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## Securing Permanent Power: The Sexism of Self-Otherization in Shakespearean Plays

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Critics have consistently been concerned with examining the otherized characters of Shakespeare's plays, focusing on those characters marginalized by either their race or female sex. However, there is rarely a focus on the play's protagonists as self-otherized, even though many characters purposefully take on attributes of such marginalized character tropes. Specifically, in the plays *Measure for Measure*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, and *The Tempest*, major characters emphasize a defining trait as a means of marginalizing themselves from the common cast. In regard to achieving their goals, only the male protagonists succeed—the females, particularly Cleopatra and Isabella, end up losing the very characteristics they used to marginalize and define themselves. I would suggest that an explanation for their failure in contrast to the males' victories can be found in their sex and the social expectations associated with womanhood. Shakespeare presented this discrepancy to exhibit the limitations aristocratic women faced regarding mobility because of expectations placed upon them. The otherized characters in the aforementioned plays lose their personhood and sense of self because their identity is instead attributed to them by the majority type, that is, white males.

Ania Loomba's scholarship regarding the marginalized characters in Shakespearean works focuses on characters of foreign origin, though she quickly connects the same discriminating attitude to women of Shakespeare. Loomba

writes, “Both women and racial ‘others’ are posited as biological and natural inferiors and similar characteristics are attributed to them.”<sup>21</sup> These characteristics include inferiority, unnaturalness, lack of intelligence, and lack of ambition. Therefore, marginalized characters begin to lose their ability to define themselves, their personhood becoming a construct of others’ conceptions. Loomba explains the phenomenon in this way: “Women, and indeed other marginalized peoples, were excluded from the projected ideals of self-fulfillment and self-fashioning, of personal achievement and mobility; sexual difference became a central preoccupation of religious and secular authority.”<sup>22</sup> In other words, aristocratic females were limited in what they could strive to achieve or the positions they could try to attain. Examples are evident in the treatment of both Isabella and Cleopatra by the men from whom they strive to separate their identities.

In order to fully understand the marginalization faced by women during the time Shakespeare was producing his works, it is enlightening to look at specific views the cultures imposed on them regarding how a well-behaved woman ought to behave. In 1608, William Vaughan, a Doctor of Civil Laws, writes, “But what shall the woman do? Shall she do what seemeth good in her eyes? No.”<sup>23</sup> Following a detailed passage on the duties of husbands, Vaughan segues into a discussion of a wife’s duties by stressing that her judgment of morality and propriety are not reliable. This statement is evident of the mentality that gave the decision-making of a woman to her husband, as Vaughan instructs. The reason, he explains, is that because “the woman is a feeble creature and not endued with such a noble courage as the man, she is sooner pricked to the heart or moved to passions than man.”<sup>24</sup> Therefore, a woman is to rely upon the man above her for wisdom and guidance regarding decision-making and judgments. By understanding these biases that were imposed on women, the dynamics of Shakespeare’s female characters and their actions in attempting to gain power over themselves and others can be better understood.

In *Measure for Measure*, the protagonist Isabella, in addition to being otherized automatically as a part the female sex, willingly otherizes herself by choosing a life of abstinence and permanent separation from men as she studies to become a nun. The reason this separates Isabella even further from the already marginalized woman of the time was that the women of Shakespeare’s age were

expected to live in accordance with the rules of their patriarch, or at least parental control until they were to become—in essence—the property of their husbands. Indeed, Bullinger offers a lengthy paragraph regarding the rules by which daughters and maidens shall “avoid all wantonness and niceness in words, gestures, and deed, to eschew all dishonest games and pastimes . . . [and] wanton communication.”<sup>5</sup> Although chasteness—not just in purity, but also in action, thought, and speech—is the aim of these stifling regulations, the end goal for all women is marriage: “to work to love their husbands and children.”<sup>6</sup> Because the purpose of women’s chastity was to save themselves for their husbands, Isabella’s decision to remain pure always through a life in the nunnery makes her worthless in the eyes of men. By willingly choosing not to fulfill her societal role as a woman, Isabella loses the immediate value of the identity that comes with partnership with a man.

Not only does Isabella choose to refrain from the responsibility of becoming a submissive wife, but she also contradicts a second, equally important, expectation: that women are to submit to the decisions of men. In the nunnery, Isabella would be under the guidance of set rules; in fact, she even expresses a desire for “farther privileges . . . wishing a more strict restraint upon the sisterhood” (1.4.1-5).<sup>7</sup> As discussed earlier, Vaughan expressed that women were not meant to do what they saw as right in their own reasoning, but rather to listen to the wisdom of their husband. Before their expected marriage, a woman was under the control and leadership of her father. Thus, following this ideology, a woman must never gain control over her own thoughts; she was always subject to the guidance of a male figure. However, the nun Francesca reveals to Isabella that by becoming a nun she loses the direct connection with male opinions, stating, “When you have vowed, you must not speak with men but in the presence of the prioress. Then if you speak, you must not show your face; or if you show your face, you must not speak” (1.4.10-13). By this rule, nuns in the convent not only follow their own rules as enforced by their prioress, but also limit their connection with male guidance and instruction. In the context of the play, therefore, to men such as Angelo or the Duke, Isabella will soon be literally and figuratively untouchable. That is, her purity and mind will be protected from male intrusion. In reality, though, since the nunnery is under the control of a church, which is under the control of a Father, Isabella’s attempt to escape male dominance is futile.

At first, Isabella's choice to protect herself in this way results in momentary power. She is able to deny Angelo the use of her body as a bartering chip for her brother's life, by virtue of her vows. It cannot be said whether or not this is the sole reason for her refusal, but it does give her the means of honorably declining the wishes of the man in power. Furthermore, through her denial of Angelo's desires, Isabella is able to gain knowledge about his sinful intentions, thus gaining the power to later incriminate him in front of the Duke and the townspeople. Therefore, her choice to otherize herself by joining a convent eventually results in the "salvation" of her brother's life. Although through her self-otherization Isabella is able to reveal the hypocrisy of Angelo's dealings of justice, it inevitably results in her loss of autonomy.

At the play's close, despite her effort to escape the expectations thrust upon her sex, Isabella eventually is forced to account for those conjectures—she is still unable to refuse the offer of marriage from a man, particularly a figure of authority. Isabella, whose intentions throughout the play are clearly to live a life of rules and abstinence, has no say in her final fate. The Duke commands, "For your lovely sake give me your hand and say you will be mine"; Isabella has no choice but to silently comply (5.1.62). The argument that the Duke is undeserving hardly needs to be made, as throughout the play he is a figure of deceit, foul play, and gutlessness. This symbolism is evident in his initial exchange of power to the hands of Angelo for the purpose of avoiding uncomfortable decisions of justice among his people. However, by virtue of his gender and status, the Duke has the final say regarding the fate of all the women crucial to the play. Interestingly, Shakespeare doesn't give Isabella a voice after the Duke's request for her hand. This silence should not be read as acquiescence on her part, but rather as a commentary on how expression of her desires would fail to change the proceedings.

From the play's start to finish, it is clear that Isabella was set on giving her life to God and the nunnery; it is obvious that a simple proposal would not sway her. Furthermore, it was clearly not the first time she had been propositioned—think Angelo—and the Duke who had deceived her would not have convinced her to willingly forsake a lifetime of values. Overall, although her self-marginalization by abstinence and pursuit of nunhood did provide her with the power to save her brother's life—resulting in a happy future for him and Juliet—and momentarily escape the control of

men over her decisions, Isabella was unable to gain enough power to achieve her true desire: to be left alone to serve God with her body and life.

While Isabella attempts—though in vain—to gain power through her chastity, the female title character of *Antony and Cleopatra*, takes the opposite approach. As Vaughan warns, “A woman is jealous and naturally suspicious,” a proclamation that frames the attitudes surrounding analysis of Cleopatra’s behavior.<sup>8</sup> In many ways, Isabella’s plight is mirrored through contrast in Cleopatra’s overt sexuality. While Isabella chooses to protect her decisions from the control of male influence by refraining from sexuality, Cleopatra attempts to influence and gain control over men through by enticing them with her sexuality. However, because she is not only a woman but also a foreigner, Cleopatra is faced with marginalization twofold to that of Isabella. In many ways, her Egyptian race inflates the restrictions placed on her sex. Loomba writes, “Cleopatra’s feminine wiles are specifically linked to her being an Egyptian [which is] constructed as being . . . uncivilized and un-Christian; [and therefore] Cleopatra cannot be sexually attractive.”<sup>9</sup> Cleopatra can escape the constraints of neither her race nor her sex throughout the play. Her position as the queen of Egypt defines her throughout the play through references such as “serpent of old Nile” and “foreign goddess” (1.5.26). These phrases alone warrant a close analysis of how Cleopatra is treated because of her race and refusal to conform. However, Cleopatra heightens this otherization by dramatizing her differences of culture and stressing womanly stereotypes.

Many critics discuss the play in terms of Antony’s struggle as he is forced to choose “between fidelity to a chaste, white wife and adultery with a promiscuous, tawny, black seductress.”<sup>10</sup> However, what’s interesting is not that Antony is forced to make such a choice, as Cohen suggests, but rather the assumptions that underlie this choice. Reading *Antony and Cleopatra* as Antony’s choice between Octavia and Cleopatra encourages the audience to view those characters simply as the right or good choice versus the wrong or bad choice. Following this reading, Cleopatra represents the epitome of an aristocratic woman who fulfills the stereotypical demeaning characteristics attributed to womankind. L. T. Fitz describes this depiction as follows: “Cleopatra is seen as the archetypal woman: practice of feminine wiles, mysterious, childlike, long on passion and short on intelligence—except

for a sort of animal cunning.”<sup>11</sup> Aware of her declining power, Cleopatra compensates by stressing those characteristics that already make her otherized. It is not far-fetched to describe Cleopatra as melodramatic or theatrical. Consider, for example, her famous exclamation at news of Antony parading into battle: “O happy horse, to bear the weight of Antony! Do bravely, horse, for wot’st thou whom thou mov’st?” (1.5.22-23). The text is chock full of such proclamations by the great queen of passion, love, or anger, demonstrating her emotional reaction to life.

For Isabella of *Measure for Measure*, her true desires are clear: power over her decision to devote herself to God and a life of chastity. Cleopatra’s own motives for gaining power have been debated by critics, but it is difficult to deny that her love for Antony was anything other than legitimate. Fitz explains Cleopatra’s use of femininity to win Antony’s affections and states that Cleopatra “is almost unique among Shakespeare’s female characters in her use of feminine wile.”<sup>12</sup> This exclusivity is why Cleopatra is such an important figure in the discussion of Shakespeare’s commentary on women—she embodies a different stereotype than the majority of female characters in Shakespeare. However, when Fitz describes Cleopatra’s actions as “wiles,” a negative connotation of manipulation is present. Yet Cleopatra’s vying for power is best understood as promoting her sensuality—otherizing herself further—so as to not lose Antony’s interest, especially since she is clearly not the ideal choice for Antony’s affections, given her Egyptian race, which makes her exotic, yet not marriage-worthy. In an aside, Cleopatra questions, “Why did he marry Fulvia and not love her?”—suggesting a desire, perhaps knowledge, that his love was her own (1.1.41-42). Also, this rhetorical question aids explanation of her violent reaction at the news of Antony’s new marriage to Octavia: “The most infectious pestilence upon thee!” (2.5.61). The ferocity of her reaction, which carries on for over fifty lines, in addition to witnessing to the intensity of her emotions for Antony, suggests that Cleopatra considered herself to be the rightful heir to Antony’s full affections after the passing of his late wife, Fulvia.

Regarding the reading of the play centered on Antony’s choice between Octavia and Cleopatra, clearly the “correct” choice for Antony was Octavia. Caesar refers to his sister as “the piece of virtue set between them” (3.2.8-9). In other words, Octavia is viewed as the cement that bonds the triumvirate; it is not a

marriage of love, but of power transfer. However, the power is not given to Octavia through her marriage, but rather to Antony, her husband. An official relationship with Cleopatra, who already had some control over Antony due to her sexual availability, would result in further compromise of Antony's authority. Loomba writes, "Active female sexuality is disruptive of patriarchal control, not just because it is an emblem for, or analogous to, other sorts of rebellion, but because it directly threatens the power base of patriarchy which is dependent upon its regulation and control."<sup>13</sup> Here Loomba observes the ways in which a sexually loose woman, or at least a woman sexually available outside of the confinements of marriage, challenges the understanding of Shakespeare's time of how a woman ought to behave. Clearly, Cleopatra is able to engage in sexual activity without the commitment of marriage and submission to a man's authority. Thus, by choosing her over Octavia, as he eventually does, Antony is allowing Cleopatra to control his actions by undermining his authority as a virtuous man.

The travesty that can define the conclusion of *Antony and Cleopatra* is expressed by Caesar: "He hath given his empire up to a whore" (3.6.66-67). Shakespeare's viewers, though they might hope for a happy ending for the illicit lovers, realize that Cleopatra's endeavor to gain Antony's love and power cannot realistically occur. Cleopatra, though in most ways opposite to the virtuous Isabella, offers another example of how her attempt at otherizing herself through feminine wiles to gain her desired result—a life of love with Antony—is in vain. Cleopatra is already otherized by her foreign heritage and female sex, and therefore must die shortly after the death of her lover. Not only does she lose her power in death, but also her attempt to gain Antony's unwavering dedication to her results in his loss. Through this conclusion Shakespeare is suggesting to his audience not only that there is a limit to the power women can truly gain during his age, but also that often their attempts at gaining power will result in tragic losses for the men in their path.

While Isabella and Cleopatra both offer examples of women who strive to break out of the expectation forced upon aristocratic women by otherizing themselves, but instead failed to gain what they desired, *The Tempest's* Prospero demonstrates the advantage of masculinity as part of the aristocracy. Prospero's own recollection of the tale suggests that part of his brother's jealousy can be attributed to Prospero's unique abilities in the magic arts.

Aside from his physical estrangement from society, Prospero is otherized by his use of magic and his ability to control others through threats and actual magic acts. However, once Prospero is banished to the island, he begins to emphasize the very thing that otherized him—in a way similar to Cleopatra’s assertion of her race and sexuality. Both Prospero and Cleopatra are rulers who gained their authority through self-otherization. Indeed, once on the island Prospero uses his magical powers as a way to define and assert himself among the other inhabitants. Because he is the only human in the context of the play that has the ability to use the magical arts, Prospero is otherized by this unique ability. Furthermore, he is aware of his advantage using magic and through it is able to manipulate the situations of the play to aid the achievement of his desires. The play follows Prospero’s journey as he gains the power he believes is rightfully his: first, power over the island on which he is stranded, and eventually power as Duke of Milan as he was originally entitled.

Prospero’s first goal, to gain power over the island, has already taken place as the play commences. Snippets as to how he achieved this mastery are revealed through recounting his and Miranda’s initial arrival on the island. It is clear that his magic is the tool that enabled him to achieve this. After banishing Sycorax, Prospero wasted no time in making a slave of her son, Caliban, of whom Prospero states, “We cannot miss him. He does make our fire, fetch in our wood, and serves in offices that profit us” (1.2.314-16). The character of Caliban serves as a demonstration as to how Prospero’s magic can reduce a threatening being—one who had attempted rape of Miranda, Prospero’s daughter—into nothing more than a house-slave. It is evident that Caliban detests Prospero, but he laments, “I must obey. His art is of such power it would control my dam’s god Setebos, and make a vassal of him” (1.2.375-77). This quote alone demonstrates the true strength of Prospero’s magic. The native Caliban, son of a witch who could conduct spells, feared him to the point of lowering himself to menial labor.

Ariel, Prospero’s chief minion, is responsible for enacting most of Prospero’s biddings in the play. It was through Prospero’s magic that he was able to rescue Ariel from “a cloven pine; within which rift imprison’d [he] didst painfully remain a dozen years” (1.2.279-81). Prospero is aware of the power that comes from rescuing someone and continually holds the debt over Ariel’s



head throughout the play, saying, “It was mine art . . . that made gape the pine and let thee out” (1.2.293-95). Without Ariel, who as a spirit has inhuman abilities to carry out Prospero’s wishes, Prospero would not be able to accomplish his goal of confronting his brother and regaining his rightful throne. Stephan Greenblatt discusses the importance of Prospero’s magic study which he “perfected during his long exile, [and] enabled Prospero to cause Antonio and his shipmates, sailing back to Italy from Tunis, to be shipwrecked on his island, where they [fell] unwittingly under his control.”<sup>14</sup> Prospero uses his advantage over Ariel to force the spirit to control the weather, creating an artful storm that forces the crew off the ship to meet Prospero face to face. From that point, once each character was in place, Prospero used his powers and knowledge to control each encounter and regain a relationship with his brother Antonio.

In the middle of the play, Prospero concludes that he is in power saying, “My high charms work, and these mine enemies are all knit up in their distractions. They now are in my power” (3.3.88-90). Because his brother and men are on the island that he already controls, Prospero easily gains power over them; thus, he is just a few step from gaining the upper-hand over his brother permanently, including repossession of his dukedom. Greenblatt writes, “His magic makes it possible not only to wrest back his dukedom but to avenge himself for the terrible wrong that his brother and his brother’s principal ally, Alonso, the King of Naples, have done him.”<sup>15</sup> In the end, Prospero is able to reassert himself as the rightful duke with the potential for heirs from his daughter Miranda—now betrothed to Ferdinand. Granted, fulfillment of his desire did take twelve years and a well-timed trip near Italy by his brother, but it would have been impossible without Prospero’s defining mark—the very magic that marginalized him in the first place. In the end, Prospero is able to use self-otherization by stressing his magic abilities to gain control over servants and also over his brother. In the play’s epilogue, Prospero relinquishes the powers that regained him the authority of his dukedom: “Now my charms are all o’erthrown, and what strength I have’s mine own” (5.1.223).

This reading of Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* is influenced significantly by the fact that Prospero is a man rather than a woman. However, in Julie Taymor’s 2010 rendition of *The Tempest*, she cast instead a female protagonist—Prospera, played by

Helen Mirren.<sup>16</sup> The effects of this gender-swap open a bigger understanding of the implications of Shakespeare's commentary on gender throughout the play. The explanation the film gives of Prospera's dethronement puts a greater emphasis on her magic as the thing that marginalized her in the first place. She explains to Miranda that after her husband's death—he was the Duke of Milan—the brother was afraid she might take over the position and turns her power against him, so he accused her of witchcraft. "Women have burned for less," female Prospero laments, adding a layer of awareness to the audience's consciousness of sexism in the film. Because of the nature of the film as a retelling of the Shakespearean work, the ending remains in essence the same. However, because she is female, the implications that she is ousted because of her magical abilities—rather than simply her position as a ruler, as Prospero was in the play—suggest that a woman cannot intrinsically be a threat when in a position of authority, but only when given outstanding powers, such as Prospera's magical abilities.

Throughout Shakespeare's works, his depictions of various female tropes showcase the limitations faced by women, specifically of the aristocracy, during the time he was writing. It would be presumptuous to claim that Shakespeare's purpose in doing so was to challenge such limitations or to even raise awareness of the plights of women. Rather, Shakespeare was most likely presenting the ways these expectations did indeed restrict a woman's ability to gain power. By depicting these limits, Shakespeare was writing to his audience with realistic stories that reflected the views of his time. This theory that his protagonists, whether male or female, used self-otherization as a way of achieving their wants can be applied to many other of his plays. Consider Shakespeare's less-known work, *Titus Andronicus*,<sup>17</sup> as a prime example in which both male and female characters use self-otherization to gain power, but the man eventually gains control. Shakespeare presents the two main characters, Titus and Tamora, caught in a back-and-forth of diabolical attempts to gain the upper hand over the other. Though their motives are different, both center on revenge. Each character attempts to gain power by self-otherization: Titus accentuates his sorrow until he is perceived as crazy and is underestimated, whereas Tamora uses her feminine wiles—not unlike Cleopatra—to subtly usurp Saturnine's power.

However, as with Cleopatra, it is important to note that Tamora, the former queen of the Goths, is already marginalized by virtue of her race and gender, whereas Titus is not. While Tamora uses her hyper-sexualized foreign appeal to undermine Saturnine and control the Roman Empire, Titus feigns mental instability and tricks her into thinking he can be easily deceived. Like Isabella and her rescue of Claudio, Tamora temporarily gains power and achieves partial victories through the subjugation of Saturnine and the rape of Lavinia, Titus's treasured daughter. Yet the true goal of the game is revenge rather than ultimate power; revenge is what they both are willing to die to achieve. Therefore, as Titus uses his feigned craziness to capture, kill, and cook Tamora's sons into a pie served to the queen herself, he makes the final move and thus achieves ultimate revenge. Their battle begins with the death of Titus's sons at the hands of Tamora's army, but ends with unwitting mother-son cannibalism. Although both Titus and Tamora use self-otherization as a way to gain the upper hand, Titus is the victor. Though the end of this tragedy is a smear of bloodshed and chaos, Shakespeare leaves hope for Titus's kingdom in the life of his grandson, Young Lucius. For Tamora, despite calculated plans and premeditated manipulation, all that remains is total destruction and humiliation as she consumes her only children and watches her authority—and then her life—wrenched from her. In this failed attempt to achieve permanent control, Tamora joins Isabella and Cleopatra. This imbalance of opportunity for power reaffirms Shakespeare's assertions that possibilities of true power and mobility for the female aristocracy of his day were limited. Whether through sexual looseness, such as that of Cleopatra and Tamora, or extreme chastity, as exemplified by Isabella, the limitations placed on women prevent permanent, effective grasps of power as a means to a desired purpose.

## Notes

1. Ania Loomba, "Sexuality and Racial Difference," in *Shakespeare: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory 1945-2000*, ed. Russ McDonald (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 794-816; 800.

2. *Ibid.*, 799.

3. William Vaughan, "The Golden Grove," in *Renaissance Woman: A Sourcebook: Construction of Femininity in England*, ed. Kate Aughterson (New York: Routledge, 1995), 96-98; 97.

4. *Ibid.*

5. Henry Bullinger, "The Christian State of Matrimony," in *Renaissance Woman: A Sourcebook: Constructions of Femininity in England*, ed. Kate Aughterson (New York: Routledge, 1995), 106-8; 108.

6. *Ibid.*

7. Stephen Greenblatt et al., *The Norton Shakespeare*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2008). Act, scene, and line citations from Shakespeare's plays refer to this edition.

8. Vaughan, "The Golden Grove," 97.

9. Loomba, "Sexuality and Racial Difference," 803.

10. Walter Cohen, "Antony and Cleopatra," in *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt et al. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2008), 2633-42; 2635.

11. L. T. Fitz, "Egyptian Queens and Male Reviewers: Sexist Attitudes in *Antony and Cleopatra* Criticism," in *Shakespeare: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory 1945-2000*, ed. Russ McDonald (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 570-90; 571.

12. *Ibid.*, 572.

13. Loomba, "Sexuality and Racial Difference," 809.

14. Stephen Greenblatt, "*The Tempest*," in *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt et al. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2008), 3057-58.

15. *Ibid.*, 3058.

16. *The Tempest*, directed by Julie Taymor (Burbank, CA: Touchstone Home Entertainment, 2010), DVD

17. *Titus*, directed by Julie Taymor (Los Angeles: 20thCentury Fox Home Entertainment, 2000), DVD.