

Ideal Shakespearian Women: Extensions of Men

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William Shakespeare's plays, *Othello* and *King Lear*, demonstrate the repression of women by the men in their lives. His portrayal of fathers and husbands, and the interchangeable roles they play, explains the purity and loyalty expected of Shakespeare's ideal female characters. The idealization of these qualities attribute to the infantilization of women and the demonization of female sexuality.

Belonging to the designated inferior sex, Shakespearian women must rely on their fathers until they get married and can supplant them. The similar roles that fathers and husbands fulfill in Shakespeare's plays confuses the relationships they have with women. In *King Lear*, this is seen through Lear's relationship with his daughter Cordelia. He sets her apart from her sisters, proclaiming, "I loved her most, and thought to set my rest / On her kind nursery" (1.1.124-125). King Lear plans to retire with his favorite daughter so that she may take care of him for the rest of his days, as though she were his wife. However, she is resistant to his aim, saying to him, "I love your majesty / According to my bond, no more nor less" (1.1.92-93), postulating that his love for her is more than familial. By telling Lear that she could only love him as her bond allows, Cordelia implies that he is asking her to love him more than a daughter should love her father. In *Othello*, the role of husband morphs into that of a father, as Othello begins to resemble his wife's biological father, Brabantio. When Brabantio discovers that Desdemona has eloped, he is enraged by her choice in husband as well as her demonstration of decision-making beyond his authority. Brabantio is convinced that Othello must have used magic to woo Desdemona:

If she in chains of magic were not bound,
Whether a maid so tender, fair and happy, . . .
Would ever have, t'incur a general mock,
Run from her guardage to the sooty bosom

Of such a thing as thou? (1.2.65-71)

Brabantio blames witchcraft as the cause of the matrimony because he cannot believe that his daughter married a man of color. By describing Othello's "sooty bosom," Brabantio refers to his skin color and compares it to the filth of soot. Consequently, Brabantio rejects Desdemona as his daughter and in response to being asked if Desdemona is dead, Brabantio says, "Ay, to me: / She is abused, stolen from me and corrupted, by spells and medicines bought of mountebanks"

(1.3.60-62). Brabantio's rejection of Othello and Desdemona's marriage results in her imagined death. This foreshadows her literal death at her husband's hands, as the culmination of Othello's self-loathing and rejection of Desdemona reflect the early sentiments of Brabantio. As Othello becomes his wife's father and Lear demonstrates a romantic love for his daughter, the plays demonstrate how the roles overlap and actively repress women.

The ideal Shakespearian daughter demonstrates her exemplary character through her dedication to duty and purity. However, these attributes are expected of women as they enter into adulthood, directly opposing the development of individualism and natural maturation.

Desdemona's loyalty to the men in her life is established when her father tells her that she has betrayed him by marrying Othello. She entreats Brabantio to understand,

I am hitherto your daughter. But here's my husband:

And so much duty as my mother showed

To you, preferring you before her father,

So much I challenge that I may profess

Due to the Moor my lord. (1.3.182-189)

Desdemona brings up her mother, explaining that preferring her husband is natural.

Understanding the transference of her duty from her father to her husband, Desdemona asserts

her loyalty to Othello. Cordelia similarly proclaims a dutiful allegiance to her father, that would transfer when she would marry, telling Lear:

You have begot me, bred, loved me. I
 Return those duties back as are right fit,
 Obey you, love you and most honour you. . .
 Haply when I shall wed,
 That lord whose hand must take my plight shall carry
 Half my love with him, half my care and duty. (1.1.96-102)

Both women demonstrate ideal commitments to their fathers and husbands. However, when Cordelia reunites with her father in Act 4, she returns without her husband, suggesting that her allegiance remains to Lear. This favor for her father alludes to the unnatural nature of their relationship, as Lear has romantic love for Cordelia. Additionally, the absence of her husband implies that Cordelia's marriage may not have been consummated. Desdemona's virginity is similarly ambiguous in an attempt to present both women as pure despite being married. Their dedication to chastity and loyalty to men is idealized by the texts, contributing to their designation as "good" women. However, these standards of female excellence promote obedience and sexual naivety, condemning women to the expectations expected of daughters.

The expectation that women must maintain their virginities into adulthood derives from their being conceptualized as children. Since female sexuality is a direct indication of physical maturation and demonstrates an advancement in autonomy, it is feared as an avenue of female liberation. It simultaneously defiles the purity that "good" women are intended to preserve and provides women with power over their male counterparts. Othello laments the inability to control female sexuality, "O curse of marriage / That we can call these delicate creatures ours / And not

their appetites!” (3.3.272-274). The “appetites” Othello describes refer to female sexuality, which men believe they cannot control. The idealization of female purity intends to prevent the empowerment of women and repress female autonomy. Consequently, in *King Lear*, female sexuality is demonized through its association with the villainous characters. For example, Edmund, the male antagonist of the story, aligns himself with his mother and the unlawful affair that resulted in his birth. He claims that he is superior to his brother because he was conceived “in the lusty stealth of nature” (1.2.11). Edmund’s corrupted morality can be attributed to his reverence for his mother and her uninhibited sexuality. This is supported by the opposing characterization of Kent, Lear’s honorable and trustworthy servant. As a representation of male goodness, Kent rejects women all-together, telling Lear he is “Not so young, sir, to love a woman for singing, / nor so old to dote on her for anything.” (1.4.37-38). He even claims “to eat no fish” (1.4.17), which refers to oral sex and implies his abstinence from any sexual relations with women. Edmund does not demonstrate the same restraint, partaking in relationships with both of Lear’s other two daughters, Goneril and Regan. In direct opposition to Cordelia, Goneril and Regan betray their duty to their father and even fall victim to their own sexualities. After being seduced by Edmund, the sisters fight over his love, and Goneril even plots to kill her husband to be with him. Furthermore, it’s implied that their wicked natures could have originated from their mother’s sexual promiscuity, when Lear says to Regan, “If thou shouldst not be glad, / I would divorce me from thy mother’s tomb, / Sepulchring an adultress.” (2.2.319-321). Lear insinuates that Regan’s disobedience towards him would implicate her mother as the cause of her own corruption. This association between villainy and promiscuity, implies the correlation between female sexuality and corruption.

The negative portrayal of female sexuality in *King Lear* demonstrates the importance and allure of purity. At the start of the play, Cordelia's loyalty to Lear and definitive virginity make her immensely desirable as a romantic partner. However, by being her biological father he cannot act on his feelings and claim her. Similarly, as Othello assumes Brabantio's role as her father, he starts feeling guilty for his attraction to Desdemona. This can be concluded by Othello's own words, as he prepares to murder Desdemona by saying, "Thy bed, lust-stained, shall with lust's blood be spotted." (5.1.36). Since Othello strangles Desdemona, the only blood actually shed onto the sheets is his own when Othello stabs himself. It can be interpreted that the lustful blood that Othello describes is his own. As husbands supersede the role of father, sex with one's own wife is demonized since it corrupts their pure nature. However, female goodness is inevitably corrupted by the obligation to produce offspring and therefore motherhood itself is demonized. Shakespeare demonstrates this in both plays, as Cordelia and Desdemona both die before they're able to fulfill their duty to have children. The ambiguity surrounding the consummation of their marriages alludes to the preservation of their virginities despite being wives. Furthermore, their deaths support their chastities, as both are asphyxiated. Deaths that involve stabbing are seen as penetrative acts and the shedding of blood is often compared to the breaking of the hymen. It's purposeful that Cordelia and Desdemona don't experience either. Instead, they remain perfectly intact when Lear and Othello look upon their bodies.

Shakespeare's leading male characters, Lear and Othello, demonstrate the interchangeability of the roles of fathers and husbands, explaining how they contribute to the repression of women. The expectations impressed upon Cordelia and Desdemona, to remain pure and dutiful into adulthood, stems from the infantilization of women and explains the demonization of female sexuality.