"NOT HE, THE QUEEN": POLITICAL POWER IN SHAKESPEARE'S WOMEN

by

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(Under the Direction of Coburn Freer)

ABSTRACT

As the titles of Shakespeare's *Richard III*, *Macbeth, King Lear*, *Coriolanus*, and *Antony and Cleopatra* would suggest, political authority in these plays rests largely with a man in power, a warrior or a king; however, the influence wielded by women is often overlooked. My intent is to explore issues of political power in Shakespeare's women: how they shape their environments, their circumstances, and their men. While their gender does not prevent them from seeking power, it is nevertheless a significant issue in that power is often gained through relationships (through men, over men), through the enactment of gender-specific roles (wife, mother, daughter, lover) and gendered behaviors (feminine seduction, manly assertion). By taking their allegedly weak stations and exploiting them for gain, these women re-create themselves and the men around them, often paying a reciprocal price for what they have won.

INDEX WORDS: Shakespeare, Anne, Elizabeth, Margaret, Lady Macbeth, Regan, Goneril, Cordelia, Volumnia, Cleopatra

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Enobarbus. Hush, here comes Antony.
Charmian. Not he, the Queen.
(*Antony and Cleopatra* I ii 79)

How could anyone confuse a Roman warrior with an Egyptian queen? If the above line indicates the increasing similarity between the two lovers, it is commonly interpreted as an indication of Antony's feminization under Cleopatra's thrall. But is this really the case? Enobarbus has known Antony for some time, and should recognize him easily. Moreover, he does not mistake Antony for Cleopatra, which would indicate that conclusion. Rather, he mistakes *Cleopatra* for *Antony*.

Richard III, *Macbeth, King Lear*, *Coriolanus*, and *Antony and Cleopatra* are all concerned largely with politics: usurpation, succession, regicide, patriarchal order, distribution of property, public office, war. As the plays' titles suggest, authority and power rest (and, as each title but one implies, rests solely) with a man in power, a warrior or a king. Unsurprisingly, stage time, audience fascination, and critical attention are largely focused on those men. But perhaps we should question the extent to which we assume that power rests exclusively, or even principally, with a male protagonist; perhaps it is "not he" but "the Queen."

The concern here is Shakespearean women in politics: queens past and present, the wives, mothers, and daughters of powerful men. Do these women have power? If so,

what kind? Do they acquire it themselves, through someone in power, or in rebellion against them? Do they seduce powerful men with their feminine wiles, or overpower them with unsexed brutality? How are love and politics entwined? Are these women constrained by ties of marriage and motherhood, or do they exploit them? How do they maintain power, and how lose it? In examining key female characters in the aforementioned plays-- Lady Anne, Queen Elizabeth, Queen Margaret, Lady Macbeth, Regan, Goneril, Cordelia, Volumnia, and Cleopatra-- I hope to explore issues of power in Shakespeare's women: how they shape their destinies, their realities, and the men around them. Some of these women are legendarily celebrated, others memorialized as villains; some are dismissed as weak, helpless victims-- but they all show similarities in their paths to and from power.

No matter whose name gets top billing in the cast list, some female characters, as I hope to prove, can be considered equally or even *more* powerful than the men because of the influence they wield over the protagonist's actions. But this essay is concerned less with who *has* power than who seeks it, how, and why. After all, some, like Lady Macbeth and Volumnia, wield it vicariously; some, like Cleopatra, have greater personal than political power; and some, like Anne, have little power at all but are noteworthy in that they are often considered to have none. There are certainly other women in Shakespeare's works who share these traits. For my purposes, however, I have chosen characters that I find to be similar in both the type of power they seek (while personal as well as political power is sought, their struggles all take place in distinctly political arenas) and the ways in which they exploit gendered behaviors and relationships to men in order to gain it. Their femininity does not prevent them from seeking power, but

neither is it unrelated to their political concerns. Rather, power is found through relationships (through men, over men) and through the enactment of gender-specific roles (wife, mother, daughter, lover) and gendered behaviors (feminine seduction, manly assertion).

Their actions exist all over the continuum of gendered behavior: seductresses both mighty and frail; pragmatic politicians; unsexed warrior-mothers. They take their allegedly weak stations and exploit them for gain: they are widows of a lost war seeking vengeance at the enemy's court and security in the enemy's beds; wives who take their husbands' destinies into their own hands; daughters revenging themselves on cruel fathers by use of the same ruthlessness; mothers living out battle-fantasies through their sons' wounds; queens who overcome their shaky political positions by forging empires of pleasure out of sheer will. Sex, marriage, motherly guilt, masculine aggression and misogynistic shame are among their weaponry. They create themselves and their men, sometimes through no other means than that they would have it so.

Such power always carries a price. To use the marriage bed to propel oneself into a dangerous postwar political arena is to risk one's own life and the lives of those promoted by her success. To shun natural order in embracing murderous deeds is to make nature an enemy. To confuse love and power is to court death. To shape a perfect warrior is to shape an imperfect man. To make a performance out of reality is to bewilder the audience. Some survive their powerful sons; some die as martyrs, villains, goddesses; some are left to wander, ghost-like, bewailing their losses. But none passes through without leaving an indelible stamp on the events of these plays.

CHAPTER 2

"YOU ENVY MY ADVANCEMENT": LANCASTRIAN WOMEN IN RICHARD III'S POSTWAR COURT

With few exceptions, the women of *Richard III* are all widows of the defeated Lancaster dynasty: Margaret, queen to the deposed and murdered Henry VI; her daughter-in-law, Anne, widow of the slain Prince Edward and daughter of the traitor Warwick; and Elizabeth, the widow of a Lancastrian knight who, in *Henry VI 3,* seeks out King Edward to reclaim her husband's land and leaves the scene his wife-to-be (III ii). As enemy wives in a court still fraught with political turmoil, they are acutely aware of their precarious positions. Richard may claim that the winter of their discontent has ended, but the tragedies of the Wars of the Roses are referred to time and time again. Edward's attempts to resolve remaining quarrels fail spectacularly; the play's historical sense of hindsight sees that the Yorkist's short time in power is not an end to war but merely an interim which, although somewhat less bloody, is besieged by the same conflicts as the preceding years. No one is innocent; even the young princes themselves are not innocent, for as exhibited throughout *Henry VI 3* and recalled with Anne's reference, near the end of her life, to her own father's crimes, this is a universe in which children die for the sins of their fathers. But if no one is an innocent bystander, then everyone has power, and in *Richard III*, women are just as active in the political game as men. Several characters (Anne, Hastings, Buckingham) curse themselves; but they inflict these curses by propagating the same destructive political environment that has

characterized the preceding years. The intent and consequent fate of all the play's characters is uniform: to seek power and court death; no one, man or woman, old or young, Yorkist or Lancastrian, is innocent or spared. Elizabeth, in promoting her sons and brothers, puts them in danger of Richard's wrath and consequently must stand by and watch them die; Anne risks and loses only herself. And as far as Margaret is concerned, the war hasn't ended at all.

Indeed, here women are victimized because of their significance; Richard's wrath is directed toward those who have the power he desires. "Doubly marginalized by his deformity and his subordinate place within the royal family as the king's youngest brother," writes Nina S. Levine in *Women's Matters: Politics, Gender, and Nation in Shakespeare's Early History Plays,*

> Richard depends on his relations to women-- as the enemy against which he forges his drive to power and, simultaneously, as the marriage partner who will strengthen his claim to the throne and guarantee its succession. (98)

It can be difficult to remember that anyone besides Richard wields power as we watch one character after the next fall into his fatal grasp. In particular, the effectiveness of his ploys makes it all too easy to cast women like Anne and Elizabeth in the role of helpless, blameless victims. He demonstrates his persuasive powers by wooing Anne at the most inopportune moment imaginable-- as she weeps over the corpse of the father-in-law Richard has slaughtered, cursing him for his death as well as that of her husband; he will do the same to Elizabeth, suing for her daughter's hand in marriage even as she curses him for murdering her children. How does he accomplish such an incredible feat? Richard's rhetorical gifts cannot be so remarkable, but despite frequent arguments that

there are no innocents in *Richard III,* critics often cast Elizabeth and Anne as weak women easily swayed by the honey-tongued villain. I would argue, however, that no matter how they underestimate him (and pay dearly for doing so), everyone in the play knows precisely with whom they are dealing: "a man that loves not me, nor none of you" (I iii 13).

Anne appears to be the weakest, most pathetic of Richard's victims; indeed, she seems programmed to self-destruct. Unable to break the cycle of mourning and despair, she curses herself twice in cursing Richard (that his wife be miserable, as she will be, and his sleep broken, which will disrupt her rest as well) and takes him in her "heart's extremest hate," even as she weeps over the corpse of the father-in-law Richard has confessed to murdering. Yet Anne's beauty has power; for Richard, convinced that he "cannot prove a lover," finds perverse satisfaction in taking advantage of this beautiful woman; as Levine writes, "for Richard, Anne's attention is indeed transformative" (107). Anne, I would argue, is fully aware of this power all along; too naive to realize that Richard's ruthlessness surpasses even the treachery with which she is familiar, heedless of the risk to herself in accepting this monster, she is simply using her beauty to secure that most precious commodity to a Lancastrian widow: a Yorkist marriage.

He openly admits to the audience that he marries Anne not for love, but for ambition (I i 157-159); given the political climate of the play, it is not unreasonable to suspect Anne of similar motives. The only power that Richard accords her-- the power of her beauty, the basilisk-eyes that kill and drive him to kill-- appears to be turned against her, for she succumbs to his attentions only after his absurd logic has condemned her for her husband's death:

> Your beauty was the cause of that effect--
> Your beauty, that did haunt me in my sleep
> To undertake the death of all the world,
> So I might live one hour in your sweet bosom.
> (I ii 121-124)

Or does she? We cannot forget the political implications that inform each moment of the play; war may be over, but it continues to haunt the characters at every turn. Like Elizabeth, Anne is a Lancastrian widow in a Yorkist court, playing the only card she has left: her beauty, her marriageability. If her loveliness has power, it is not the power to kill, but to secure a profitable marriage.

"Whatever reason Anne may give herself or him," Murray Krieger writes in his essay "The Dark Generations of *Richard III*," "she can accept him as a successor to her sweet and lovely gentleman, his victim, for but one reason-- her self-interest":

> A widow of the ousted House of Lancaster, she must sense that the ruthless Richard's star is rising . . . . Disdaining the bitter role of her mother-in-law, Queen Margaret, she must instead take Richard, swallowing her curses and pretending to have successfully wooed-- which is of course precisely the game that Richard expects her to play and that his perverseness, as we have seen, demands that she play. (152-153)

She gives no indication that she believes his ridiculous argument; not only does she continue their banter, but she directly contradicts the idea that she is to be held responsible for the deaths of her husband and father-in-law: "If I thought that, I tell thee, homicide, / These nails should rent that beauty from my cheeks" (I ii 125-126). She succumbs only when the sword is in her hands, and Richard gives her a clear and decisive choice: "Take up the sword again, or take up me" (I ii 183). Only then does she falter, and after refusing to kill him, her tone shifts: "I would I knew thy heart" (I ii 192).

Perhaps Anne concludes that there has been enough bloodshed, and that marriage will grant her power (or, at the very least, security-- an equally precious commodity); this power is an adequate consolation prize for that of the sword that she cannot bring herself to wield. She remains standoffish, however, warning him that "to take is not to give" and declaring that he does not deserve a farewell (I ii 202, 222-224).

Richard is certainly a misogynist who targets women; as Richard P. Wheeler writes in "History, Character and Conscience in *Richard III*," he "does not kill men so much as he kills sons and husbands" (187). But his contempt for women stems not from their insignificance but their value; they cannot be dismissed from a political arena wherein power is gained as much through marriage and lineage as through war. "Richard's need to legitimate his ambition by warring against women is complicated, and eventually compromised," writes Levine,

> by his simultaneous dependence on them as a means of consolidating power and ensuring his own lineage. This dependence signals the weakness not only of Richard's claim to the throne but of patriarchal structures in general, exposing the myth of patrilineal succession in which power is imagined as passing from father to son as if no women were involved. (Levine 99)

Richard may be a more *effective* schemer than the rest, more sly and unscrupulous than his fellow courtiers, but no one on this stage is blameless-- least of all Elizabeth, who uses kinship as a means to power both before and after Richard murders her sons. Although her initial position, like Margaret's, is powerless-- desperate suitor to Margaret's captive bride-- she, like the former queen, uses marriage to propel herself into safety and her male relatives into power. Never content to be Edward's mistress, she spurns his advances in *Henry VI 3* until he promises to make her his queen; though she clearly

miscalculates the risks, she nevertheless understands the game. When the play opens, Elizabeth's brother, Earl Rivers, and her sons from her first marriage, the Marquess of Dorset and Lord Grey, have found influential positions at court. Richard exploits suspicion of Elizabeth's influence; when his malice sends his brother Clarence to his death, he knows exactly where to place the blame, for there is one party whose ambitious influence is more mistrusted than his-- the Queen's:

> Why, thus it is, when men are rul'd by women;
> 'Tis not the King that sends you to the Tower;
> My Lady Grey his wife, Clarence, 'tis she
> That tempers him to this extremity.
> (I i 62-65)

Even the king's unseen mistress, Jane Shore, has the power to influence Edward and win Hastings' freedom. Elizabeth's marriage and Jane's sexuality empower them, as Richard notes:

> We say the King
> Is wise and virtuous, and his noble queen
> Well strook in years, fair, and not jealous;
> We say that Shore's wife hath a pretty foot,
> A cherry lip, a bonny eye, a passing pleasing tongue;
> And that the Queen's kindred are made gentlefolks.
> (I i 90-96)

Richard simply says aloud what everyone else seems to be thinking. The force of repetition in his "We are not safe, Clarence, we are not safe" plays on the fears of men at court: that women and women's interests will take over utterly (I i 70). Elizabeth is passive to Margaret's aggressive, marrying for political safety (a precious commodity in these turbulent times) as well as power. Her marriage propels her brothers and sons into positions of power that otherwise would have been impossible for a postwar Lancastrian.

But power gained through men, she finds, can all too quickly be stripped away by their deaths. "If he were dead, what would betide on me?" she laments; "The loss of such a lord includes all harm" (I iii 6, 8). Her attitude towards power is ambivalent; the happiness that she fears is "at its height" becomes, only lines later, a "careful height" from which she would rather climb down (I iii 41, 82-83). She claims to lament her station, yet continues to advance her family. When Richard himself insists that he would "rather be a pedlar," we know he is lying (I iii 148). Elizabeth makes a similar declaration:

> I had rather be a country servant maid
> Than a great queen with this condition,
> To be so baited, scorn'd, and stormed at.
> Small joy have I in being England's queen.
> (I iii 106-109)

The queen, perhaps, doth protest too much. She clearly understands that her machinations have made her enemies at court: "You envy my advancement and my friends'" (I iii 74). But she does not fully understand the risk that power presents; suspicion of women soon runs so high that Richard's absurd accusation of witchcraft against Elizabeth and Shore is enough to condemn Hastings to death:

> And this is Edward's wife, that monstrous witch,
> Consorted with that harlot, strumpet Shore
> That by their witchcraft thus have marked me.
> (III iv 70-72)

"Nowhere are the accusations against women more flagrant than when Richard attributes his deformity to a demonic alliance between Queen Elizabeth and her husband's mistress,

Jane Shore," writes Levine. "Those, like Hastings, who refuse to endorse Richard's misogyny, he declares traitors" (100-101).

Richard's malevolent attention is directed next at Rivers and Grey, and then at her young sons, the princes. By advancing her brothers she has put them in the position to become victims of Richard's ruthless climb to the throne; her child is plucked "perforce" from her arms (III i 35-36) and further imperiled by the insults he flings at Richard on her behalf. Buckingham asks,

> Think you, my lord, this little prating York
> Was not incensed by his subtile mother
> To taunt and scorn you thus opprobriously?
> (III i 151-153)

Her heedless decision to have her young child insult his uncle in her stead is unlikely to endear him to a man who has already numbered the child's days. "Thy mother's name is ominous to children," she warns Dorset (IV i 40); to mix family and politics, she finds, is to endanger those she involves. Anne, too, has learned her dreadful lesson well in the company of queens past and present, and she fears power even before she is crowned: "Anointed let me be with deadly venom, / And die ere men can say, 'God save the Queen!'" (IV i 61-62). She foresees her own fate, and specifically identifies the Lancastrian connections she sought to escape as the cause of her imminent doom: "Besides, he hates me for my father Warwick, / And will, no doubt, shortly be rid of me" (IV i 85-86). That she does not give the intuitive reason (that Richard, having won the crown to which he hoped his marriage would propel him, no longer needs her and is malicious enough to do away with her) or the one that Richard soon gives us (that he needs her out of the way so he can marry his niece, Elizabeth of York) indicates her

anxiety concerning her connection to the house of Lancaster: she considers herself, despite her efforts to forge a new future in the enemy's court, doomed by her ties to the past.

The period of men being "rul'd by women" seems to be brought to a crashing halt when Richard takes the throne; in the course of taking care of business, much attention is given to lessening the risk presented by women at court. He gives orders for Anne's "keeping close" and bids Stanley "look to your wife" as his marriage to Richmond's mother makes him suspect. He considers Clarence's son too "foolish" to be a threat, but his daughter must be removed from the political sphere by an unfortunate marriage (IV ii 52-55, 92). The ties of motherhood and marriage no longer give women any rights; Richard's drums and trumpets drown out the cries for vengeance that had been so loud before (IV iv 149-151). But Richard cannot escape the significance of marriage-ties; after all the steps he has taken to ensure his security, he fears that his "kingdom stands on brittle glass" unless he marries his niece (IV ii 61). Here Elizabeth plays her last card, using her daughter's marriage contract as she has used her own, keeping her options open by offering up the young Elizabeth to two kings simultaneously. She claims that her daughters "shall be praying nuns, not weeping queens" (IV iv 202); she claims to understand that "Th'advancement of your children" leads only "Up to some scaffold, there to lose their heads" (IV iv 241-242). But she nevertheless soon seems to concede to Richard's will and, in the next scene, does not hesitate to give Elizabeth over to Richmond. As in Anne's wooing scene, Elizabeth never seems convinced by Richard's arguments, nor does she make any promises; she simply submits. Richard sees her as she saw Anne-- "Relenting fool, shallow, changing woman!" (IV iv 431)-- but Krieger argues

again that women who submit to Richard do so not out of weakness, but in hopes of power:

> [T]here is no evidence in her scene with Richard that she need fear him, nor does she fear him; for she is as outspoken as she pleases. Why, then, pretend to accept him? Why, having come to curse, does she remain to welcome his addresses? Is it not more likely that, with Richard still in power, and Richmond's venture surely questionable at best, she will play it safe and mother a queen regardless of the victor? (153)

Only this Elizabeth, broken by grief and regret, can accept Margaret the cursing ghost of sorrows past who haunts *Richard III*. The mourning scene in IV iv, in which Elizabeth, Margaret and the Duchess of York bewail their fates seems to last forever, and well it should, for the first *Henriad* takes place in a world where the cycle of bloodshed and mourning never ceases. Margaret is a connecting thread throughout the tetralogy, the only character to appear in all four plays. As A.P. Rossiter notes in "'Angel with Horns': The Unity of *Richard III*," by the time she appears in *Richard III*, she has become a living ghost, the embodiment of the Wars of the Roses:

> . . . what else is Margaret Reignier's daughter picked up on a battlefield by Suffolk and married to that most etiolated of Shakespeare's husbands, Henry VI, but the living ghost of Lancaster, the walking dead, memorializing the long, cruel, treacherous, bloody conflict of the years of civil strife and pitiless butchery? (138)

But she is more than a ghost; Margaret is a force of judgment and vengeance, meting out revenge through her curses to all who have wronged her and encouraging the other women, also queens fallen from power, to do the same. Margaret still demands

attention -- even submission-- from a court of enemies who do not take her seriously; she has become absurd. But although they beg for silence throughout her first scene, in which she calls down vengeance on half the court, still she will not be silenced:

> Although Margaret is only a shadow of her former self, her presence here in the enemy's court testifies to the vestiges of power she retains. She may no longer stand at the head of the royal army, but she does not passively wail her loss. (Levine 102-103).

Even if her voice is not heeded, it is persistently heard, for it carries the weight of both history and prophecy. Margaret exerts little apparent power over the play's plot; she is the observer, the Chorus (or, perhaps more specifically, *Henry VI*'s chorus, wandering in from the past to comment on yesteryear's wrongs). Yet her curses wield a sort of power, for everything she says comes to pass. If Richard, as critics such as Rossiter have argued, is the bringer of divine wrath upon the Yorkists and the Lancastrians, then Margaret is that angry God's mad prophet. Lest we become as complacent as Edward's court and turn a blind eye to Richard's dastardly machinations, lest we fall victim to Yorkist propaganda that the clouds of the all-too-recent past are, indeed, in the ocean buried and that the horrors of the war do not haunt the stage still, Margaret is there, armed to the teeth with her long list of grievances. She is both the voice of the past, bitter from past wrongs, and the voice of the present, made clear-eyed by decades of turmoil and unmistakably aware of Richard's misdeeds. "[W]hile the women may be Richard's most visible victims, they are also his most outspoken opponents," Levine notes (102). She is the first character (besides Richard himself) to express full understanding of what he is and warns Elizabeth of the threat he presents:

> Why strew'st thou sugar on that bottled spider

> Whose deadly web ensnareth thee about?
> Fool, fool, thou whet'st a knife to kill thyself.
> (I iii 241-243)

Margaret's curses are a call not to stop the bloodshed but to perpetuate it. She does not understand that power brings misery upon itself; the same power Elizabeth regrets gaining, Margaret is still bitter to have lost: "Thy honor, state, and seat is due to me" (I iii 111). She does not want pity, and rejects it when the Duchess of York offers it-- "Bear with me; I am hungry for revenge, / And now I cloy me with beholding it" (IV iv 61-62)-- for she finds strength and purpose in her fury and clings to it at all costs, even upon threat of banishment, and will delude herself if she must in order to retain her righteous rage:

> Think that thy babes were sweeter that they were,
> And he that slew them fouler than he is.
> Bett'ring thy loss makes the bad causer worse;
> Revolving this will teach thee how to curse.
> (IV iv 120-123)

The threat of magic is certainly a powerful force in this play; Richard, we recall, condemns Hastings by accusing Elizabeth and Jane Shore of witchery. And there is certainly a ritualistic power to Margaret's carefully formulated curses. Such warrior-witchery is characteristic of the brutal queen whose hand guides the action of another tale of dynastic bloodshed: Lady Macbeth.

CHAPTER 3

"WHEN YOU DURST DO IT, THEN YOU WERE A MAN": UNSEXED POWER AND THE UNCONSIDERED DEED IN MACBETH

Macbeth is "Bellona's bridegroom" (I ii 54); while the reference is meant to indicate Macbeth's fierceness, it emphasizes his wife's. In "Two Scenes from *Macbeth*," Harry Levin writes that Lady Macbeth "seeks a vicarious fulfillment in her ruthless ambitions for his career" (123). While she may not live vicariously through her husband's accomplishments to the extent that, say, Volumnia lives through those of her son, she clearly relishes the taste of power and has given the matter some thought long before the witches approached Macbeth. In her first speech, Lady Macbeth reveals that she is certain of two things: that her husband will not seek the crown on his own, being "too full o' the' milk of human kindness / To catch the nearest way" (I v 17-18); and that he *will* seek it with her persuasion: she needs only to "pour my spirits in thine ear, / And chastise with the valor of my tongue" (I v 26-27). Without her, she believes, he is powerless. The witches are the first characters to appear, and they have a hand in the proceedings throughout the play; Lady Macbeth, who operates to the same ends as the Weird Sisters, urges him along the path to violence every step of the way. Perhaps Macbeth *could* have behaved contrary to their wishes, but he does not; perhaps he would have committed the murders without her encouragement, but the persistence of her persuasion and his constant second-guessing of his actions suggests otherwise. Consequently, the influence of women-- of the witches and his wife, both striving for a

common goal-- guides the play's events; Macbeth is driven to action by these un-feminine women, the witches and his wife.

Lady Macbeth does not consider power possible without violence, and presumes that her husband's path must be similarly bloody if he is to achieve distinction:

> Thou wouldst be great,
> Art not without ambition, but without
> The illness should attend it. What thou wouldst highly,
> That wouldst thou holily; would not play false,
> And yet wouldst wrongly win.
> (I v 18-22)

Although her power is a result of her marital connections and her influence over her husband's actions, her true might comes not by exploiting the feminine ties of marriage but by suppressing the part of herself that she identifies as weak and womanly and therefore unfit for bloodshed. As Lady Macduff notes, "womanly defense" is useless in the brutal world of *Macbeth* (IV ii 78); the only path to power, Lady Macbeth feels, is to repress her femininity, denying her instincts as a mother ("take my milk for gall" [I v 48]) and daughter ("Had he not resembled / My father as he slept, I had done't" [II ii 12-13]) to shape herself into a stone-hearted murderess. But she is not, as we will see in Regan and Goneril, irrevocably bred to hardness and unnatural behavior. Rather, she feels her "unsexed" nature, necessary to gain power, can be turned on and off as needed: *despite* the fact that she knows "how tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me," she must be willing to "Have plucke'd my nipple from his boneless gums, / And dash'd the brains out" as occasion demands (I vii 55, 57-58). She chooses, as Robert N. Watson writes in his essay "'Thriftless Ambition,' Foolish Wishes, and the Tragedy of *Macbeth*," to "abandon

her maternal role in the nursery in favor of a phallic role in the bedroom" (141); she is a shape-shifter, a witch.

Indeed, as powerful forces that shape Macbeth's destiny, Lady Macbeth and the witches are closely linked. The first description of the weird sisters reveals them as ugly, unnatural, and most significantly, *unfeminine*:

> You should be women,
> And yet your beards forbid me to interpret
> That you are so.
> (I iii 45-47)

Just as Lady Macbeth would rather dash out the brains of a nursing child than shame herself with a broken promise, the weird sisters conjure spirits with "sow's blood, that hath eaten / Her nine farrow" (IV i 64-65). They have the same intent; brutal and unsexed, they urge Macbeth towards murder. Nowhere is this more apparent than in Lady Macbeth's wish to suppress her femininity, which Harold C. Goddard, in his essay "*Macbeth*," calls "the very prophecy and counterpart of the caldron scene" (29):

> Come, you spirits
> That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here,
> And fill me from the crown to the toe topful
> Of direst cruelty! Make thick my blood,
> Stop up th'access and passage to remorse,
> That no compunctious visitings of nature
> Shake my fell purpose, nor keep peace between
> Th'effect and it! Come to my woman's breast,
> And take my milk for gall, you murth'ring ministers,
> Wherever in your sightless substances
> You wait on nature's mischief!
> (I v 40-50)

These "spirits," these "murth'ring ministers," keepers of "nature's mischief," should be familiar to us, for they have already confronted her husband. "They do not need to accost

her on any blasted heath," Goddard writes. "She herself invites them into her heart" (28). She lives not for now, but in full hope of the future she has determined:

> Thy letters have transported me beyond
> This ignorant present, and I feel now
> The future in the instant.
> (I v 56-58)

Like the three sisters, she is a witch, bending reality to suit her will and manifest her desires.

Lady Macbeth not only suppresses her own femininity but also encourages her idea of violent masculinity in her husband, chiding him with accusations of unmanliness when he hesitates. Certain that his only path to power is through performing her will, she shames and emasculates him into action: "Are you a man? . . . What? quite unmann'd in folly? . . . Fie, for shame!" (III iv 57, 72, 73) She most strongly criticizes his tendency to reflect too much on the task at hand. Macbeth is a thinker, rarely able to get through a scene without an introspective soliloquy; Lady Macbeth is a *doer*. In a play hesitant to connect thought to deed, she embodies the masculine principle of action that drives the plot; to feel compassion is to fall victim to (feminine) inaction, and to think about the act removes the will to do it: "We fail?" she scoffs. "But screw your courage to the sticking place, / And we'll not fail" (I vii 59-61). Like Macbeth, she calls forth darkness to hide the knife, to separate the act from its meaning and consequences. Unlike her husband, however, she does not obsess over the deed before it is committed, or question it after it is done. Like the witches, she performs a "deed without a name" (IV i 49); thought is utterly severed from act. "Consider it not so deeply," she coaxes:

> These deeds must not be thought

> After these ways; so, it will make us mad . . . .
> You do unbend your noble strength, to think
> So brain-sickly of things.
> (II ii 27, 30-31, 42-43)

But her very belief that thought and deed can be so separated will render her "mad" and "brain-sick." Lady Macbeth's power finally consumes her as thought catches up all too late to deed. As Levin writes, it is only after Macbeth leaves and her need for bravery is gone that "her suppressed compunction, her latent sense of guilt, wells up from the depths of her subconscious anguish" (124). She had preferred the eye to wink at the hand; now she finds that "hell is murky" (V i 36). Even in sleep she cannot contend with what she has done; she can only scrub away at the evidence or attempt to drown it in perfume. She can look upon her crimes but not process their implications; her eyes are open but their sense is shut.

Their acts have murdered sleep, and her unnatural sleep-walking is an expression of their unnatural conduct. Rejecting the "milk of human kindness," a woman who interrupts the generative cycle instead of propagating it, she is an inhuman, unnatural thing, disruption and chaos personified, unable to rest even in sleep. "Lady Macbeth's imagined destruction of her feeding babe permeates the play as a whole," writes Peter Erickson in *Patriarchal Structures in Shakespeare's Drama*:

> . . . Benevolent patriarchy is modeled on (and hence depends on) the domestic microcosm in which the mother lovingly feeds her infant; when this model is lost because of an upsurge of destructive maternal imagery, then it is frighteningly difficult to sustain a belief in the idealized, harmonious "ceremony." (120, 121)

Unnatural occurrences soon ravage the land: the sun ceases to shine, a mousing owl kills a falcon, and Duncan's horses eat one another (II iv 4-18). Macbeth's reign throws the kingdom into chaos; Scotland "cannot / Be call'd our mother," muses Rosse, "but our grave" (IV iii 165-166). The Macbeths disrupt their entire world and thereby bring about their own downfall. "An attack on the cycle of parents and children," writes Watson, "necessarily affronts the cycles of night and day, sleeping and waking, and planting and harvesting, as well" (137); hence, the disruption of natural cycles disrupts the Macbeths' sleep. "He murders sleep and plunges the world into an uneasy darkness," writes Watson, "but he and his wife suffer the worst insomnia of all" (139). The witches and the Macbeths create a world of paradoxes and topsy-turvyness, where "fair is foul and foul is fair," and the destructive, anti-feminine, dis-creative nature of the play's powerful women epitomizes this perfectly. "Shakespeare portrays Macbeth's crimes, from first to last, as costly violations of the procreative cycle," writes Watson (149). The play depicts woman as a destructive force that goads man to regicide, bringing about chaos and disruption. "The witches in *Macbeth* are perhaps the completest anti-types to peace in Shakespeare," Goddard writes (28); similarly, Lady Macbeth moves against the natural order, unsexed, destroying lineage. It is little wonder that only a man not "of woman born" (IV i 80) and a man "unknown to woman" (IV iii 125-126) can return order in the wake of the Macbeths' destructive, unnatural regime; he is unseated by things untouched by the feminine, by phallic trees ripped from the earth and male children ripped from wombs: "In *Macbeth*," notes Erickson, "the restoration of order is contingent on the conspicuous exclusion of women" (121). Lest we get caught up in Macbeth's "unmann'd" dithering and his wife's "unsexed" brutality, we have Macduff as an example of balance:

when Malcolm says, of the deaths of Macduff's family, "Dispute it like a man," he answers "I shall do so; / But I must also feel it as a man" (IV iii 220-221). "The "also" is the crucial qualification," writes Maynard Mack in "The Voice in the Sword": "Macduff accepts the need for *both* responses, both definitions of man" (82). As Malcolm and Macduff restore order, "the sun or son always rises up again" (Watson 144); but not so for the Macbeths. As their sun sets, nevertheless, we see such figures of unsexed warrior-women arising again in *King Lear*.

CHAPTER 4

"IS THERE ANY CAUSE IN HEAVEN THAT MAKE THESE HARD HEARTS?": LEAR, PATRIARCHY, AND POWER

Lear's authority as a king is of such deep consequence to him that everything, including the treatment of his daughters, is translated into terms of economics and power. He explicitly shows, from the outset, that love equals wealth and stability in his eyes:

> Which of you shall we say doth love us most,
> That we our largest bounty may extend
> Where nature doth with merit challenge?
> (I i 51-53)

Indeed, his daughters' only purpose, it seems, is both to obey and sustain him: "Better thou / Hadst not been born than not t'have pleas'd me better," he tells Cordelia, and later confides that he "thought to set my rest / On her kind nursery" (I i 233-234, 123-124). "Lear is really trying to coerce his daughters to a certain form of behavior," Marianne Novy writes in "Patriarchy, Mutuality, and Forgiveness in *King Lear*":

> he sets up the terms and the contract . . . . As king, Lear is the source of all money and property; in the dependence on him at this point the daughters resemble wives in a patriarchal marriage who can get money only by begging it from their husbands. (86)

Lear's patriarchal power is all-encompassing; it is little wonder they respond, as Regan and Goneril do, with outright rebellion, or as Cordelia does, with passive aggression. The hypocrisy of Regan and Goneril's apparent love for their father and the rapidity with which it is unmasked as hate and contempt, is, of course, monstrous. But Lear's behavior

in the first scene-- his warm reception of his deceitfully affectionate daughters and his harsh treatment of the honest Cordelia, his obvious equation of love with property-- shows that Regan and Goneril are merely playing a game that Lear himself has taught them. "Though they respond differently to this provocation, all three daughters share the common purpose of protecting themselves against the father's total claim on them," writes Erickson (104). They know precisely what external behavior to employ to deceive their father, how to use the methods he has engendered and encouraged in them to control him. "In such a situation, the obvious way for a woman to survive is to go along with the social order, as Goneril and Regan do at the beginning," writes Novy (86). Whether they go along with their father's infantile love-games to entrap him, as they do in the first scene, or rebel with an arrogance to match Lear's own, as they do later in the play, they have learned to how to turn his methods against him.

Cordelia is the more passive daughter, but there is great strength in her passivity; she lets her father set the terms of neither her choices nor her circumstances. "I know you what you are," Cordelia informs her sisters (I i 269); she clearly understands their machinations and refuses to behave the same way. Regan's withering response to her upbraiding foreshadows both her dislike for authority and her imminent rebellion: "Prescribe not us our duty" (I i 275). Cordelia knows all along what she is getting herself into; France is her escape. She understands that Lear's disastrous arithmetic of love and money will only bring her grief; this is why she coldly refuses Burgundy, whose "respects of fortune are his love" (I i 248). In his essay "*King Lear*," Harold C. Goddard writes,

> Cordelia loves her father deeply and sincerely, but underplays her confession of affection-- partly from a congenital truthfulness and hatred of display that bends backward at the hypocrisy of her sisters, but even more, perhaps, through a well-grounded fear, possibly unconscious, that if her father's plan goes through, she will be given to the worldly Burgundy whom she could only have despised rather than to the unworldly France whom she loves. (11)

Consequently, because Cordelia does not play Lear's game but, rather, escapes it, she is able to retain enough humanity to pity the father who has mistreated her, to be moved "not to a rage" but to "patience and sorrow" (IV iii 16, 17).

Patriarchal oppression is, of course, both gendered and economic; Regan and Goneril's resentment and callous treatment of Lear is also a result of the intense misogyny he has bred in them. "One of the few suggestions of psychological complexity in their characterization," writes Novy, "is this hint of a compensatory quality in their cruelty-- a hatred of others they consider weak because of a fear of being weak themselves" (88). Like Lady Macbeth, Regan and Goneril despise weakness and deliberately fashion themselves into hard, unfeminine creatures; such behavior is unsurprising when we examine Lear's attitudes towards femininity. His misogyny is blatantly manifested in his condemnation of all women after Regan and Goneril have betrayed him:

> Down from the waist they are Centaurs,
> Though women all above;
> But to the girdle to the gods inherit,
> Beneath is all the fiend's: there's hell, there's darkness,
> There is the sulphurous pit, burning, scalding,
> Stench, consumption.
> (IV vi 124-129)

They are not simply women who are evil; Lear's speech makes clear his belief that they are evil *because* they are women, whose wickedness is found in the dark, reeking places below the waist. Lear's misogynistic attitudes have apparently taken their toll on his daughters; he has bred in them a self-loathing that turns them into monsters. "Rather than attacking tyranny, they prefer to attack weakness, and sometimes compare those they attack to women in terms meant to be insulting," Novy observes (88). They would not be weak; they become heartless. They resent men and, at the same time, embody the worst in them, becoming both unnatural murderesses: "Howe'er thou art a fiend, / A woman's shape doth shield thee" (IV iii 66-67)-- and misogynists disgusted by weakness: "Milk-liver'd man" (IV iii 50).

Their resentment of their father is apparent in the blinding scene, in which Regan symbolically emasculates Gloucester (another bad father) by plucking his beard (III vii 35) and then takes up a sword to kill brutally the servant that dares question her authority (III vii 79). Lear claims to "Unburthen'd crawl toward death" (I i 41); yet he still tries to maintain authority in Goneril's household, beating her servants, overrunning her domicile with his unneeded knights, and criticizing her at every turn. His earlier behavior towards Cordelia, and his consequent resistance to Kent's attempts to instill reason in him, have already shown that Lear does not respond to reason; only the same ruthless tactics he has employed on his daughters can be used to overcome his authority. Lear's power-hunger brings rebellion on himself; his daughters simply usurp the patriarchal power in which he had such faith. As soon as the old man is rendered powerless, the facade is dropped; Lear finds his rights and possessions quickly stripped away, with no sympathy from his daughters. Regan speaks not the language of love but the language of power, the only

tongue she knows: "You should be rul'd and led / By some discretion that discerns your state / Better than you yourself" (II iv 148-150). The power balance is completely reversed: he has become a paradox, the "obedient father" (I iv 235). Their rebellion destroys his self-identity, which was defined by his authority: "Does any here know me?" he asks. "This is not Lear. / Does Lear walk thus? speak thus? Where are his eyes? . . . Who is it that can tell me who I am?" The Fool answers: "Lear's shadow" (I iv 226-227, 230-231). Indeed, he is identifiable only through feminine ties, as "my lady's father" (I iv 79).

Lear continues to conflate power with affection, reacting to the loss of one by severing the other: "Yet have I left a daughter" (I iv 255). Although his own equations of wealth and love have reduced him to almost nothing, he still persists in his twisted perceptions of fatherhood and property; because "Thy fifty yet doth double five and twenty," Regan is "twice her love" (II iv 259-260). Regan and Goneril, embodying the principles they have been taught, make their father a victim of the savage warrior-daughters whom he himself has created. "Is there any cause in nature that make these hard hearts?" he asks, blind to the fact that he himself is the cause (III vi 77-78). He tries and condemns his daughters in their absence, representing them with sticks of furniture, blind to his part in their monstrosity. Cordelia, who was first driven away from not behaving as her sisters did, will be welcomed back for the same reason, but Lear's self-realization never extends to forgiving his daughters for the beastly behavior to which he has driven them.

Indeed, they are victims in this tragedy as much as Lear himself, for they destroy themselves through the same sort of power-driven expression of affection that they have

learned from their father, in the form of their competitive love for Edmund. Two of such blind ambition must inevitably turn against one another, and it is hardly surprising that their violence should manifest in a conflation of power in love: their struggle for the murderous, unnatural, patricidal Edmund's affection. They express their love violently because they know no other way; he is "Yours in the ranks of death" (IV iv 25). Affection is equivalent to bloodshed, interchangeable with it; Goneril had "rather lose the battle than that sister / Should loosen him and me" (V i 18-19). Their embittered fight for Edmund's hand results in Regan's murder and Goneril's suicide; love and death are unified with Edmund's words "I was contracted to them both; all three / Now marry in an instant" (V iii 229-30). Volumnia, likewise, dooms her child through a paradoxical combination of love and violence in *Coriolanus*.

CHAPTER 5

"THOU ART MY WARRIOR": VOLUMNIA'S VICARIOUS TRIUMPH AND DEFEAT

Coriolanus's mother, Volumnia, considers her warrior son the embodiment of manliness and prizes him as thus: "I sprang not more with joy at first hearing he was a man-child than now in first seeing he had prov'd himself a man" (I iii 15-17). Yet she is never compelled to call upon the "spirits" to "unsex" her so that she may urge her son to battle; unlike Lady Macbeth, who feels she must suppress her motherly instincts to act as a warrior and inspire her husband to do the same, Volumnia sees her encouragement of his warlike behavior as an expression of motherly love. She speaks of violence and war in maternal terms:

> The breasts of Hecuba,
> When she did suckle Hector, look'd not lovelier
> Than Hector's forehead when it spit forth blood
> At Grecian sword, contemning.
> (I iii 40-43)

But she also conflates war with sex: "If my son were my husband," she tells Coriolanus' wife, Virgilia, "I should freelier rejoice in that absence wherein he won honor than in the embracements of his bed where he would show most love" (I iii 2-5). She is mother/wife, partner in his decisions, infinitely more significant than Coriolanus's own wife; sex and violence, war and motherhood are bound up together, and therefore

Coriolanus, similarly, uses the language of sex to express the bonds of war, as when he greets Cominius with tellingly erotic language:

> O! let me clip ye
> In arms as sound as when I woo'd, in heart
> As merry as when our nuptial day was done
> And tapers burnt to bedward!
> (I vi 29-32)

Madelon Sprengnether, in her essay "Annihilating Intimacy in *Coriolanus*," writes:

> Love and war are so intertwined in Volumnia's imagination that eroticized violence becomes the mark of her relationship with her son. To be a man and to love his mother, Coriolanus must be wounded, a condition he more than fulfills in the course of the play, until his mutilated body becomes the visible emblem of his destiny. (189)

She rhapsodizes at the thought of seeing him bloodied. "O, he is wounded, I thank the gods for't," she exclaims (II i 121), and later categorizes his injuries in exacting detail: "I' th' shoulder and the left arm. There will be large cicatrices to show the people, when he shall stand for his place. He receiv'd in the repulse of Tarquin seven hurts i' th' body" (II i 147-150). Volumnia's power proceeds from motherhood, yet her love is contradictory in that she would rather see him wounded in battle than not live up to her masculine ideal. Indeed, her obsession with her son's valor is such that it seems she would love him more dead than alive. She is no Margaret, baying for the blood of those who have wronged her son; the blood she bays for is Coriolanus's. "Volumnia, who maintains, like Portia, the paradoxical equation of wounds with masculinity, seems to thrust her son towards death," writes Sprengnether (188); she would rather have "eleven [sons] die nobly for their country than one voluptuously surfeit out of action" (I iii 15-25). For Volumnia, the *idea*

of Coriolanus, the warrior, is as valuable as her son himself; had Coriolanus died, "his good report should have been my son" (I iii 20-21). She gets less joy from motherhood than from her vicarious pride in his accomplishments.

His actions proceed directly from her wishes; Coriolanus has "no alternative but to try to be the kind of man his mother had determined to make him," writes Tyrone Guthrie in his essay "*Coriolanus*" (71). They are as one: he desires to shape himself to his mother's will; she wishes to live through his accomplishments. He is a surrogate, the warrior she cannot be; she usurps his power, gains glory through him. "Thy valiantness was mine," Volumnia informs her son; "thou suck'st it from me" (III ii 129). He is not a soldier but a weapon in her hands. "*Coriolanus* is unique in that we," as Lawrence Danson, in his essay "Coriolanus," notes, "learn more about the *childhood* of this insistently heroic man than we do about the childhood of any other of Shakespeare's tragic heroes" (132). This is because Coriolanus's story is, by extension, Volumnia's; his triumphs are ulitimately her own. Volumnia therefore has considerable influence on how events in the play unfold, for she is the puppet-master that pulls the warrior's strings. The mighty Coriolanus is a helpless, weeping child against her, and only she can break down the iron resolve that she herself engendered in him. "Thou art my warrior," she tells him (V ii 63-64). Coriolanus's power proceeds directly from his mother; he is a product of her will. "The ego boundaries between mother and son are vague and indistinct," writes Emmett Wilson in "Coriolanus: The Anxious Bridegroom;" "Coriolanus feels undifferentiated from his mother who is inimical to his development as an individual distinct from her" (108).

"Coriolanus does the things he does out of a sense of absolute moral righteousness, a righteousness he derives from privilege of birth," writes David Wheeler in *Coriolanus: Critical Essays*. "He is right simply because of who he is: a patrician, Rome's greatest military hero, Volumnia's son" (xvi). Volumnia shapes her son's perceptions of himself and the world around him; Coriolanus believes with his whole being that he is great simply because she convinced him as much. The result is a pathological sense of pride and privilege; as Brutus notes,

> You speak a' th' people
> As if you were a god, to punish; not
> A man of their infirmity.
> (III i 80-81)

Not only does he consider himself superior to the common people, but to "the gods" themselves (III ii 38). Coriolanus is paradoxical in that his might and manliness stem from a need to please his overpowering mother; Volumnia has shaped him into a powerful warrior and, at the same time, a helpless son. Despite his manly posturing, Coriolanus behaves like a child playing soldier, who sulks when he doesn't get his way; he shows himself to be the very "boy" Aufidius taunts him as. Volumnia "reared him to be a harsh, contemptuous, intolerant, arrogant patrician and a ferocious, indomitable warrior," writes Rufus Putney in his essay "Coriolanus and his Mother:" "Upon this mighty man she then imposed the role of submissive son who must obey his mother and strive for her constant approbation" (104). Coriolanus's power is also contradictory in that the same pride that has made him a warrior makes him too stubborn to function in society. "[H]earing Volumnia, and seeing the results of her training in her ferocious son," Danson writes, "we are forced to recognize how the desire to prove oneself a man

can imply, in fact, the desire to be less than-- or at least other than-- a fully sentient human being" (132). By raising her son to be so proud and unbending that he fails utterly as a statesman, the very principles that she engenders in him bring about his doom.

For Coriolanus, such values are the core of his existence. For Volumnia, however, they are simply a means to an end. "Would you have me / False to my nature?" he asks her, as if to behave otherwise would be detrimental to his very sense of self; "Rather say, I play / The man I am." Volumnia, in response, treats humility as no more significant than the garment he had to wear to signify it:

> O sir, sir, sir,
> I would have had you put your power well on
> Before you had worn it out.
> (III ii 14-18)

Power itself is what matters, not what he must do to gain it. As his valor proceeds directly from the maternal body, Coriolanus' own material form cannot rebel against that which she has engendered in him. He considers himself physically incapable of humility: "I cannot bring / My tongue to such a pace" (II iii 50-51). Like Lear, Coriolanus experiences a fracturing of his identity when he is separated from his masculine role; he does not recognize himself in a gown of humility (II iii 147-148). "By giving in to his mother's request and to factionalist politics," Wheeler notes, "he will fragment his body (essentially, his tongue and mouth, which will utter the false words) from his mind" (Wheeler xxv). To split pride from obedience is to split Coriolanus in two. His status as a Roman warrior has defined him; but as he ultimately cannot forego his pride, he is banished from Rome, his home, his country, his very identity. He responds by turning

against Rome and destroying the part of himself that has been taken away; as Cominius recounts,

> Coriolanus
> He would not answer to; forbade all names;
> He was a kind of nothing, titleless,
> Till he had forg'd himself a name a' th' fire
> Of burning Rome.
> (V i 11-15)

Like Lear, Volumnia is at the mercy of the monster that she created. She has fashioned a gun that cannot help but fire, and she finds it pointed at her head. Yet even at her weakest, with her son at the height of his tyrannical might, she is able to play on his sense of guilt to use his very attachment to her-- the attachment that has made him proud and unbending, that led him to rise against Rome-- to overcome him:

> There's no man in the world
> More bound to 's mother, yet here he lets me prate
> Like one i' th' stocks.-- Thou hast never in thy life
> Show'd thy dear mother any courtesy,
> When she, poor hen, fond of no second brood,
> Has cluck'd thee to the wars, and safely home
> Loaden with honor.
> (V iii 158-165)

But Coriolanus understands that he has become irrevocably split, and that either he or Rome, but not both, may survive. "O mother, mother! / What have you done?" he asks in horror:

> O my mother, mother! O!
> You have won a happy victory to Rome;
> But, for your son, believe it-- O, believe it--
> Most dangerously you have with him prevail'd,
> If not most mortal to him.
> (V iii 182-183, 185-189)

Volumnia has "so imposed her values upon him that she created in him a superego that made him a man of iron rigidity," writes Rufus Putney in "Coriolanus and his Mother." "Since his conscience does not permit compromises, he is a military hero but a failure as a politician and statesman. Volumnia ultimately contrives his doom" (104).

But where does that leave Volumnia when the play ends? Sprengnether notes that *Coriolanus* is "unique among the tragedies . . . in allowing a central female figure to survive. While Gertrude, Desdemona, Emilia, Goneril, Regan, Cordelia, and even Lady Macbeth all die within moments of the hero, Volumnia does not" (195). I would argue, however, that Volumnia suffers a kind of death, for what self-definition does she have outside of her son's accomplishments? By convincing Coriolanus to cease his attack on Rome, Volumnia saves her own life, rather than dooming herself as Lady Macbeth and Lear's daughters do; but she dooms that extension of herself, her warrior-self, her son. Her son's exploits having ended, she has no other purpose. Another powerful woman, however, shapes a Roman military hero of her own and not only survives (albeit briefly) but surpasses him, ascending to immortality, not defeated but deified: Cleopatra.

CHAPTER 6

"SHOW ME, MY WOMEN, LIKE A QUEEN": CLEOPATRA AS ARTIST AND ACTRESS

As queen of Egypt, Cleopatra holds a position of greater political power than the wives and children of kings and mothers of warriors that we have examined earlier. But Cleopatra's political authority is negligible in comparison to the power she wields over the hearts and minds of all who observe her; Cleopatra's power is in playing herself, completely and passionately. "She stages herself at Cydnus," writes Rosalie Colie in "The Significance of Style":

> she stages herself as dead for Antony; she stages herself for her death. She speaks and is spoken of in theatrical terms of scene, act, and stage; she is a creature of impulse and whim, which she tries out on her audiences, acting to Dolabella, to Caesar, to Antony, acting even with her familiar maids. That habit of acting stands her in good stead in her determination to outwit Caesar in the end. (73)

Cleopatra is a piece of art, a performance, a legend in her own time. She is a constant source of gossip, be it concerning the contents of her feasts-- "Eight wild-boars roasted whole at a breakfast, and but twelve persons there; is this true?" (II ii 179-180)-- or the legendary romantic exploits of a "certain queen . . . in a mattress" (II vi 70). Enobarbus recounts the couple's famous meeting like an old tale:

> *Enobarbus*. When she first met Mark Antony, she purs'd up his heart upon the river of Cydnus.
> *Agrippa*. There she appear'd indeed, or my reporter devis'd well for her.
> *Enobarbus.* I will tell you.

(II ii 186-190)

Antony's first glimpse of her, recreated in such breathtaking imagery by Enobarbus, is intoxicating. Her surroundings are "adornings" (II ii 208): beautiful setting, accompanying music, and a cast of mermaid-like attendants and "pretty dimpled boys" (II ii 202). But concerning the queen herself, Enobarbus fears his own flowery language is inadequate: "For her own person, / It beggar'd all description" (II ii 197-198). She is anything but the simple "gipsy" or "strumpet" the Romans would have her be (I i 10,13). These concepts are too simple; Cleopatra cannot be adequately described in one word, or a thousand. She is not "this caricature of a whore the Romans would make her out to be," Howard Felperin writes in his essay "Mimesis and Modernity in *Antony and Cleopatra*": "She parodies their parody, deconstructs their construct of disapproval and doubt, rendering it null and void" (90). She is ephemeral, indefinable, an actress who never gives her audience any control; all we know for certain about Cleopatra is that we cannot look away from her, either out of enthrallment or mistrust. "To hunt for this Cleopatra," writes Linda Bamber in "Gender and Genre," "is to double back so many times that we forget what we were looking for" (110). The closest definition we have of Cleopatra is in Antony's description of the crocodile, the magnificent beast that can only be understood as what it is:

Lepidus. What manner o' thing is your crocodile?
Antony. It is shap'd, sir, like itself, and it is as broad as it hath breadth. Is is just so high as it is, and moves with it own organs. It lives by that which nourisheth it, and the elements once out of it, it transmigrates.
Lepidus. What color is it?
Antony. Of it own color too.
Lepidus. 'Tis a strange serpent.

(II vii 41-47)

She is a paradox: honestly, brazenly theatrical, a complete power that is completely feminine, the crocodile that can only be described as herself. "In a play that is crisscrossed by journeys all over the Mediterranean, Cleopatra alone stays at home," Bamber writes. "She is no quester; she makes no odyssey in search of herself" (128). Unlike Antony, she is never troubled with bothersome questions of who she is-- she knows that *being* Cleopatra means simply *playing* Cleopatra.

As playwright and audience to her own exploits, as well as actress, Cleopatra is her own favorite performer; "though she certainly loved Antony," Harold Bloom writes in *Modern Critical Interpretations: Antony and Cleopatra*, "it is inevitable that, like any great actress, she must love herself all but apocalyptically" (3). We must mistrust her and her motives, for she always has her own best interest in mind; it is as much Cleopatra's story as that of Antony and Cleopatra. Janet Adelman, in her essay "Uncertainty and Judgment in *Antony and Cleopatra*," warns that "we must question Cleopatra's love for Antony as she plans her suicide; Shakespeare's insistence upon her dread of a Roman triumph forces us to question it" (12-13). But though we must mistrust her, the audience cannot help but love her, not only for her enticing nature but because she is so candid about her very deception. "We are never in doubt of her duplicity," writes Colie, "but its naturalness comes to seem worthy in comparison to the slyness of Octavius and of the 'trustworthy' Proculeius. Cleopatra's is a consistent and therefore honest duplicity: her policy is innocence itself compared to the masterful and automatic deceptions of the politic Octavius" (62).

As she is limitlessly enticing, Antony's love for her cannot be quantified: "Then must thou needs find out new heaven, new earth" (I i 17). Just as she constantly redefines her behavior to respond to his moods, he must readjust his capacity for affection in order to adequately adore the "infinite variety" that is Cleopatra. Her paradoxes and peccadilloes make her fascinating. Antony does not want a wife of "a holy, cold, and still conversation," Enobarbus tells us; "He will to his Egyptian dish again" (II vi 122, 126). Her defects are perfections, her seeming flaws infused with beauty; Enobarbus tells how he

> saw her once
> Hop forty paces through the public street;
> And having lost her breath, she spoke, and panted,
> That she did make defect perfection,
> And breathless, pow'r breath forth.
> (II ii 228-232).

She perplexes, maddens, intrigues. The very beauty of her imperfections confounds observers, which makes her all the more enticing. Antony hates the fact that he stays with her for the same reason that he stays with her:

> *Maecenas.* Now Antony
> Must leave her utterly.
> *Enobarbus.* Never, he will not:
> Age cannot wither her, nor custom stale
> Her infinite variety. Other women cloy
> The appetites they feed, but she makes hungry
> Where most she satisfies; for vildest things
> Become themselves in her, that the holy priests
> Bless her when she is riggish.
> (II ii 233-239)

But Cleopatra is more than a performer in her environment; she is an artist who shapes her own atmosphere. She is actress and director all at once, stage-managing her

appearance, her surroundings, her romances and, ultimately, her own death. Antony himself calls her a witch, and what is a witch but a powerful woman who shapes her reality and those around her? The world she creates with Antony is chaotic, a more pleasurable version of the "fair is foul" world of *Macbeth*-- they exchange clothes, stay awake all night and go to bed drunk in the morning (II v 21-23). This world is also utterly absorbing, to the point at which he fears that he will never return. "These strong Egyptian fetters I must break," Antony worries, "Or lose myself in dotage" (I ii 116-117). When he is not present, she creates the reality she wants in her imagination: "He's speaking now, / Or murmuring, 'Where's my serpent of old Nile?' (I v 24-25). She sends a message every day; he is not allowed to forget her, to construct a life-world in which she is not a principal player. She even sexualizes the messenger's report of him, making that performance of Antony's words an Antony itself: "Ram thou fruitful tidings in mine ears, / That long have been barren" (II v 24-25). She reacts badly to her plans being foiled, to the fantasy she has built being challenged; she grows furious with a messenger who refuses to lie about Antony's marriage: "The gods confound thee, dost thou hold there still?" (II v 92) But she soon adjusts her perceptions to fit recent developments; since Octavia is "low-voiced" and not as tall as Cleopatra, the queen's mental theater casts her as "dull of tongue, and dwarfish" and consequently not a threat (III iii 13, 16). Cleopatra doesn't share her stage well-- that is, her environment, over which she exerts theatrical control-- with women who aren't her servants; as her seductive wiles give her power, only other women are considered a threat. But if she paints Octavia as dull and unappetizing, she presents no danger. Cleopatra writes and rewrites herself, dismissing entire histories as

my salad days,
When I was green in judgment, cold in blood,
To say as I said then!
(I v 73-75)

She wills such power over her surroundings that they become an extension of the queen herself. We recall that Cleopatra is the crocodile definable only by her own traits; the only hard fact we know is that, like "your serpent of Egypt," she is "bred now of your mud by the operation of your sun" (II vii 26-27). She is a cherished aspect of the landscape, elemental, astounding, a monument, an eighth wonder of the world:

Enobarbus. Alack, sir, no, her passions are made of nothing but the finest part of pure love. We cannot call her winds and waters sighs and tears; they are greater storms and tempests than almanacs can report. This cannot be cunning in her; if it be, she makes a show'r of rain as well as Jove.
Antony. Would I had never seen her!
Enobarbus. O, sir, you had then left unseen a wonderful piece of work, which not to have been blest withal would have discredited your travel.
(I ii 146-155)

As with Lady Macbeth, fertility imagery is employed to characterize her; but Cleopatra is given it as Lady Macbeth rejects it. Egypt itself becomes a woman by association; the entire country is feminized, holding Antony captive in its sensual grip. Egypt is never completely hers, not in the strictest political sense; yet we cannot imagine it as anything less than an extension of Cleopatra herself. "Egypt is comfort, pleasure, softness, seduction, sensuousness (if not sensuality also), variety, and sport," writes Colie. "Egypt promises her children rich, languorous pleasures and satisfaction. Rome is business, Egypt is foison; Rome is warfare, Egypt is love" (58).

Cleopatra's greatest creation, however, is Antony himself. "An imaginative being in that he moves the imagination of others, he is simply not an imaginer of her stature," writes Bloom (3). When he is with her, whatever he is proceeds directly from her, "stirr'd by Cleopatra" (I i 43). He is her "soldier, servant, making peace or war / As thou affects" (I iii 70-71). They inspire great things in one another: before his death, she urges him to greatness; after he dies, she makes a legend of him through her words. "The manhood she attributes to him no ordinary mortal can aspire to," Colie notes (72). He loves her because she challenges and exasperates him, because she will not allow him to be less than everything in the world. Their extraordinary love is consequently expressed in extraordinarily theatrical language. Colie writes:

> Antony and Cleopatra demand a language for their love which rejects conventional hyperbole and invents and creates new overstatements, new forms of overstatement. In the language itself, we can read the instability of their love, as the language seems to make hungry, too, where most it satisfies. Nothing is enough for these two, not even the most extravagant figures of speech. (77)

Cleopatra's performance shows its greatest creativity in her ability to fashion an environment that adjusts to the quicksilver changes of Antony's moods. "From the beginning," writes Adelman, "we see Cleopatra stage emotions for Antony's benefit" (11). In their first scene, she teases him with a parody of summons, as if anything beyond Egypt's borders is a mere shadow:

> Nay, hear them, Antony.
> Fulvia perchance is angry; or who knows
> If the scarce-bearded Caesar have not sent
> His pow'rful mandate to you: "Do this, or this;
> Take in that kingdom, and enfranchise that;
> Perform't, or else we damn thee."
> (I i 19-24)

He agrees:

> Let Rome in Tiber melt, and the wide arch
> Of the rang'd empire fall! Here is my space,
> Kingdoms are clay; our dungy earth alike
> Feeds beast as man; the nobleness of life
> Is to do thus.
> (I i 33-37)

But Cleopatra knows better, for her skill is not in *being* one thing or another, as Antony's is, but in creating and performing: "I'll seem the fool I am not. Antony / Will be himself" (I i 42-43). She is acutely aware of Rome's existence, and knows Antony deceives himself: "Excellent falsehood! / Why did he marry Fulvia, and not love her?" (I i 40-41) But she has great power in convincing Antony of his homeland's insignificance, and keeps him by letting him believe he is free: "Let her not say 'tis I that keep you here, / I have no power upon you; hers you are" (I iii 22-23). Rome *is* an intrusive figure, however; even a "Roman thought" (I ii 83) can change Antony's demeanor, and news of Fulvia's death throws their relationship into chaos. But chaos is where Cleopatra feels most at home; her script is flexible, with a response for every outcome. "If you find him sad, / Say I am dancing," she tells Charmian; "if in mirth, report / That I am sudden sick" (I iii 3-5). She adjusts her performance to accommodate changes in his disposition. To do thus does not oppress but, rather, empower her; for to "in each thing give him way, cross him in nothing" is "the way to lose him" (I iii 7-10). Knowing how unstable his behavior and desires are, she rapidly adjusts: "I am quickly ill, and well, / So Antony loves" (I iii 72-73). She urges him to act, as she does:

> I prithee turn aside, and weep for her,

> Then bid adieu to me, and say the tears
> Belong to Egypt. Good now, play one scene
> Of excellent dissembling, and let it look
> Like perfect honor.
> (I iii 76-80)

But he can only be himself, whatever that means at the moment. When under Roman report, he would be Roman; in Cleopatra's arms, he would be Egyptian. The two lands define him by turns. He cannot function as a Roman in Egypt, and makes poor excuses for behaving badly; of his mistreatment of a messenger he weakly explains that

> He fell upon me, ere admitted, then;
> Three kings I had newly feasted, and did want
> Of what I was i' th' morning.
> (II ii 75-77)

Yet only a few lines later he dismisses his Egyptian associations with a cold "I am not married, Caesar" (II ii 122). But Cleopatra understands and allows both sides of Antony, for she allows and encourages his quicksilver changes in mood; she prefers the "violence" of his emotional extremes:

> Be'st thou sad or merry,
> The violence of either thee becomes,
> So does it no man's else.
> (I v 59-61)

She takes him as both a politician and a lover, and together they seem to have more might than the greatest politicians. But their relationship, despite their respective military positions, is less political than the cause of political disorder. Their love disrupts politics-- he will make "No wars without-doors" (II i 13)-- and politics disrupt their love:

> The strong necessity of time commands
> Our services awhile; but my full heart

Remains in use with you.
(I iii 41-43)

His first wife "came into the field" in his absence (I ii 88); the second he weds "for my peace" while "I' th' East my pleasure lies" (II iii 40, 41). But Cleopatra is not these women. She can dress in Antony's armor and playfully wield his sword; she can even attempt to command her own fleet, but she is no warrior. She is a woman informed with a woman's power, "as quintessentially feminine," writes Anne Barton in "The Divided Catastrophe in *Antony and Cleopatra*," as the younger Antony was male" (40). She prefers wars between the sexes and "trade[s] in love" (II v 2); she is no good at politics or war, but wields her own (feminine) wiles instead: enchantment, sexual prowess, the sheer force of will that shapes her surroundings. But because she can pretend to be all things, and play at war with her armor and ships, Antony mistakenly believes that she is a warrior.

"Not know me yet?" she asks (III xiii 157), but "Antony can scarcely be blamed for not knowing Cleopatra," writes Adelman; "the question stands as central to the play" (11). Because Cleopatra's true self cannot be pinned down, he has fallen for her performance. The world she has made for him, where victory comes swiftly and by sea, is so enticing that he cannot see the disastrous reality beyond it. He flies after her; he is the hooked fish she would have him be:

Antony. O, whither hath thou led me, Egypt? . . .
Cleopatra. O my lord, my lord,
Forgive my fearful sails! I little thought
You would have followed.
Antony. Egypt, thou knew'st too well
My heart was to they rudder tied by th' strings,
And thou shouldst tow me after. O'er my spirit

> Thy full supremacy thou knews't, and that
> They beck might from the bidding of the gods
> Command me . . . .
> You did know
> How much you were my conqueror, and that
> My sword, made weak by my affection, would
> Obey it on all cause.
> (III xi 51, 54-58, 65-68)

But Cleopatra remains the inveterate performer, fixing the damage caused by Antony's faith in her performance with yet another performance. She knows that she does not have to be contrite; she must only create an illusion of contrition. Here the actress operates as author and audience as well, bidding Mardian

> go tell him I have slain myself;
> Say that the last I spoke was 'Antony,'
> And word it, prithee, piteously. Hence, Mardian,
> And bring me how he takes my death.
> (IV xiii 7-9)

Once again, Antony falls for the act, and kills himself (somewhat incompetently, too, for his "being" always falls somewhat short of her "acting"). Cleopatra's reaction is characteristically self-centered: "Noblest of men, woo't die? / Hast thou no care of me?" (IV xv 59-60).

"[A]fter his death, the story of Antony is in Cleopatra's hands," writes Erickson. "She has the power to make his self-image as a heroic lover a mockery or a truth that must be honored" (141). "Think you there was or might be such a man / As this I dreamt of?" she asks Dolabella, who answers in the negative (V ii 93-94). But Antony *was* real, as well as a creature she "dreamt of"; moreover, he was "such a man" *because* she dreamt him thusly. Antony becomes art through her speeches, a legend in death as she is in life,

a god worthy of the goddess she will soon become. She speaks of him not as a mortal man but a legendary warrior, larger than life, as great as she would have him be:

> The crown o' th' earth doth melt . . .
> Young boys and girls
> Are level now with men; the odds is gone,
> And there is nothing left remarkable
> Beneath the visiting moon.
> (IV xv 63, 65-68)

The final scenes are fitting for this paradoxical queen; from her most oppressed and powerless position, she stealthily plans to ascend to immortality. "'Tis paltry to be Caesar," Cleopatra comments disparagingly, "Not being Fortune, he's but Fortune's knave, / A minister of her will" (V ii 2-3). Cleopatra is Fortune; she may not control Caesar's fate, but she is firmly in charge of her own, and swears that "This mortal house I'll ruin, / Do Caesar what he can" (V ii 51-52). "Because Cleopatra has left him no real choice," Barton writes, "Caesar consents to become an actor in her tragedy" (53). Cleopatra's power over her environment and the people who surround her is undeniable, but her temporal might is shaky at best; she wields the most might as a symbol, a representation of power. Unlike other subjects of this paper, her might is more personal than political, her influence stronger over the heart and mind than the state. Her suicide changes this; she transforms herself from a woman of limited earthly power to a deity. Death augments, rather than destroys, her power; death makes her a goddess. At the very moment at which Cleopatra seems to be made helpless-- captured by her enemies, about to be humiliated and paraded before them-- she ascends to immortality. As she moves towards the decision to treat her suicide as a transformation from mortal to goddess, her language becomes increasingly concerned with theatricality-- with how she will be

played after her death, and how Caesar would have her play now. The Romans would make a performance of her, put her on display, but Cleopatra knows better than to play any role not of her own direction:

> Shall they hoist me up,
> And show me to the shouting varlotry
> Of censuring Rome? Rather a ditch in Egypt
> Be gentle grave unto me! rather on Nilus' mud
> Lay me stark-nak'd, and let the water-flies
> Blow me into abhorring! Rather make
> My country's high pyramides my gibbet,
> And hang me up in chains!
> (V ii 55-62)

She knows her own act well, but does not fall for someone else's: "He words me, girls, he words me, that I should not / Be noble to myself" (V ii 191-192). Caesar would have her play someone other than "myself," but the only consistency that Cleopatra needs in her roles is the certainty that she is the one performing them. She and Antony are art, and she realizes that their art will, over time, descend into base entertainment:

> Saucy lictors
> Will catch at us like strumpets, and scald rhymers
> Ballad 's out a' tune. The quick comedians
> Extemporally will stage us, and present
> Our Alexandrian revels: Antony
> Shall be brought drunken forth, and I shall see
> Some squeaking Cleopatra boy my greatness
> I' th' posture of a whore.
> (V ii 214-221)

But for now she is perfection, art personified, a sculpture:

> I have nothing
> Of woman in me; now from head to foot
> I am marble-constant.
> (V ii 238-240)

She theatrically recreates the moment of their meeting, stage-managing the world as she would have it one last time: "Show me, my women, like a queen; go fetch / My best attires," she commands. "I am again for Cydnus / To meet Mark Antony" (V ii 227-229). The asp-bearing Clown jokes that the worm's "biting is immortal; those that do die of it do seldom or never recover" (V ii 246-248). But the serpent's bite, to her, *is* immortal; she will recover-- indeed, she will thrive. The deadly worm is "pretty" and brings "joy" (V ii 243, 279). It "pains not" (V ii 244) and leaves no blood or swelling; she will die as beautifully as she lived. This is no defeat; this is apotheosis. Her death is an ascension because she would have it so, because she will fall to her own hand and not Caesar's; because nothing happens in her performance that is not her choice. "Give me my robe, put on my crown," she commands, dressing for her final role. "I have / Immortal longings in me" (V ii 280-281). Not only does she ascend to immortality, but she ascends to the side of her legendary lover; as he swore "I will be / A bridegroom in my death, and run into't / As to a lover's bed," so she parts with the avowal "Husband, I come!" (IV xiv 99-100, V ii 287) She is the "eastern star," "fire and air," her "baser" elements abandoned to a mortal plane for which she has no use, an empty terrain that cannot hold her, from which she parts with an unapologetic "What should I stay--" (V ii 308, 289, 290, 313)

As an actress within her environment, Cleopatra utterly claims the attention of her audience both on and offstage. "Antony's relationship to a woman differs from relationships to earlier tragic heroes," writes Erickson. "The play's title, with its emphasis on the couple rather than the single hero, alerts us to this shift" (Erickson 123). Separate death scenes give the lovers equal time in the spotlight; moreso here than in perhaps any

of Shakespeare's plays, man and woman share the stage. Indeed, we cannot criticize Antony's errors too harshly, for the queen of Egypt amazes us as well; the heroic Antony can barely attract our attention away from his dazzlingly theatrical lover. Such is the case with all these compelling, volatile, mesmerizing women, these "wrangling queen[s]" (I i 48) who so thoroughly capture our fascination.

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