, with this speech "Desdemona characterizes herself as a soldier-spouse, adopting the vocabulary of the epic quest" (217). While the "rites" she requests are certainly her marriage (i.e. sexual) rites, and she openly expresses her desire to go with her husband into the battlefield so that she can be with him in every sense. This trope is continued in 3.4, when she sternly rebukes herself for having challenged Othello's anger over the handkerchief, and invokes the imagery of a military court to express her own guilt: "I was – unhandsome warrior as I am – / Arraigning his unkindness with my soul; / But now I find I had suborn'd the witness, / And he's indicted falsely" (3.4.145-8). The idea of her soldierly obedience is most strongly supported by her speech in 4.2. Although she realizes that she fighting a losing battle against an unknown enemy (Iago), she is resolved to be loyal to Othello at all costs. She swears to Iago himself:

> If e'er my will did trespass 'gainst his love
> Either in discourse of thought or in actual deed;
> Or that mine eyes, mine ears, or any sense
> Delighted them in any other form;
> Or that I do not yet, and never did,
> And ever will – though he do shake me off
> To beggarly divorcement – love him dearly,
> Comfort forswear me! Unkindness may do much,
> And his unkindness may defeat my life,
> But never taint my love. (4.2.151-60)

As evidenced by this speech, Desdemona possesses a profound sense of loyalty towards Othello. In a terrible foreshadowing of the events to come, Desdemona declares that she will never betray her husband – not even if he sees fit to kill her.

In contrast to her longer speeches, these potent, warrior-like images are not to be found in Desdemona's regular dialogue. If, according to Karen Newman's theories, these longer speeches "communicate [Desdemona's] mental life" (4), her shorter exchanges seem to serve more to uphold the status quo and preserve her reputation as a Venetian gentlewoman within her character society. Perhaps the best example of this is in 2.1, where Desdemona and Iago, having returned from Cyprus, engage in idle banter as they wait for Othello on the docks of Venice. After having successfully violated numerous social prescriptions for women in "half-wooing" Othello (1.3.174), running off to marry him, and then electing to accompany him to the battlegrounds of Cyprus, Desdemona uses this return home to try and reinforce her genteel, upper-class status. While Iago makes crude jokes and insulting character sketches of female virtues and vices, Desdemona, despite feeling anxious, laughs at him good-naturedly and challenges him only superficially. In a short aside – a sort of dialogue with the audience – she confesses to the ruse: "I am not merry; but I do beguile / The thing I am by seeming otherwise" (2.1.121-2). This aside proves Desdemona's acute awareness of the need for image-control in this society. That understanding is also shown in her defense of Emilia, whom Iago chastizes for talking too much. Desdemona declares, "Alas, she has no speech!"(2.1.103), suggesting once again that, in this character society, the best rhetoric for a woman may be no rhetoric at all.

In fact, Desdemona ultimately resorts to a non-rhetorical rhetoric in a final attempt to support and defend her own character – the rhetoric of silence. When all of her attempts to portray her own character as both a dutiful wife and a respectable lady have failed, and all of her pleas and promises of innocence have been exhausted, Desdemona withdraws from those forms of rhetoric. In *'A moving Rhetoricke,'* Christina Luckyj claims that "[f]eminine silence can be constructed as a space of subjective agency which threatens masculine authority" (60). Desdemona's is a figurative silence, which is to say that it is not so much non-verbal or non-argumentative as it is passive-aggressive. It includes the decision she makes, in the face of an impending, unjust demise, to surrender her own words and sing the "song of willow" – one that another forsaken woman, her mother's maid Barbary, sang to "expre[ss] her fortune" (4.3.25, 27, 28).[4] It also includes her decision to devote her very last verbal effort to keeping Othello from being implicated in her murder. Though she swears to Othello in her final moments, "I never did / Offend you in my life" (5.2.58-9), he utterly refuses to accept her testimony, and the most solid proof of her loyalty comes only after he has smothered her. Her last words uttered to a horrified Emilia:

> EMILIA.   O, lady, speak again!
>   Sweet, Desdemona, O sweet mistress, speak!
> DESDEMONA. A guiltless death I die.
> EMILIA. O, who hath done this deed?
> DESDEMONA. Nobody; I myself. Farewell.
>   Commend me to my kind lord. O farewell! (*She dies*) (5.2.121-6)

These final speech acts of Desdemona's are so entirely self-effacing and self-undermining, that it is difficult to argue that they serve any purpose or prove any point at all (Orlin 181), and indeed they do not *within* the drama of *Othello*: Othello is still

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[4] "The Willow Song": *Othello* 4.3.38-53.

undone, and now all of Desdemona's efforts to construct her own character have been completely undermined. In *Wooing, Wedding and Power: Women in Shakespeare's Plays*, Irene Dash contends that "[Othello] is the tragedy of a woman, of women, pummeled into shape by the conventions that bind" (104). That argument has some merit, but if we re-examine its claim in terms of the rhetorical constructions of Desdemona's character, we see that it is only partially true; being treated as the object of language and being largely excluded from the process of her own characterization is Desdemona's necessary, dramatic fate – it is her *literal* tragedy. Metadramatically, however, Desdemona's rhetorical efforts to "shape" herself do not go unheard or unseen. They form the very last – and the last*ing* – impressions that the audience has of her character: images of a forsaken wife, a fallen soldier, and even a martyred saint.

If *Measure for Measure* is a tragicomedy, and *Othello* is a tragedy with a "comic matrix," *Macbeth* is a tragedy, through and through. With its murder and madness, ghosts and gore, Macbeth is a horrific spectacle which includes all of the necessary ingredients to properly thrill an audience – including, of course, a freakishly-violent and outrageously-vocal female who suffers cruelly for the potency of her rhetorical identity. In Chapter 1, I state that "any female appropriation of the art of rhetoric Early Modern society was tantamount to her physically wandering beyond the private, domestic sphere to which she was relegated, and into the masculine, public realms of politics and war – it was an aberration, and a violation of gender-appropriate behavior. For a woman to speak out at all, she had to be speaking the language of men" (15). If any one Shakespearean female character can be described as being the most rhetorically deviant, physically transgressive, and gender-inappropriate, it is the murderous Queen of

Scotland, Lady Macbeth. Lady Macbeth's grisly, ambitious, and ultimately successful endeavor to secure the throne of Scotland for her husband involves her character's bold performance of both a literal and a rhetorical usurpation. Her obtaining for her husband the kingship that is not rightfully his signals her intrusion into the matters of men – those of politics and war – and her unlawful seizure and appropriation of the language and they physical means that belong to them.

While the drama of Macbeth has been widely criticized for lacking the thematic complexity and the profound character development of other Shakespearean tragedies, such as *Hamlet* and *Othello*, the play's topical and linguistic straightforwardness is useful in its construction of very clear and uncomplicated characters. While this phenomenon is, on the one hand, responsible for the terrific vivacity of the figure of Lady Macbeth, it also rather cements the fate of her spectacular character. According to the theory of rhetorical identity, it would appear that the sharper the female character image, the greater the evidence of female agency and subjectivity; the greater the evidence of female agency and subjectivity, the greater the need for its repression and destruction. Indeed, Lady Macbeth is one of the most violent and vocal of Shakespeare's females, and those male qualities construct for her a rhetorical identity that is intrepid to the point of being androgynous; of course, such rhetorical audacity on the part of woman cannot go unpunished on the Early Modern stage, and so Lady Macbeth's character is subject to a forcible descent into madness, and her language is systemically reduced from powerful and persuasive soliloquies and speeches, through subservient, wifely pleas, and mindless and shameful sleep-talking, to a suicide heralded by a cry – not of her own, but of other women.

I have shown that because of the numerous and diverse rhetorical constructions of the character of Desdemona, there is a challenge in sorting out which of those characterizations represent her true identity in *Othello*; even Desdemona uses various types of rhetoric to shape herself, thereby forming and presenting a complex figure of herself. Such is not the case with Lady Macbeth. Her rhetoric characterizes her rather singularly as a power-hungry, blood-thirsty warrior-woman, and in fact, all signs in Macbeth point to that characterization as being the right one. In Act 2, Scene 2 of *Macbeth*, the Thane of Rosse refers to Macbeth as "Bellona's bridegroom" (line 54). Bellona is, of course, the goddess of war in Roman mythology, who was said to walk directly beside Mars, the god of war (the Greek god Ares) in battle, the two of them leaving the earth behind them streaming with blood (Hamilton 34). Though Rosse's words might, at first, seem to be an appraisal of Macbeth's military prowess – an indication of how intricately the qualities of despotism and violence are woven into his character – they can also be taken as an assertion of the true nature and role of his spouse, Lady Macbeth. Applying the pseudonym of "Bellona" to Macbeth's wife not only allows us to liken Lady Macbeth to a priestess or goddess of war, but it encourages us to assess the extent to which her character's rhetoric and actions uphold that image and support that characterization of her.

Using her own speech as her main weapon, Lady Macbeth wills herself into combat against what is deemed "natural" for a woman in her character society, and she does so with the specific intent of rendering herself capable of murder. The theme of nature being grossly disturbed – to the point where "[f]air is foul, and foul is fair" (1.1.12) – is crucial in *Macbeth*, for it secures the proper conditions for evil and disorder

to easily intrude upon the lives of the characters and corrupt them. The theme of the frightening abnormality of gender disturbance and sexual ambiguity in this play is first invoked during Macbeth and Banquo's initial encounter with the witches – appropriately nicknamed "the Weïrd sisters" (1.3.33) – and right after Macbeth has described the day as both "foul and fair" (1.3.39). Banquo's says of the hags: "You should be women, / And yet your beards forbid me to interpret / That you are so" (1.3.47-9). This allusion to physical androgyny in fact sets the stage for Lady Macbeth's psychological adoption of masculinity (Adelman 111), that which is most strongly evidenced by her famous speech in Act 1, Scene 5. Once she learns of the future that the witches have prophesied for her husband, she calls upon the evil spirits that be to relieve her of her femininity so that she might do what is necessary to make Macbeth's prospects become realities:

> Come, you spirits
> That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here,
> And fill me from crown to the toe top-full
> Of direst cruelty. Make thick my blood,
> Stop up th' access and passage to remorse,
> That no compunctious visitings of nature
> Shake my fell purpose, nor keep peace between
> Th' effect and it! Come to my woman's breasts,
> And take my milk for gall, you murd'ring ministers.
> Wherever in your sightless substances
> You wait on nature's mischief. (1.5.47-57)

Duncan, the King of Scotland, will make a "fatal entrance… [u]nder [her] battlements" that night (1.5.46-7), and this speech serves as Lady Macbeth's rallying cry to herself – an assurance that no aspects of her own womanhood will distract her from her purpose. The result of this, Angela Pitt explains, is that Lady Macbeth comes to demonstrate – or

rather, to betray of herself – "characteristics that are traditionally held to be possible only in the male – single-minded courage and cruelty" (66).

In fact, what constitutes a man is one of the play's central concerns, and certainly one of Lady Macbeth's. When she first receives the letter from her husband, telling her of the witches' sayings, she privately expresses her concern that Macbeth simply does not have, in his character, the necessary ruthlessness to make those sayings come true; she believes that he is not, as it were, 'man enough':

> Glamis thou art, and Cawdor, and shalt be
> What thou art promised. Yet I do fear thy nature;
> It is too full o' th' milk of human kindness
> To catch the nearest way. Thou would'st be great,
> Art not without ambition, but without
> The illness that should attend it. (1.5.15-20)

Lady Macbeth knows that she possesses, within her own character, the qualities that her husband lacks, and she explicitly states her intention to berate him for his weaknesses, and to impart to him, through her speech, her own will and capabilities: "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" (1.5.28-31). With an acute sense of the goodly impression that they need to give their guests, and the hostility and human disregard that their open show of friendliness must mask, Lady Macbeth instructs her husband as to how they must first 'perform' for their company, so that they can then perform the murder:

> Your face, my thane, is as a book where men
> May read strange matters. To beguile the time,
> Look like the time. Bear welcome in your eye,
> Your hand, your tongue. Look like th' innocent flower,
> But be the serpent under't. He that's coming
> Must be provided for, and you shall put
> This night's great business into my dispatch,

> Which shall to all our nights and days to come
> Give solely sovereign sway and masterdom. (1.6.73-82)

Interestingly, Macbeth here tells her that they "will speak further" about this matter, and Lady Macbeth dismisses him: "Only look up clear. / To alter favour ever is to fear. / Leave all the rest to me" (1.6.82-4). This rebuke indicates rather forcefully that *she* is now the man in charge, and that the only speech that matters now is hers.

Lady Macbeth's rhetoric in fact continues to be characterized by a trope of masculinity, and as the play progresses she goes on to make several attacks upon her husband's manliness – the most forceful of which occurs when he tries to back out of their plan to murder the king. Macbeth claims, in his own defense, "I dare do all that may become a man; / Who dares do more is none" (1.7.51-2). However, as Dusinberre claims, while "[t]he witches work on Macbeth's image of himself as king[,] Lady Macbeth works on his image of himself as man" (283). She does not stand for his fear, and her lack of womanly impulses becomes increasingly apparent as she taunts Macbeth, and compares her own courage and determination to his:

> 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...
>   ...I have given suck, and know,
> How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me;
> I would, while it was smiling in my face,
> Have pluck'd my nipple from his boneless gums,
> And dash'd the brains out, had I so sworn as you
> Have done to this. (1.7.56-9, 62-7)

This is Lady Macbeth's first and only verbal acknowledgment of her own womanhood in the entire play of *Macbeth*. Given that there is no other indication of the Macbeths having had any children between them, one presumes that the child she mentions in this passage is dead – leaving one to wonder how such an event may have shaped her

character's distorted psychology. Nonetheless, her speech indicates that no womanly aspect, not even the bond of motherhood – could ever have made her break any promise to her husband, let alone such an important and consequential one. It is a statement which proves that the violence in her character is indeed inherent, and not to be dismissed by Macbeth or by her audience as merely a passing fancy. When Macbeth returns from murdering Duncan – delirious, and having forgotten to leave the bloody daggers behind with the king's grooms, to frame them for the crime – Lady Macbeth scorns him for being "[i]nfirm of purpose" (2.2.68), and goes back to finish the job that he started.

In the midst of committing their gruesome act, and with his wife as the instigator of it, Macbeth declares that "nature seems dead" (2.1.62), and the truth in that observation is reflected throughout the rest of the play in the deterioration of Macbeth's relationship with his wife, and in the decline and eventual death of Lady Macbeth. Having reversed their gender roles so perversely, the Macbeths' marriage is irrevocably altered. The horror of what they have done affects them both; however, Lady Macbeth maintains her feminine composure enough to preserve her courtly status and appearance as a "gentle lady" (2.3.96), while Macbeth loses his own to the point where his wife declares him to be "unmann'd in folly" (3.4.87). As Macbeth loses his sanity as a part of the aftermath of their crime, so does he lose the respect and love he once felt for his wife. While he initially admired her ability to shake off her female weakness, telling her that she should "[b]ring forth men-children only! / For thy undaunted mettle should compose / Nothing but males" (1.7.83-5), he begins to realize that there is "[n]o son of [his] succeeding" (3.1.69). Macbeth comes to see Lady Macbeth in the context of his

own reign – as "fruitless" and "barren" (3.1.66, 67). Having made use of Lady Macbeth's evil instruction and warped constitution to get his crown, Macbeth ends up resenting her and alienating her in his desperate attempts to keep it.

As Macbeth's state of mind and the state of their union disintegrate, Lady Macbeth goes to great lengths to 'keep up appearances' at court by behaving in a more womanly and wifely fashion. As they prepare for the banquet where they will celebrate their coronations, Macbeth is deeply unsettled in his anticipation of Banquo's murder, and an unwitting Lady Macbeth tries to console and compose him: "Come on, gentle my lord, / Sleek o'er your rugged looks. Be bright and jovial / Among your guests tonight" (3.2.30-2). He tells her that his mind is "full of scorpions" (3.2.41), and when she asks him "[w]hat's to be done," he keeps her in the dark: "Be innocent of the knowledge, dearest chuck" (3.3.50-1). This exchange involves a useless attempt on both of their parts to restore themselves to their former marital roles and normalcy. Lady Macbeth cannot "be innocent" at Macbeth's command, no more than Macbeth can "give the cheer" at her request (3.4.37), and the futility of Lady Macbeth's endeavor to be woman and a wife again becomes increasingly evident. As the rest of the deadly events in *Macbeth* unfold without her, Lady Macbeth retreats from the action and becomes "unmann'd" in a folly of her own.

By the time we see Lady Macbeth again, in Act 5, she has descended into madness and is apparently prone to sleepwalking – behavior which her doctor appropriately describes as a "great perturbation in nature" (5.1.10). She stalks the court at night, madly wringing her hands in an effort to rid them of imaginary blood stains,

and reliving – and revealing in her muttering – the horrors that she and Macbeth have experienced:

> Out, damned spot, out, I say! One. Two.
> Why then, 'tis time to do't. Hell is murky. Fie, my
> lord, fie, a soldier and afeard? What need we fear
> who knows it, when none can call our power to
> account? Yet who would have thought the old man
> to have had so much blood in hid?...
>   ...The Thane of Fife had wife. Where is
> she now? What, will these hands ne'er be clean?...
> What's done cannot be undone. To bed. (5.1.36-42, 44-5, 71)

What is obvious to the doctor and the gentlewoman who witness Lady Macbeth in this state, is also obvious to the audience: "Unnatural deeds / Do breed unnatural troubles" (5.2.75-6). Lady Macbeth's daring rhetorical transgressions are both unnatural and irreversible, and her strange and uncertain manner of death is ironically signaled offstage by "the cry of women" (5.5.10), and not a single word of her own. Her suicide has little effect upon the now heartless Macbeth, who generally laments that "[life] is a tale / Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury / Signifying nothing" (5.5.29.31). The "insignificance" of Lady Macbeth's "sound and fury" within her character society is accentuated by how Young Siward is reported, in the final scene, to have died "like a man" (5.8.48). That statement, in itself, contains perhaps the greatest irony in *Macbeth*, for no matter how many men die like men, it is the fact that one Lady *speaks* like a man which is the most crucial element of the entire play.

Isabella, Desdemona, and Lady Macbeth together demonstrate a consequential generic trajectory for the rhetorical Shakespearean female. As the severity of their misfortunes are directly proportional to the seriousness of their plays, we may conclude that the movement from comedy into tragedy is, for the speaking woman, a passage into

hostile and deadly territory. However, if we choose to consider that the tragicomic rhetorical female – she who embodies eloquence, femininity, *and* survival – bridges the gap between the dramatic genres, then she becomes our license to judge Shakespeare's more tragic females by their rhetorical identities, and not according to the events and outcomes of their character lives. According to the theory of rhetorical identity, the rhetorical female is tragic only insofar as she is a victim of poor dramatic circumstances. There is nothing inherently tragic about her.

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~ **Conclusion / Prospectus** ~

> Perhaps the simplest observation that we can make is that in the sixteenth century there appears to be an increased self-consciousness about the fashioning of human identity as a manipulable, artful process.
>
> ~ Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, 1980

> Rhetoric is less preoccupied with distinctions, rather more unifying. It works through the imagination… [and] schematizes what would otherwise be too fantastic into identifiable figures of style that can be made out to simple embellishments on formal signification.
>
> ~ Walter J. Ong, *Rhetoric, Romance, and Technology*, 1971

My development of this theory of rhetorical identity is partially an attempt to revive Shakespearean character criticism in a way that authenticates it. The highly-romanticized character analyses of such great critics as Dr Samuel Johnson, A.C. Bradley, and the irrepressible Harold Bloom have – with their enthusiasm, imagination, and articulacy – made an important contribution to Shakespeare studies; they have also, unfortunately, given Shakespearean character criticism the reputation of being a self-indulgent exercise in "bardolatry," and a soapbox from which to treat Shakespeare as a genius, and his characters as real people who present us with images of our own selves. Other critics have rebelled against this formalist tendency by applying, to Shakespeare's texts and figures, completely external theories of literature such as those employed by postmodern psychoanalytic, deconstructionist, Marxist, and feminist scholars. While I do not share Bloom's grand sentiment that Shakespeare is responsible for the "invention of the human," I also refuse to acknowledge any futility or decadence in formalist theory or in the practice of Shakespearean character criticism. I personally share Northrop Frye's original desire and vision: to create a theory that "grow(s) out of the art it deals with" (6-7). I want to study Shakespeare's characters for what they actually *are*: the very words by

which we identify them. That being said, I also want to ensure that any character theory that I create and apply is not aesthetically frozen, but firmly rooted in literary history and authorial craftsmanship. That is where rhetorical theory proves itself to be crucial, in establishing and qualifying the Shakespearean character as the product and the embodiment of the classical "art of persuasion" – that which was not only widely studied and practiced in Early Modern England, but which heavily influenced the production of neoclassical texts, including the works of Shakespeare, and thus contributed significantly to the fashioning of character identity. I want Shakespearean character criticism to examine Shakespeare's figures both aesthetically *and* practically – not as people, but the as exceptional works of art that they have always been, and continue to be.

This thesis is a labor of love, and it is also very much a work in progress – one that I intend to broaden and strengthen at the doctoral level in my proposed dissertation, *Rhetorical Identity and the Enduring Shakespearean Character*. At this stage, I have examined the crucial relationship between dramatic structure and character in its necessitation and formation of rhetorical identity – that which allows a character to transcend and to be considered apart from its dramatic origins. For the rhetorical female character, this methodology shifts the critical focus away from her character's actions and fate, and towards the image(s) that she presents of herself. While my development of the concept of rhetorical identity has served, in this project, to theoretically liberate the dramatically-doomed rhetorical female in Shakespearean drama, I envision this theory as being relevant and applicable to other complex and controversial Shakespearean figures – including his tragic heroes,

loveable fools, and outstanding villains. I also intend for the assessment of rhetorical identity to become a far more comprehensive and disciplined process, in which character rhetoric is dissected and analyzed for the specific tropes and figures of speech that it uses to influence and to entertain its intended audience.

After all, my particular interest in Shakespearean character and rhetoric stems from a will to explain the power of language to affect the imagination. Shakespeare's figures have an exceptional capacity to take shape and dwell in the minds of audiences, readers and critics, and this phenomenon begs certain questions: What gives Shakespeare's characters their human value and cultural currency? How do they speak to us, and why do they remain with us? My goal is, and has always been, to explicitly examine the manner in which Shakespeare's characters resist dramatic and contextual constraints upon their speech and actions and achieve potent and lasting identities that extend beyond the boundaries of their plays. The theory and methodology of rhetorical identity essentially highlights the persuasive effect that Shakespeare's characters have on audiences and readers, and thus encourages a critical awareness of how they maintain their integrity over time, and persistently compel our consideration.

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