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“That Thing that Ends All Other Deeds”: Silence as a Literary Device in the Suicides of Shakespeare’s Female Characters

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in English from
The College of William and Mary

by

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Alas, she has no speech!
– Desdemona, *Othello* (2.1.112)

"This was the noblest Roman of them all" (5.5.68). So begins Antony's speech praising Brutus following his suicide. Many of the Roman soldiers in *Julius Caesar* are extolled as they stoically die via suicide or assisted suicide on the battlefield, honoring themselves and their Roman heritage. Brutus's wife Portia emulates the stoic style by killing herself before her husband's defeat. Instead of praising her courageous and venerable act, Brutus denies her the conscious intention of committing suicide, saying instead that she became insane: "She fell distract,/ And, her attendants absent, swallowed fire" (4.3.155-6). When Cassius expresses his shock, Brutus orders him to "Speak no more of her" (4.3.158). This contrast between the treatment of suicides by gender in *Julius Caesar* is reflective of a larger phenomenon throughout Shakespeare's plays.

Suicide is a frequent and important occurrence in the oeuvre of Shakespeare. Not only a plot device, suicide is an important reflection of character. Shakespeare's tragedies and histories are rife with suicides, often committed or contemplated by characters who are military leaders grappling with defeat on a national scale, such as Othello, Macbeth, Antony, Brutus, and Cassius. Critics commonly analyze these suicides in the context of stoicism, a philosophy of Seneca, one of Shakespeare's favorite sources (Bevington; Levitsky; MacDonald and Murphy; Miola; Wymer). Many of these imperfect heroes, Roman or otherwise, embody the traditional characteristics of classical Roman stoicism: "high-mindedness, self-control, the ability to rise above one's material circumstances, fortitude in the face of adversity, moral dedication, constancy of purpose, and a rigorous concern with personal honor" (Charney xiii). Characters like Brutus, the classic stoic, work to free themselves of passions and bear pleasure and pain equally, accepting the

edicts of the gods (Bevington 157-61). They also share the classic stoic flaw of overconfidence of will and wisdom (Levitsky 241). While Renaissance-era Christianity saw suicide as a sin and could view their ancestors as cold-hearted or stubborn, theatre-goers appreciated the old world's values of dignity, honor, nobility, and preservation of the family name, and could thus respect those characters committing suicide rationally and as an assertion of their free will, especially those who killed themselves patriotically (Bevington 161; Kahn 121-2; Levitsky 240-1; MacDonald and Murphy 276).

As Ruth Levitsky writes, "For the Stoic, good or evil lies in the intention, in the motivation" (242). Overlooking the Christian-imposed morality of suicide, critics from the Renaissance to the present often analyze the merit of a male character's suicide based on his presumed intentions. However flawed his logic, a character can still be respected if his motivations are noble. Death, including suicide, was simply the capstone of a stoic's life: "To die well is to complete and justify one's existence and one's hope of being remembered as a worthy person; to die badly is to put the seal on a bad bargain and to concede failure" (Bevington 179). It is hard to bridge the gender gap with this philosophy, however. Shakespeare's female characters, including the suicidal ones, are typically not leaders or reminiscent of Roman nobility. Their flaws are different from those of the traditional stoic and their motivations are more difficult to discern.

Most critics (Bloom; Bradley; Coleridge; Kellogg; Wymer) have chosen to focus on understanding the suicides of male characters, as these deaths seem more similar to one another and more straightforward. Suicides by female characters often seem analyzed as an afterthought, used to contrast against the more important male suicides, without much consideration for each woman's unique motivations and method or the important

differences between the male and female suicides in general. Even authors such as Juliet Dusinberre, Theresa Kemp, and David Mann who focus on the roles of women in Shakespeare's plays often ignore suicide completely. Others, as we will see, offer cursory explanations. Juliet kills herself for love, as she cannot bear to live without her beloved Romeo. Ophelia drowns herself after being driven insane from grief. Desdemona claims her death is a suicide to protect her husband. Lavinia commits an assisted suicide to escape her shamed and painful life. The characters' silence seems to suggest to some that no further explanation is required; their motivations can be easily understood without the lengthy speeches that are commonplace before male suicides. With as gifted and thorough an author as Shakespeare, however, silence should not be assumed to be a mistake, a deficit in the writing, or a general dismissal of the female characters as less important than the males. Typical critical interpretations do not take into account the social positions of Renaissance women and the perceptions and incidence of suicide during that time.

While Shakespeare's male characters typically contemplate and commit suicide on stage, complete with lofty, pensive soliloquies on the matter, his female characters often commit their acts behind the curtain and are given few to no lines to clarify their deeds or dictate how they wish to be remembered. Just as Lavinia in *Titus Andronicus* is literally rendered mute, Shakespeare silences most of his suicidal female characters, leaving the audience to contemplate their motives instead of hearing them directly, as they would from male characters. This lack of information leads to many ambiguities surrounding the deaths of female characters, including the exact reasons for their suicides and even whether some of their deaths were suicides at all.

It has been documented that female characters have significantly less dialogue than males in the plays of Shakespeare and his contemporaries (Mann; Seward). Alan Sinfield has argued that Shakespeare's women, such as Desdemona, are more like pawns portraying different stereotypes than fully realized characters. Silent women whose roles seem to lack continuity are simply a sign that Shakespeare did not write them as complex characters requiring close attention (54, 72-3). While this alarming phenomenon of silenced women occurs throughout many of Shakespeare's plays, examining it seems particularly important when a character commits suicide or has an ambiguous, potentially suicidal, death. The lack of dialogue, especially of soliloquies, which allow characters to disclose their secret thoughts and motivations, is especially concerning when it occurs during the moments before their deaths, leaving the audience to wonder why the characters chose such a drastic measure.

When a character is murdered, he or she has been deprived of autonomy by another, dying at the time and by the method chosen by the assailant. Death by suicide, however, allows a character a final opportunity for self-assertion, especially in a controlling world (Foreman 55). Moreover, suicide was considered a heinous sin by the church and was punished more harshly in England than in any other European country at the time, so it is not something one would do without significant consideration and strong motivations (MacDonald and Murphy 15, 75). The lack of dialogue allowed for female characters seems to support Sinfield's theory and suggests that Shakespeare did not portray these women as developed characters with complex motivations. However, while some female characters, Desdemona in particular, do seem to experience a significant shift in character, silence, and the perceived discontinuities it creates, does not predicate

an absence of character. I believe that Shakespeare purposefully silenced many of his female characters in order to arouse curiosity in his audience, thus drawing their attention closer to the women, instead of suggesting they ignore them. Shakespeare does not limit his women to being merely instruments in the plot; when closely examined, it becomes apparent that the women have simply been placed in subservient positions by male characters and the patriarchal society. Shakespeare wrote the women's roles to attract the attention of an audience primed to ask questions about deaths for which there was little information.

In minimizing the amount of dialogue and freedom of speech of female characters, Shakespeare uses silence as a literary device to subtly draw attention to the ambiguities surrounding their suicidal or potentially suicidal deaths. Once examined, the situations reveal themselves to be significantly more complex than they appear topically, and often illuminate the roles and positions of women in the suppressive Renaissance society. The silence both of the female characters themselves and of those around them suggests simplicity and conceals multifaceted motivations. Upon closer readings, however, it reveals the social constructs that push the characters toward death and which were thought to spur suicide in Renaissance times, as well.

Perhaps even more so than contemporary audiences, Renaissance theatre-goers were predisposed to question the circumstances surrounding potentially suicidal deaths, especially those of young women, like Juliet and Ophelia. As Michael MacDonald and Terence Murphy write in *Sleepless Souls: Suicide in Early Modern England*, youth had the highest rate of suicides amongst the British population; forty-three percent of reported suicides between 1485 and 1714 were committed by people aged 10-24 (251). In the

sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, middle-class English men served on coroners' juries to determine if deaths were suicides. The jurors typically lived in the village of the deceased person and often knew him or her (112). In situations of ambiguous deaths, the men analyzed the corpse, testimonies, and other evidence as well as hypothesized about the mental state and potential motivations the deceased may have had to commit suicide (259). If the deaths were determined to be suicides, property, money, and possessions were turned over to the government as punishment for the criminal felony and corpses were mangled and denied Christian burials. Those who killed themselves while insane did not face punishment (7-16).

The motivations jurors imagined for suicides were based in common problems and values. Their sense of motivations "grew out of a universal recognition of the importance of the nuclear family, of the uncertainties of economic life, of the need to win and keep a good reputation, and of the difficulties in reconciling romantic love and family interests" (259). One man's recorded list of motivations separated catalysts by gender; he wrote that men generally killed themselves over financial loss, while women were typically spurred by "sexual shame, romantic passion, infidelity, and mistreatment by their husbands" (260). The collapse of a marriage through infidelity, death, or abuse was a popularly assumed motivation for suicide (261-2). MacDonald and Murphy further write that poverty was another huge motivation – suicide rates exploded in times of economic downturn (270). Shame was often decided as the principal cause for a suicide. For women, shame was closely linked to "honesty" and sexual behavior (283-5). Thus, it is not surprising that love affairs ending in infidelity, fighting, or unreturned affections were considered another common motivation (291).

English Renaissance society at large minimized female suicides. While men were much more likely to kill themselves with methods such as hanging or shooting, women typically chose drowning or poisoning, so their deaths were more likely to be mistaken for accidents, especially as sudden deaths were assumed accidental until proven otherwise (Anderson 43-4; MacDonald and Murphy 247-8). Juries found males' deaths to be suicides twice as often as women's. Beyond method, there are deeper societal factors that illuminate why women's deaths were not found to be suicides as often as males'. Olive Anderson writes, "it has been argued…that families always have a greater incentive to conceal female suicide; and it is not improbable that in cases of doubt there was often greater readiness to avoid verdicts of suicide on women" (44). If a man committed suicide, the government seized his property. Women, especially those of the lower class, typically had little to no property that could be seized, so their deaths were not reported as fastidiously or examined as closely as men's (MacDonald and Murphy 247-8).

In Shakespeare's plays, the surviving characters' avoidance of speaking about women's ambiguous deaths and their acceptance of the simplest and most superficial explanations regarding them reflects the discomfort with and social stigmas surrounding female suicides during the Renaissance. This discomfort further silences the women, as others speak for them, rather than try to understand their true motivations. While the suicides of males, such as Brutus, Cassius, Antony, and Othello, are often praised, characters seem uncomfortable discussing women's suicides. Male characters are typically very open regarding their motivations for suicide and the other characters and, likely, the audience, respect these motivations. The silence of the surviving characters

suggests that they fear the women's motivations would not be as respectable or socially acceptable. The characters do not seem to wish to discover that the women kill themselves because of oppression condoned and commanded by society. Nevertheless, the characters' discomfort draws careful readers' attention to the women's deaths. Attempting to uncover obscure motivations would feel customary for Renaissance-era viewers who, due to serving on death juries, were encouraged to search for and, to some extent, imagine, what induced people to commit suicide.

For the basis of this discussion, I have chosen to focus on four characters: Juliet of *Romeo and Juliet*, Ophelia from *Hamlet*, Lavinia from *Titus Andronicus*, and Desdemona from *Othello*. I conclude with a brief discussion of Cleopatra of *Antony and Cleopatra*. While Portia of *Julius Caesar*, Lady Macbeth of *Macbeth*, and Goneril of *King Lear* also kill themselves, their deaths have fewer ambiguities for the audience to ponder. Lady Macbeth and Goneril both commit suicide after murdering people; the proximity of their deaths to the crimes strongly suggests that they commit their acts out of guilt. Also, as both characters are cast as villains, the audience is inclined to unsympathetically view their suicides as sinful ends taken by murderers. Portia kills herself in a very stoic fashion after learning that her husband would likely soon be defeated. While some critics see Cleopatra as a stoic as well, the text shows that she has multiple possible motivations and dies in a very dramatic and sensational fashion, not characteristic of the stoics. Juliet, Ophelia, Lavinia, Desdemona, and Cleopatra are protagonists who have pivotal roles within the plots of their respective plays, and cannot be dismissed as villainesses. While the deaths of the women vary significantly, they all display the phenomenon of silence before their deaths.

I

The most famous of Shakespeare's female suicides is Juliet. Superficially, Juliet's suicide seems quite straightforward. She kills herself onstage, so it is clear that her death is, in fact, a suicide. Her reasoning seems straightforward, as well. Critics typically agree that Romeo is fickle and dramatic and chooses to kill himself rashly and easily to avoid living without Juliet. As her death immediately follows the suicide of her husband, some critics have speculated that it must occur for the same reasons. Juliet's silence immediately before her death deprives her of an opportunity to outline the reasons she chooses to die, but her words and actions earlier in the text provide insight into her true motives.

While Shakespeare gives Juliet a much more prominent role in the play than many of his other female leads, her dialogue is cut short at the moment just before her death. In *Tragic Vision in Romeo and Juliet*, James Seward outlines the exact line counts. He writes that, while Romeo speaks 120 lines directly before his death, Juliet dies a mere 50 lines after his suicide, and only 20 lines are spoken while she is awake (199). Fewer than half of those 20 lines are spoken by Juliet herself. In addition, Romeo even leaves a letter for his father explaining the circumstances surrounding his suicide, while Juliet imparts no such postmortem communication. Many critics do not view her lack of speech at the pivotal moments around her death as bizarre or meaningful; instead, they see it either as a sign that she shares Romeo's motivations or that explanations in general are secondary to drama.

Douglass Trevor writes that the play generally ignores motivations: "Shakespeare is less interested in establishing an airtight raison d'être for their deaths than in making

sure they die passionately, with drug overdoses and daggers." Although the motivations, Juliet's in particular, are somewhat subtle, Shakespeare certainly did not sacrifice substance for drama. Some critics do consider motivations important, but believe that little information is needed from Juliet at the time of her death because her motivations for suicide exactly mirror her husband's. Martha Rozett, for instance, writes that Juliet has an abbreviated suicide speech because Shakespeare needed time at the end of the play for explanation (157). Rozett likely feels that a speech matching Romeo's in length would be superfluous as she writes that both characters commit suicide because they believe death is preferable to life without the other (152).

While some critics acknowledge that Romeo and Juliet's motivations for suicide differ, most do not recognize the severity of the deviation. Critics have written that Romeo kills himself because he is overly passionate, generally melancholy, or overwhelmed by guilt, while Juliet kills herself impetuously because of her belief in the wholesomeness of love, to avoid bigamy, or because of her feelings of isolation and abandonment (Deats, "The Conspiracy of Silence" 88; Seward 200; Williamson 129-33). Juliet's suicide, however, is not spurred entirely by love, nor is it a spontaneous act in response to her whirlwind romance and loss; close examination of the text in conjunction with historical records and cultural information reveals other contributing causes and shows many instances where she anticipates her own death, at times by her own hand. Juliet undoubtedly loves Romeo; her practical nature would not have allowed her to enter so quickly into a relationship with him otherwise. Her practicality and foresight suggest she would not commit suicide rashly, so while killing herself to avoid a life without Romeo is likely a motivation for suicide, it is certainly not the only one.

Juliet has few lines after she awakens in the tomb, but they reveal quite a bit about her motivations for suicide, especially when contrasted against Romeo's final soliloquy. In her nine lines after the Friar's departure before she stabs herself, Juliet discusses death, but not hopes of joining Romeo or even despair at his death. While Romeo pines extensively for his deceased wife and praises her enduring beauty, Juliet simply refers to him as "my true love" (5.3.161) as she assesses his method of suicide. Before kissing him for the final time, she says, "I will kiss thy lips./ Haply some poison yet doth hang on them,/ To make me die with a restorative" (5.3.164-5). Her last words are much less romantic than her husband's. Romeo asks:

> Shall I believe
> That unsubstantial death is amorous,
> And that the lean abhorrèd monster keeps
> Thee here in dark to be his paramour?
> For fear of that, I still will stay with thee,
> And never from this palace of dim night
> Depart again. (5.3.102-8)

He explicitly states that he wants to die to be with Juliet, even as their bodies decay. His very last words are a toast to Juliet; he dies upon a kiss: "Here's to my love! O true apothecary,/ Thy drugs are quick. Thus with a kiss I die" (5.3.119-20). Her final words are not of love for her husband, but of appreciation for the knife that will take her life: "Yea, noise? Then I'll be brief. O happy dagger,/ This is thy sheath. There rust and let me die" (5.3.168-9). Her hurried self-stabbing after hearing voices suggests that she is much more concerned about being discovered and potentially stopped from killing herself than she is with joining her dead husband.

Juliet would rather rush into death than face the society that is waiting to condemn her. She resisted when society pushed her toward a more socially appropriate marriage and further withstands pressure from the Friar to hide in a nunnery. She knows what she faces if she stays alive as well as the moral magnitude of committing suicide. Juliet weighs the options, and chooses to defy society a final time through death. Her concise and fairly pragmatic final speech appears even more so as it follows so soon after Romeo's grandiose words. The proximity to Romeo's speech also emphasizes the lack of romantic elements and direct explanation of motivation. This forces the audience to search elsewhere in the play for the factors that push Juliet toward suicide.

Capulet's response to Juliet's refusal of marriage to Paris is disturbing, derisive, and violent. Shakespeare wrote the character exaggerated enough to be shocking, but Capulet's reaction does not diverge significantly from what would be expected from fathers at the time. He threatens violence against Juliet: "My fingers itch" (3.5.165). Lady Capulet even suggests that she would rather Juliet was dead than refuse the match. When she tells Capulet that Juliet has rejected Paris, she says, "I would the fool were married to her grave!" (3.5.141). Capulet considers Juliet's rejection of Paris a grievous act of defiance and presents Juliet with two choices: marriage to his selected spouse or permanent estrangement. He tells Juliet:

> But, an you will not wed, I'll pardon you,
> Graze where you will, you shall not house with me…
> An you be mine, I'll give you to my friend.
> An you be not, hang, beg, starve, die in the streets,
> For, by my soul, I'll ne'er acknowledge thee,
> Nor what is mine shall never do thee good. (3.5.189-96)

Capulet insinuates that, if his daughter remains disobedient, she is less than human. His use of "graze" evokes the idea of a cow on a farm, unsheltered and expendable. He also refers to her as "carrion" (3.5.157), "baggage" (3.5.157), and "a whining mammet" (3.5.186). To Capulet, an insubordinate daughter is mindless, useless, and not deserving of sympathy, support, or the respect of an autonomous person.

While young people, especially of the lower class, sometimes waited to marry and selected matches for themselves based on romantic inclinations, parents of the upper class, chiefly fathers, selected their daughter's mates according to rationality of the match and generally expected the girls to remain uninvolved with the process. Matches made for love could compromise a family's social standing and finances (MacDonald and Murphy 292). Capulet says of his planning, "Day, night, hour, tide, time, work, play,/ Alone, in company, still my care hath been/ To have her matched" (3.5.178-80). Juliet has usurped Capulet's right and duty to arrange his daughter's marriage. Upon hearing that Juliet does not wish to marry Paris, Capulet addresses his wife, excluding Juliet as a participant in the conversation:

> Doth she not give us thanks?
> Is she not proud? Doth she not count her blest,
> Unworthy as she is, that we have wrought
> So worthy a gentleman to be her bridegroom? (3.5.143-6)

Capulet tells her that, not only is she to be submissive to his directives regarding her marriage, but that she is an inferior to her prospective husband. Refusing a chosen match was not even considered an option for women. Capulet tells his daughter, "fettle your fine joints 'gainst Thursday next/ To go with Paris to Saint Peter's Church,/ Or I will drag thee on a hurdle thither" (3.5.154-6). In Renaissance times, fathers were paramount as

disciplinarians within the all-important family structure. They operated with "unquestioned authority to discipline their dependents," but rarely abused their children (MacDonald and Murphy 253). While Capulet's anger at Juliet's disobedience and his threats of disownment were likely typical of a Renaissance father and acceptable to the audience, Shakespeare intensifies Capulet's speech and adds threats of violence that likely would have been disconcerting to the audience and encouraged them to sympathize with Juliet, while drawing attention to the harsh, unfeeling, and tyrannical father figure.

Like Juliet, the audience was sure to have known the social mores prohibiting an upper-class woman from eloping and the consequences she would face if her marriage were discovered. Both propriety and the Church of England strictly forbade elopement, as it suggested that the match was inappropriate for some reason; the Council of Trent outlawed secret marriages (Kemp 21). Unbeknownst to her family, Juliet marries and loses her virginity to Romeo. Although the act occurs within wedlock, the marriage was not appropriate as neither partner received parental permission. Not only is Juliet disobedient, but she behaves highly indecorously. Sexual reputation was incredibly important for women in seventeenth-century England. While men could be judged by their occupations or positions in the public sphere, women did little outside the house so their reputations were limited to their behavior in the private world (MacDonald and Murphy 285). Just as living as the spouse of Romeo would have set her up for social chastisement and ridicule, her life as a widow likely would have been difficult as well.

Widows during the Renaissance lacked social mobility and financial opportunities and often faced poverty and homelessness, so some chose to kill themselves rather than live under such circumstances (Kemp 23; MacDonald and Murphy 264-7). Capulet

himself references this dismal reality when he tells her, “Graze where you will, you shall not house with me…/ An you be not [mine], hang, beg, starve, die in the streets” (3.5.190-4). He predicts that her homelessness will lead to destitution. Juliet, widowed as a young teenager, no longer possesses her purity as a bargaining chip for an advantageous marriage, and so faces condemnation for her sexual transgression. Even Friar Lawrence offers to “dispose of [her]/ Among a sisterhood of holy nuns,” suggesting that she escape society’s harsh criticism (5.3.156-7). Fleeing society or death seem to be her main options; she does not want to act unfaithfully to her husband or sin against the church as a polygamist. The Friar shows his understanding of Juliet’s fear of polygamy when he tells her before giving her the potion that if she would rather kill herself than marry Paris, “Then it is likely thou wilt undertake/ A thing like death to chide away this shame,/ That copest with death himself to ’scape from it” (4.1.73-5). He further says, “This [sleeping potion] shall free thee from this present shame” (4.1.118). The Friar acknowledges both the shame of Juliet’s situation and that she would rather die than perpetuate it by violating her marriage.

Juliet’s situation is even more dismal when considering the importance of family in the Renaissance. MacDonald and Murphy write, “The family defined the individual’s social identity[;]…the person was conceived of in terms of his relationship with others in his family and in his community, rather than as a psychologically unique and independent being…A person without a family was in a sense not a person” (241). Capulet clearly outlines the consequences for disobeying him, so Juliet, a widow, is without a family and an identity in society. When she tries to establish a new family of sorts with Romeo, the Nurse, and the Friar, these characters, too, abandon her physically or in terms of

emotional support. These societal factors, combined with Juliet's utter sense of loneliness and abandonment after her husband is banished incite her to take her own life.

The only characters Juliet regularly interacts with are authoritative figures who push her to follow social conventions instead of making independent choices. This position is especially difficult for her when those closest to her switch their loyalties from supporting Juliet's wishes to urging her to make more socially appropriate decisions. While the play does not suggest that Juliet was ever particularly close with either her father or her mother, Sara Deats is correct that Juliet is certainly abandoned by the only characters she does have relationships with, perhaps, most importantly, the Nurse ("The Conspiracy of Silence" 88). Throughout the play, it is evident that Juliet is very distant from her parents; the Nurse acts as her confidante, caregiver, and authoritative figure. Separated from Romeo and ordered to marry Paris, Juliet depends on the Nurse in an environment that is otherwise cold and uninterested in her feelings, but her only friend echoes the same sentiments as her aloof and inconsiderate parents:

> I think you are happy in this second match,
> For it excels your first. Or if it did not,
> Your first is dead, or 'twere as good he were
> As living here and you no use of him. (3.5.224-27)

While the Nurse may have been Juliet's only true confidante, it becomes apparent that she knows little about the true feelings of the girl she has cared for so long. Alone, Juliet severs her emotional connection from the Nurse: "Go counselor./ Thou and my bosom henceforth shall be twain" (3.5.239-40).

As Juliet later reveals before drinking the Friar's concoction, she doesn't entirely trust the holy man, either; she wonders if the Friar has given her poison to protect himself

(Rozett 157). Juliet, it seems, is prepared for abandonment by all. The Nurse and Friar, whom Juliet thought had her best interests at heart, prove to be pawns of the social system, pushing her toward the most societally appropriate choices. Distrusting those around her and divided from Romeo, Juliet truly feels alone in the world and, when his temporary separation from banishment becomes permanent separation by his death, Juliet feels she has nothing more to live for. Juliet disobeys society's directives by marrying Romeo, and the Nurse and Friar cannot offer her satisfying options for dealing with the consequences; the Nurse, especially, ceases to be supportive of Juliet's transgression. Juliet defies convention much earlier in the play, however, when she merely expresses a desire to marry Romeo.

In Renaissance England, women were not encouraged to voice preference of suitors or even to express a desire for marriage in general. When Lady Capulet asks Juliet if she would like to marry, Juliet properly responds, "It is an honor that I dream not of" (1.3.66). In discussing Paris with her mother, Juliet is careful to appear neither displeased with her parents' choice nor too eager to like him. "I'll look to like if looking liking move," she tells Lady Capulet. "But no more deep will I endart mine eye/ Than your consent gives strength to make it fly" (1.3.97-99). Juliet is clearly not entirely lacking in desire for marriage or intimacy. During the balcony scene, Juliet tells Romeo that if he "purpose marriage…/ all my fortunes at thy foot I'll lay,/ And follow thee my lord throughout the world" (2.2.144-8). When she awaits Romeo to consummate their marriage, she says, "Come, civil night…/ And learn me how to lose a winning match/ Played for a pair of stainless maidenhoods" (3.2.10-3). Juliet is not asexual, but she does not publicly display her desire; she controls herself to conform to Renaissance standards

and only reveals her yearning to the audience. She speaks frankly at this point in the play but does not so bluntly express longing again, even when she is alone with Romeo's body in the moments before her death. Her silence on this topic in her final soliloquy further suggests that her suicide is not a desperate act to rejoin Romeo, but occurs for less romantic reasons.

Not only are Juliet's hesitation and coyness signs that she is knowledgeable of appropriate social protocol, but they are indicative of her practicality regarding romance. Throughout the play, Juliet proves to be a very practically-minded woman; in fact, her sensible nature is strongly contrasted against the dramatic and impulsive Romeo. The consequences for disobeying social protocol were much more severe for a woman than for a man, so Juliet is forced to take greater responsibility for her actions and plan more thoroughly. While Romeo can act impetuously with few considerations to potential negative social consequences, Juliet's father explicitly delineates the repercussions of impropriety. When the audience is first introduced to Romeo, he is consumed with melancholy. When the audience meets Juliet, however, during her discussion with her mother about marrying Paris, the young girl seems very pragmatic and socially-aware, as she is careful not to appear overzealous about the prospect of marriage. She even tries to temper Romeo's eagerness when she meets him. When Romeo speaks of "saints lips," Juliet replies, "Ay, pilgrim, lips that they must use in prayer" (1.5.103-4). Even during the romantic balcony scene, Juliet wants to discuss practicalities:

> How camest thou hither, tell me, and wherefore?
> The orchard walls are high and hard to climb,
> And the place death, considering who thou art,
> If any of my kinsmen find thee here." (2.2.62-5)

She is not swept away by romance, but is interested in discovering the truth behind Romeo's words.

Juliet knows the social requirements of acting coy and seeks to verify his affection while not appearing too easily seduced:

> If thou dost love, pronounce it faithfully.
> Or if thou think'st I am too quickly won,
> I'll frown and be perverse and say thee nay,
> So thou wilt woo; but else, not for the world. (2.2.94-7)

Even after their discussion, she is still wary of the hasty romance. "Although I joy in thee,/ I have no joy of this contract tonight./ It is too rash, too unadvised, too sudden" (2.2.116-8). She even orders Romeo to leave the morning after their wedding to protect him from death. Juliet is a cautious woman, whose obvious knowledge of the rules of decorum shapes her actions; practicality was necessary for adherence to strict social codes. She is so thorough, rational, and deliberate that a spontaneous suicide would seem out of character. She controls her emotions throughout the play and avoids heedless actions, so it is doubtful that Juliet would have done something as drastic as suicide while consumed by passion. It is much more likely that her suicide is the result of a careful contemplation of options.

Juliet's practicality and planning even extend to her death itself; the text shows that she had considered suicide even before she discovered her husband dead in the tomb. When she meets with the Friar, Juliet threatens suicide as a means to escape a second marriage and to convince the Friar to help her. "Be not so long to speak," she tells him. "I long to die/ If what thou speak'st speak not of remedy" (4.1.66-7). These statements seem less like bluffs when one considers that she does indeed go through with them:

> Ere this hand, by thee to Romeo sealed,
> Shall be the label to another deed,
> Or my true heart with treacherous revolt
> Turn to another, this shall slay them both. (4.1.56-9)

Juliet seems to view suicide as a viable option to avoid marrying Paris.

Juliet mentions suicide multiple times before she actually kills herself. She speaks of death after she discovers that Romeo has been banished. To the Nurse, Juliet says, "To speak that word [banished]/ Is father, mother, Tybalt, Romeo, Juliet,/ All slain, all dead" (3.2.122-4). While not explicitly suicidal, Juliet certainly reveals that her thoughts are consumed with death. She later says, "Come, cords, come, Nurse, I'll to my wedding bed,/ And death, not Romeo, take my maidenhead!" (3.2.136-7). A few scenes later, her discussion of death seems more threatening. She tells her family, "Delay this marriage for a month, a week;/ Or, if you do not, make the bridal bed/ In that dim monument where Tybalt lies" (3.5.201-3). As her situation becomes progressively direr, Juliet appears more serious about suicide as an option.

Additional evidence that Juliet's suicide was planned and thoroughly considered is that she makes reference to a knife that she has in her possession. Katherine Duncan-Jones asserts that Juliet likely stabbed herself with her own dagger, not Romeo's. While some later editions have stage directions showing Juliet taking Romeo's dagger, the instructions in the Quartos 1 and 2 and the Folio are more ambiguous and just require that she stab herself (314). Historically, Juliet having her own knife is not implausible; Duncan-Jones writes that it was normal for upper class girls to wear a set of small knives called a housewife (314). Multiple instances in the text support this theory. Before Juliet goes to the Friar for help, she says in solitude, "I'll to the friar to know his remedy./ If all

else fail, myself have power to die" (3.5.241-2). While she could mean internal power, when viewed in context with later statements it seems that she could be referencing the means by which she will kill herself. When she is with the Friar, she says, "If in thy wisdom thou canst give no help,/ Do thou but call my resolution wise,/ And with this knife I'll help it presently" (4.1.52-4). A few lines later Juliet says, "Give me some present counsel, or, behold,/ 'Twixt my extremes and me this bloody knife/ Shall play the umpire" (4.1.61-3). The repetition of "this knife" suggests that she actually has a knife in her possession. Before she drinks the vial, Juliet asks herself, "What if this mixture do not work at all?/ Shall I be married then tomorrow morning?/ No, no. This shall forbid it. Lie thou there" (4.3.21-23). Many editions of the play follow these lines with some variation of "Laying down a dagger." Whether this is because she wore a housewife or typically carried a knife with her or not, it certainly suggests that the "happy dagger" she stabs herself with is her own knife (5.3.168).

Juliet's use of her own dagger as opposed to Romeo's gives her a greater appearance of independence and agency in addition to suggesting that her suicide is not spontaneously conceived of and committed. Duncan-Jones adds, "Though less matronly and articulate than Lucrece, less queenly and auto-erotic than Cleopatra, Juliet, too, may achieve her own dignity and autonomy in death, bringing about her escape with an implement that is domestic rather than military" (315). Having her own weapon gives Juliet control over her life, death, and image (316). Duncan-Jones's interpretation is reasonable – Juliet seems particularly independent and self-sufficient if she determines her own end without having to seek help from her husband. Although she tries to take poison from Romeo's lips, he fails her as he does when he is banished. Juliet finds a way

to accomplish her goal, nonetheless, by relying on herself. Her inconspicuous statement of autonomy is the greatest feature of Juliet's suicide. If Juliet had taken Romeo's dagger or had failed to commit suicide after realizing the poison was gone, she would have shown dependence in her husband, needing his assistance to act upon her intents. Not only does having her own dagger imply that her decision to die is less rash, death is, literally and metaphorically, within her own grasp. In addition, Juliet's use of a dagger, a violent method generally chosen by males, is much more shocking to audiences than death by poison. Her self-stabbing is jarring as it maims her exquisite beauty, and even further detracts from the idea that her death is romantic. Juliet, dissatisfied with society's options for her, embraces her autonomy by ending her life.

II

Ophelia's options are exhausted to an even greater extent and she resorts to suicide less as a display of autonomy than an escape from the oppressive world. While Juliet is deprived of speech to clarify her motivations for dying, her death is obviously a suicide. Ophelia has an even more mysterious end. Not only is she limited in speech by other characters, but they never come to agreement over whether her death is a suicide or an accident caused by her madness. Whereas Juliet disobeys convention and her domineering parents to pursue love, Ophelia suppresses every desire in a futile pursuit of perfect obedience. While female characters in Shakespeare's tragedies often lack autonomy, Ophelia is likely his most passive and most manipulated character. Ophelia is treated as little more than a pawn in her father's schemes, receives directives from her brother, and is taunted and denigrated by her once-suitor. Torn by opposing loyalties and contrasting orders, and discouraged from making sovereign decisions, Ophelia goes

insane. No longer hindered by a desire to uphold her impossibly perfect reputation, she, for the first time, honestly reveals her inner thoughts and conflicts. As a woman, and a crazy woman at that, the other characters ignore her rants and make excuses for her uncharacteristic actions. Alienated from her former world and unable to create one in which she could truly be accepted, Ophelia drowns herself, escaping the people who neither understood her as a person nor wanted her to be one. Although Juliet and Ophelia vary significantly in their adherence, or attempted adherence, to social codes, they meet the same end. Juliet is dissatisfied with the options that society offers her, while Ophelia feels that she has no options – it is impossible for her to placate all the authoritative figures in her life while simultaneously preserving her all-important sexual reputation. Both women commit suicide to escape worlds that have failed them.

Ophelia is described by the nineteenth-century author Abner Kellogg as the Shakespeare character who is the closest to feminine perfection. She does embody many of the characteristics highly valued in women at the time: demureness, obedience, and virginity. After her death, Laertes describes Ophelia as someone “Whose worth…/Stood challenger on mount of all the age/ For her perfections” (4.7.27-9). Ophelia seems unbelievably perfect, impossibly ideal. Ophelia is little more than the shell of a human, within whom the male characters closest to her place their visions of perfection. Struggling to uphold varying expectations from the characters around her, Ophelia is trapped in a situation where she is required to be obedient but finds it impossible to be so, and is pushed to suicide to escape.

Laertes and Polonius are representative of domineering males integral to the traditional Renaissance family. They push Ophelia to uphold the strict standards of

decorum and do not trust her to do so without their constant instruction. Their interactions with Ophelia show the ease with which her father and brother silence her opinions by depriving her of an opportunity to speak and imposing their own directives upon her. To Polonius, Ophelia's worth is limited to the preservation of her virginity and her usefulness in his obsequious pursuit of Claudius's favor. He criticizes Ophelia's behavior in her recent encounters with Hamlet as less than discreet: "You do not understand yourself so clearly/ As it behooves my daughter and your honor" (1.3.96-7). Polonius tells Ophelia that she speaks "like a green girl" and says "I'll teach you" what to think of Hamlet and the apparent "tenders of his affection" (1.3.101-5). Ophelia, in classic acquiescence, replies, "I shall obey, my lord" (1.3.136). Her brother, Laertes, also instructs Ophelia to safeguard her virginity from Hamlet:

> Weigh what loss your honor may sustain
> If with too credent ear you list his songs,
> Or lose your heart, or your chaste treasure open
> To his unmastered importunity.
> Fear it, Ophelia. (1.3.29-33)

Not only does Laertes order his sister to protect her virginity from her suitor's advances, but he tells her to protect it even from herself, directing her to "keep you in the rear of your affection,/ Out of the shot and danger of desire" (1.3.34-5). Her family does not believe that Ophelia possesses the competence to protect her virginity on her own or that she necessarily wants to remain a virgin. Thus, they strip her of choice and deny her a voice. At her funeral, Laertes cries that his sister had an "ingenious sense," but during her life he never wishes her to make use of it (5.1.271).

Not satisfied with merely telling Ophelia what she should think, Laertes informs her of Hamlet's feelings, as well. What Ophelia believed to be true affections, Laertes describes as, "Forward, not permanent, sweet, not lasting,/ The perfume and suppliance of a minute" (1.3.8-9). When Ophelia asks if there is no more to Hamlet's actions, Laertes replies, "Think it no more" (1.3.10). Polonius goes a step further, ordering Ophelia to "lock herself from his resort,/ Admit no messengers, receive no tokens" (2.2.143-4). When Polonius's plan backfires and Hamlet appears to be insane, he blames Ophelia for following his own instructions. After Polonius asks his daughter if she had "given him [Hamlet] any hard words of late," Ophelia replies that she had merely done what he told her to. "That hath made him mad," Polonius replies (2.1.107-10). "I believe," he later says, "The origin and commencement of his grief/ Sprung from neglected love" (3.1.185-6). Polonius expects Ophelia to suppress her feelings and volitions as he alters his plans for her on a seemingly day-to-day basis. He schemes for her to meet Hamlet to discover the source of his madness as well as for her to speak to him at the play so he and the king can spy on them. Polonius uses his daughter as a means to gain access to Hamlet's thoughts, but she is not a traditional spy. Polonius distrusts Ophelia's abilities to analyze her interactions with Hamlet, so he is sure to be present during their conversations to gather his own information. For Polonius, the useful part of Ophelia is not her mind, but her sexuality which allows her access to Hamlet. Polonius seems to try to convince Ophelia to use her sexuality while fearing it, and distrusting her perceptions which have been inadvertently tainted by it.

Hamlet, too, in his feigned insanity, suggests to Polonius that he be even more controlling of Ophelia: "Let her not walk i' th' sun. Conception is a blessing, but, as your

daughter may conceive—Friend, look to ’t” (2.2.185-6). While Polonius likely interprets Hamlet’s warning as a threat against his daughter’s virginity, Hamlet may also be mocking Polonius’s attempts to control his daughter’s thoughts. Hamlet later warns Ophelia, “be thou as chaste as ice, as pure as snow, thou shalt not escape calumny. Get thee to a nunnery, go” (3.1.139-40). Whether he recommends that Ophelia go to a convent or uses the word to mean a brothel, Hamlet implies that her gender decrees that she will always be called a whore. Just as he does when he quips earlier that “virtue cannot so inoculate our old stock but we shall relish of it” (3.1.118-9), Hamlet tells Ophelia that, no matter how she acts, she cannot retain a perfect reputation: “We are arrant knaves, all. Believe none of us” (3.1.130-1). Hamlet disparages the idea of attaining moral perfection and suggests that neither Ophelia nor those ordering her actions are virtuous. He tells Ophelia to not believe others while simultaneously issuing her a command.

Hamlet’s directions are sharply contrasted with his behaviors and words. He alters his attitude freely without concern for the consequences on Ophelia’s mindset and reputation. Ophelia wants to preserve her honor, but she is also obligated to be obedient, especially to her social superior who might also become her husband. In the same discussion, Hamlet tells Ophelia both “I did love you once” and “I loved you not” (3.1.116-20). Hamlet gave her gifts, wrote her letters, and even told Ophelia of his affection, only to retract it. Hamlet accuses Ophelia of making herself another face from the one God has given her, but he has been fickle and contrary of his own accord (3.1.148). Ophelia calls herself “deject and wretched…T’ have seen what I have seen, see what I see!” (3.1.163-9). After Ophelia’s death, Hamlet reveals his genuine feelings for

Ophelia, saying, “I loved Ophelia. Forty thousand brothers/ Could not with all their quantity of love/ Make up my sum” (5.1.292-4). He reserves his true emotions until it is too late to share them with her and toys with her feelings for his own gain during her life. While Polonius alters his instructions for Ophelia and Hamlet transforms his emotions, Ophelia attempts to remain consistent both in her obedience to her father and her affections for Hamlet.

As it is impossible for Ophelia constantly to track and obey her father’s ever-evolving plans while simultaneously adapting to Hamlet’s wavering emotions, in addition to being loyal to her own feelings, Ophelia chooses obedience, a trait intrinsic to her loved ones’ perceptions of her. Rather than have an opinion that could conflict with another’s beliefs, Ophelia opts for silence. When her father questions her about her belief in Hamlet’s affection, Ophelia replies, “I do not know, my lord, what I should think” (1.3.104). After Hamlet appears, crazed, in Ophelia’s room, Polonius asks Ophelia why he was there, to which Ophelia says, “My lord, I do not know” (2.1.85). At the play, Hamlet suggestively jokes with Ophelia. He asks her if she believes he is referring to “country matters,” and she says “I think nothing, my lord” (3.2.123-4). Even her attempts to reply to Hamlet in an inoffensive and passive way backfire; he makes bawdy puns of “nothing,” further supporting his claim that she cannot avoid accusations of sexual indecency.

In this situation, obedience has not been, and cannot be, a viable option, and Ophelia is trapped within an unfixable double bind. She cannot continue to live in a world that unceasingly offers opposing directives; the pressure to obey the other characters individually and the societal pressure to obey in general forces her into a

double bind that destabilizes her emotionally. Lagretta Lenker describes a double bind as a “situation entangling a person in an intense relationship with a significant other who gives contradictory messages whereby fulfilling one violates the other” (97). Throughout the play Ophelia is continually torn between others’ instructions and expectations, especially regarding her sexuality. Rowland Wymer writes that she “becomes paralyzed between childlike innocence and adult sexual knowledge” (35). Trying to obey everyone around her has resulted in a situation where Ophelia is trapped between extremes; those ordering her could not be entirely satisfied with either complete innocence or sexual knowledge and offer no room for compromising. Ophelia’s level of sexual knowledge is debatable, but she faces pressure from other characters to act both seductively and innocently, even, on occasion, at the same time. Polonius directs her to avoid sexual encounters and desires, but uses Ophelia’s sexuality to arrange interactions with Hamlet. Like the character in the song she sings before the court, Ophelia is trapped within the virgin-whore dichotomy. She faces pressures from her family to remain chaste, but is pursued by Hamlet who almost simultaneously tries to seduce her and warn her to remain virginal. No middle ground exists, and living free from male influence seems an impossible goal.

Once Ophelia becomes “distract,” she is no longer able to adhere to society’s strict limitations on her speech and obedience and she becomes freer with her words (4.5.2). She has been denied thought for so long that she seems unable to control it. Her song does not sound like the words of the reserved and complacent maiden the other characters perceive Ophelia to be:

> Young men will do ’t, if they come to ’t.

> By cock, they are to blame.
> Quoth she, 'Before you tumbled me,
> You promised me to wed.' He answers,
> 'So would I ha' done, by yonder sun,
> An thou hadst not come to my bed.' (4.5.61-6)

Ophelia's song shows a contrast between the pressure from the males in her life to remain virginal and the sexual desires of someone else, and, perhaps, herself. Lenker writes, "only in madness can she declare her own sexuality and respond to his sexual overtures in kind" (107). Whether or not Ophelia's rant stems from her own sexual desires or pressures to appear sexually interested, her speech and songs certainly draw attention to her impossible situation. Like the character in the song, Ophelia reveals her understanding of her own powerlessness to control her fate; if she protested her suitor's advances he would ignore her, but having succumbed to them he rebukes her. Rather than simply allowing her to reveal her suppressed sexual desires, Ophelia's insanity exposes her deeper internal conflicts to obey contradictory pressures. Ophelia's inability to comply has destroyed her mental stability, but, instead of exploring this as a potential cause of her insanity, the characters resort to simpler explanations and try to focus blame on more acceptable emotions, such as grief.

One of the more disturbing aspects of Ophelia's "distract" scene is the other characters' reactions toward her, reactions that seem to stem from their discomfort with Ophelia's divergence from the role of a perfectly passive, opinion-less woman. Instead of encouraging this uncharacteristic expression, the other characters continue in their attempts to silence her; they ignore her or rationalize her impassioned outbursts by attributing her disturbances to external causes. The scene opens with Gertrude refusing to meet with Ophelia. Even after the Gentleman tells Gertrude that Ophelia's "mood will

needs be pitied" (4.5.3) she does not agree to see her until Horatio warns Gertrude that Ophelia "may strew/ Dangerous conjectures in ill-breeding minds" (4.5.14-5). Gertrude is not interested in hearing or helping Ophelia until she believes it may directly affect her; Ophelia as an individual is not worthwhile unless she is useful. Even the Gentleman who seems to come on Ophelia's behalf says that she

> Speaks things in doubt
> That carry but half sense. Her speech is nothing,
> Yet the unshaped use of it doth move
> The hearers to collection. (4.5.6-9)

Her words, he concludes, are nonsense that people are trying to interpret based on what they want them to mean. The Gentleman does, however, acknowledge that Ophelia likely has some meaning to convey, although it is hidden beneath her madness. He says that her gestures "would make one think there might be thought,/ Though nothing sure, yet much unhappily" (4.5.12-3). Any sign of thoughts could reveal Ophelia to think independently, a dangerous quality for a woman whom most characters would prefer to remain mindless and obedient.

Ophelia seldom offers her opinions early in the play, but speaks unreservedly to the court after the onset of her insanity. This rare display of openness is not appreciated by the king and queen; they are made uncomfortable by her lack of restraint, ask her to speak more directly, and presumptuously assume the sources of her distress. Even before Ophelia enters, Gertrude does exactly what the Gentleman warned against; she interprets Ophelia's insanity as an ill-omen. "To my sick soul (as sin's true nature is)/ Each toy seems prologue to some great amiss" (4.5.17-8). Gertrude does not take Ophelia's speech seriously, but calls it a "toy," which, in Renaissance times, could mean foolish or

frivolous speech ("Toy"). When Ophelia enters, Gertrude tries to get Ophelia to explain her words and songs. "Alas, sweet lady, what imports this song?" Gertrude asks (4.5.27). "Say you? Nay, pray you, mark," Ophelia responds (4.5.28). After Ophelia sings, Gertrude asks again, "Nay, but, Ophelia—" (4.5.34). Instead of allowing Ophelia simply to express herself, Gertrude demands a straightforward explanation. This seems to place Ophelia in another double bind situation; Gertrude requests logical speech from an obviously disturbed woman, but does not want to hear what Ophelia herself wishes to convey. Gertrude, and the other members of the court, do not want Ophelia to reveal anything that would damage their view of her obedience.

Rather than try to garner a logical response from Ophelia, Claudius and Laertes simply predict the cause of her distress. After Ophelia references the owl as the baker's daughter, Claudius deems it a "Conceit upon her father" (4.5.45). Once she exits, Claudius expounds his theory. "Oh, this is the poison of deep grief. It springs/ All from her father's death, and now behold!" (4.5.76-7). Claudius and Laertes, who blame Polonius's death for Ophelia's insanity, ignore any possibility that her insanity has other causes or that her words have any deeper meaning than expressions of grief. Laertes later asks, "Is 't possible a young maid's wits/ Should be as mortal as an old man's life?" (4.5.159-60). Both men blame Hamlet: in the scene of her burial, Laertes cries out against him, "Fall ten times treble on that cursèd head,/ Whose wicked deed thy most ingenious sense/ Deprived thee of!" (5.1.270-2). Laertes, already furious at Hamlet over his father's death, makes him an easy scapegoat and looks no further for a cause. No one considers that Ophelia's madness and songs may be a reflection of her suppressed sexuality or double-bind regarding it.

The characters do not seem to place much value in Ophelia herself, especially once she has become distract. Instead of fearing that she might be harmful to herself, Claudius only seems to worry that her words will result in negative repercussions for himself. Claudius does not expect Ophelia to act upon her own volition; the epitome of submission, Ophelia has not done so before. When Ophelia leaves, Claudius orders her to be watched closely (4.5.75). While, at first, this command appears to be out of concern for Ophelia, in conjunction with her statement that "My brother shall know if it," it seems that Claudius is worried about Laertes's actions, not Ophelia's (4.5.70). Claudius presumably assumes that the "it" Ophelia mentions is her father's death by Hamlet's hand. Claudius tells Gertrude that Laertes, recently returned from France:

> Wants not buzzers to infect his ear
> With pestilent speeches of his father's death,
> Wherein necessity, of matter beggared,
> Will nothing stick our person to arraign
> In ear and ear. (4.5.90-4)

Claudius is worried that Ophelia's insanity spurred by Polonius's death will incite Laertes to lead a rebellion against him. He does not credit Ophelia's autonomy enough to believe that she could act independently against him or in general. After her second mad scene, it seems that all present in the court agree that Ophelia is insane, but no one follows her or tries to stop her from leaving; Gertrude and Claudius quickly lose interest in Ophelia once Laertes enters with a mutinous crowd. Later, when Hamlet sees the court at Ophelia's funeral, he appears potentially insane and Claudius orders his wife to "set some watch over your son" (5.1.319). Claudius fears Hamlet, but feels no such threats from

Ophelia. In her insane state, perhaps the others feel that they no longer have the same control over Ophelia that they once had and so, no longer useful to them, they ignore her.

Claudius tells Gertrude that Ophelia is “divided from herself and her fair judgment” (4.5.85). Throughout the play, the characters deprive Ophelia of choice and a voice and do not place much worth in her mind even before she becomes insane. Her lost “fair judgment” almost seems to be a euphemism for obedience and passivity; once insane, she is no longer compelled to conceal her feelings and opinions. It is only after Ophelia is distract that Laertes seems to praise her formerly sane mind. He retroactively exalts her “ingenious sense” while devaluing the altered Ophelia. He describes his sister as one “Whose worth, if praises may go back again,/ Stood challenger on mount of all the age/ For her perfections” (4.7.27-9). Neither Laertes nor the other characters ever valued Ophelia’s opinions; he instructed her as to what she should believe. But once her formerly disregarded mind becomes “distract,” it taints his belief in her perfection: Ophelia no longer behaves decorously; she ceases to be the paragon of politeness and subservience that she once was. While she does not mention Ophelia specifically, Sara Eaton writes that the plot of many plays of the early seventeenth century “reveals women’s physicality and shows how they fall from their idealised positions into lustful ones. Only when dead do these heroines recover their original ‘perfect’ and ‘undeformed’ condition in the male characters’ minds” (184-5). Eaton further writes that “the persistent image of an idealised, cold, chaste, often dead, female body is placed in juxtaposition to that same body’s fleshy failures” (185-6). While Ophelia has not necessarily become impure through sexual acts, her song while distract certainly has a sexual theme. In

addition, Ophelia's insanity would likely be enough to taint her perfection in her brother's mind.

The beauty of Ophelia's corpse shows her as the other characters wish to see her: delicate, tranquil, and silently obedient. Ophelia kills herself to escape the impossible pressures placed upon her, but Gertrude paints her death as an accident and imagines Ophelia to be completely passive in her death, rather than disobedient and sinful. In her attempt to withdraw from a world demanding compliancy, Ophelia inadvertently becomes exactly what the other characters desire from her. Now completely devoid of the ability to speak, Ophelia cannot shock the court with her sexually charged words, nor can her undamaged body implicate her death as a suicide. Gertrude's description of Ophelia's drowning shows that she shares the desire to replace the memories of Ophelia's imperfect actions before her death with those of an innocent end.

Even after Ophelia's death, the other characters do not seek to understand her or consider multiple possibilities of how or why her mysterious death occurred. When Gertrude announces Ophelia's death to the court, she describes it as an accident. After climbing a tree, Ophelia fell into the river when a branch broke. Instead of trying to emerge, Ophelia

> Chanted snatches of old tunes
> As one incapable of her own distress,
> Or like a creature native and indued
> Unto that element. (4.7.178-81)

There is no way of knowing if Gertrude witnessed Ophelia's death or merely imagined the series of events, but, either way, her account shifts attention from Ophelia's previous mental state and the content of her final songs to the aesthetics of her death. She does not

discuss the possibility of Ophelia's death being a suicide, potential motivations, or even the madness that may have caused her death; no other character questions her account or probes further into these issues. Gertrude and the other characters ignore Ophelia's state of sanity and degree of choice in her death; the workings of her mind are irrelevant.

Gertrude delineates Ophelia's appearance as she floated and sunk as if it were a poem, not an account of a friend's death. Gertrude says that Ophelia's clothes

> Mermaid-like a while… bore her up…
> Till that her garments, heavy with their drink,
> Pulled the poor wretch from her melodious lay
> To muddy death. (4.7.177-84)

Ophelia's appearance seems paramount in the discussion of her death. Gertrude deprives Ophelia of agency by describing her drowning as a result of the weight of Ophelia's clothes, not of a woman climbing into the river. Samuel Coleridge, too, focuses on her appearance as he describes how she passively sinks into the water. Ophelia "seem[s] like a little projection of land into a lake or stream covered with spray-flowers…[but] becomes a floating Faery Isle, and after a brief vagrancy sinks almost without an eddy" (88). The other characters are satisfied with Gertrude's explanation. Laertes remarks upon his sadness, but then complains that his tears prevent him from discussing more important details of revenge with Claudius: "I have a speech of fire that fain would blaze,/ But that this folly doubts it" (4.7.191-2). The circumstances surrounding her death are completely ignored.

The next scene shows a sharp contrast in others' perceptions of Ophelia's death. Two gravediggers, untainted by the biases of having known Ophelia in life, discuss her drowning. One is quite convinced that she has committed suicide and, thus, should not

receive a Christian burial. The first gravedigger says that Ophelia "willfully seeks her own salvation," giving her much more agency in her death than any of the court (5.1.2). The other protests, not that she has died another way, but that she should be given a Christian burial simply because he has been ordered to do so. He says, "the crowner [coroner] hath sat on her and finds it Christian burial" (5.1.4). The first grave digger replies, "How can that be, unless she drowned herself in her own defense?" (5.1.5). The two continue in a discussion of Ophelia's culpability in her death. Even if the audience was not already questioning the circumstances surrounding Ophelia's drowning, this scene, which strongly resembles an unofficial death jury, would encourage them to examine it beyond Gertrude's depiction.

While the two Gravediggers serve as comic relief and are not portrayed as particularly intelligent, their perceptions of Ophelia's death seem more trustworthy and reliable than those of Gertrude, Laertes, or Claudius. We have never seen these men be possessive, demanding, or dismissive toward Ophelia and their opinions seem to be unclouded by a desire to regard her in a particular way. Even the Priest believes Ophelia committed suicide. "Her death was doubtful," he says, "And, but that great command o'ersways the order,/ She should in ground unsanctified have lodged/ Till the last trumpet" (5.1.250-3). The agreement of these minor characters who have no incentive to believe any particular theory about Ophelia's death suggests that Shakespeare wants the audience to believe them. The contradiction between the gravediggers' and priest's stance on Ophelia's death and that of the court encourages the audience to question why the friends and family of Ophelia do not wish to uncover or accept the likely truth of her suicide.

The method of Ophelia's death does nothing to dispel the theory that it was a suicide. Although drowning was a common accident in Renaissance times, it was also the most popular method for women to commit suicide (Anderson 43; Neely, *Distracted Subjects* 55). "Found drowned" was even a euphemism for a female suicide, but these deaths were difficult to prove conclusively as suicide (Anderson 43-4). In addition, Renaissance theater-goers may have known developing theories about madness, including the idea of "distraction," which often afflicted women (Neely, *Distracted Subjects* 6). This historical context supports the interpretation that Ophelia did indeed commit suicide, not exclusively out of grief over her father's death.

Walter Foreman writes that "Shakespeare's tragic figures, in shaping their ends, are responding to a world they can no longer control" (61). Ophelia's dilemma advances one step further: not only can she not control her world, she is even incapable of fully obeying those who do control it. Whether consciously or unconsciously, Ophelia understands that she can never be truly obedient or truly good in a world that expects, at times, polar actions from her; she feels that her only remaining option is suicide. Although this could appear as a unique act of defiance in a society that deprives her of any autonomy, her suicide is less of a rebellion than an escape from a world with impossible expectations and no consideration of her as a sovereign person. David Leverenz writes, "Ophelia goes mad rather than gets mad. Even in her madness she has no voice of her own, only a discord of other voices and expectations, customs gone awry" (119). She has been oppressed to the extent that she cannot break free. After her death, the characters who ought to have cared the most about her speak only of her appearance as she died and discount the possibility of her suicide. They do not wish for Ophelia's

internal struggles or true feelings to distort their limited and biased views of her as an idyllically obedient woman, nor do they wish to acknowledge what may be the most threatening of all: Ophelia's agency in willingly seeking her own demise. A sinful death would irrevocably taint her image, and thus the court attempts to ignore this possibility completely.

Ophelia doesn't speak of a heavenly afterlife, but merely an end. After she becomes distract, she speaks of someone, presumably Polonius, as being "*dead and gone,/ At his head a grass-green turf,/ At his heels a stone*" (4.5.30-2). She later says "I cannot choose but weep, to think they should lay him i' th' cold ground" (4.5.69-70). Her words do not sound like those of a devout Christian thinking of her father, happy, in the afterlife. For her, death is silence, an end to the pressures, confusion, and guilt. Society has pushed her to embody the ideal woman in all her contradictions, so Ophelia, options exhausted, chooses escape.

III

Like Juliet and Ophelia, Desdemona faces significant pressures from males in her life to be obedient as well as from society to observe certain codes of marriage and propriety. When the audience meets Desdemona, she appears much more courageous and rebellious against her family and society than both Juliet, who elopes but dies, in part, to avoid telling her secret, and Ophelia, who cannot bear to be defiant toward anyone. Her death is even more bizarre than those of the previously discussed women. While, on the surface, it appears to be a simple murder, Desdemona claims responsibility, making her death very ambiguous. Desdemona originally cries, "Oh, falsely, falsely murdered!" after Othello smothers her, as she knows she has done no wrong (5.2.130). When Emilia asks

her who has killed her, however, Desdemona replies, "Nobody. I myself" (5.2.137). A. C. Bradley sees Desdemona's false admission of guilt as "angelic" (163). David Bevington writes that Desdemona's "readiness to take the blame on herself for somehow having driven Othello to impatience…and her attempt to claim responsibility for her own death testify to her astonishing and unassailable goodness" (166). Considering her acceptance of blame as "goodness" simplifies the situation, however. While Desdemona may have claimed culpability in order to protect her husband, *The Book of Common Prayer*'s depiction of marriage as the union of two bodies supports the idea that she is partially at fault for her death. Although Desdemona does not blame herself for Othello's perception of her guilt, her husband, considered a part of herself, killed her in a situation where she predicted she would die and yet remained.

Desdemona's claim of self-murder, however, is limited to a single line; she has no time to justify her assertion before she dies. Her allegation is heard only by Othello and Emilia and is not shared with the other characters who arrive later to examine the scene. With Desdemona dies her belief in her own fault. However convoluted and disturbing audiences, especially modern ones, may find Desdemona's assertion of guilt, its ambiguity and intriguing abruptness encourage further examination into the perhaps equally convoluted Christian doctrine that likely spurred her claim. In the end, Desdemona's death is more like passive Ophelia's than rebellious Juliet's. Rather than directly seeking death to escape an abusive husband and unsympathetic world, she allows her husband to murder her on his terms. Like Ophelia, Desdemona finds it impossible to obey completely while embodying the other aspects of an ideal woman; her obedience is

inherently sinful as she finally submits to the society whose codes she once confidently defied.

The character of Desdemona is introduced along with the knowledge that she has just completed an interracial elopement; her status as a rebel is established at the start. While Desdemona does not reveal her elopement to her father, when it is discovered she defends her choice of husband to Brabantio and the entire Senate. Minutes later, when it is announced that Othello must travel to Cyprus, Desdemona proclaims to the court that she does not wish to remain at home, as the wife of a military leader typically did, but wants to travel to the warzone with her husband. "I did love the Moor to live with him," she tells the court. "If I be left behind…/ The rites for which I love him are bereft me" (1.3.243-52). She speaks frankly, although her words could be interpreted as impudent and sexually forward. After these actions, it would appear that Desdemona's audacity separates her from Juliet and Ophelia, but she soon proves to be another passive heroine. Desdemona transitions from a bold, code-defying daughter to an often submissive wife and friend. While she quickly accepts Cassio's appeal for help and pleads assertively for him without considering any potential consequences to herself, she accepts insults and abuse from Othello and responds with mere confusion. After Othello strikes her, she says, "I have not deserved this" (4.1.189). This response does not seem fitting with the Desdemona first introduced in the play.

Although Desdemona is one of Shakespeare's more outspoken female characters, she is incredibly obedient to her husband. Othello believes otherwise, but the only deception Desdemona ever engaged in was that of her father when she eloped. Since

taking her vows to Othello, she has been faithful and obedient as she explained she would be when she described her transfer of loyalties:

> 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. (1.3.186-91)

Although she defies societal conventions regarding race and marriage, she is obedient to the majority of male characters in the play. She tricks her father only to obey the man she loves and faithfully complies with Othello's directives up through her murder. She refers to herself as being obedient to him, saying, "Be as your fancies teach you;/ Whate'er you be, I am obedient" (3.3.96-7). She also almost obsessively pleas for Cassio after he asks her and trusts Iago's suggestions without question. When Othello strikes Desdemona and calls her "devil" (4.1.86) and "false as hell" (4.2.42), she knows he is unjustly angry, but continues to obey him. (4.1.87). Bradley writes that Desdemona is "helplessly passive," "the sweetest and most pathetic of Shakespeare's women" (179; 203). Stephen Greenblatt, however, finds Desdemona's obedience subversive, her willingness to die "erotic" submission, a "frank acceptance of pleasure and submission to her spouse's pleasure," which supports Othello's perception of her adultery (250). Desdemona's submissiveness can be interpreted both as angelic goodness as well as sinful obedience. Her final words do not suggest that Desdemona perceives her submission as erotic, but she does appear to view herself as somewhat accountable for her death.

Desdemona's shift from self-assertion to passivity is both confusing and alarming; the difficulty in discovering the nature of the "real" Desdemona complicates the

understanding of what pushes her to claim responsibility for her murder and why she appears somewhat willing to be killed. Alan Sinfield writes that there is, in fact, no single, true character of Desdemona; she is simply a pawn in the male characters' story. Citing, "Was this fair paper, this most goodly book,/ Made to write 'whore' upon?" (4.2.73-4), Sinfield argues that the male characters all "write" upon Desdemona: "They take Desdemona as a blank page for the versions of her that they want. She is written into a script that is organized through the perceptions and needs of male dominance in heterosexuality and patriarchal relations" (54). At different parts in the play, Desdemona thus seems to embody different stereotypes or traditional roles of women. At the beginning, she is strong and outspoken like *As You Like It*'s Rosalind, but devolves into a shrew. She finally becomes entirely passive in a typical abused-woman role. Many readers and critics, however, do not notice these incongruities because of an overarching female stereotype – that of the inherent inconstancy of women. Any deviation from docility is both temporary and costly (Sinfield 53, 56). While denying Desdemona a personality is severe, she does exhibit a number of startling inconsistencies. I would argue that, rather than merely embodying a series of stereotypes, Desdemona's stark shift in character draws the audience's attention to her drastically altered level of speech as obedience and docility consume her.

While Othello is clearly at fault for maliciously murdering his wife, Desdemona's final words indicate that she herself believes her death to be at least partially suicidal, as she expects her husband to murder her. The play shows that Desdemona is aware of Othello's anger and suspicion, but she obeys his directives to go to bed and wait for him, making her feel complicit in her death. Although Emilia does not appear to recognize the

same danger, Desdemona senses that something is amiss when Othello tells her to "Get you to bed on th' instant, I will be returned/ Forthwith. Dismiss your attendant there, look 't be done" (4.3.7-8). Desdemona, bewildered by her husband's accusations, anticipates her own death but does nothing to prevent it (Deats, "'Truly, an obedient lady'" 246). Desdemona alludes to her fears when, alone with Emilia, she sings the willow song. "She was in love," Desdemona tells Emilia of her childhood maid:

> And he she loved proved mad
> And did forsake her. She had a song of "Willow,"
> An old thing 'twas, but it expressed her fortune
> And she died singing it. That song tonight
> Will not go from my mind. (4.3.26-30)

She later asks Emilia, "Mine eyes do itch,/ Doth that bode weeping?" (4.3.43-4). She senses that her upcoming interaction with Othello will be a sorrowful one and, yet, she does nothing to save herself from this situation; she purposefully and obediently waits for her violent husband to confront her.

Not only does Desdemona seem to believe she is complicit in her own death because she anticipates and obediently awaits it, but she may feel that she acts as her own murderer via her absolute union with her husband. In Renaissance England, the church taught that marriage united a man and woman not merely symbolically, but literally as they became extensions of each other. For every act done by Othello, Desdemona is a participant of sorts. As is written in the *Book of Common Prayer*, "For this cause shall a man leave father and mother, and shall be joined unto his wife, and they two shall be one flesh" (360). Michael Neill describes the marriage bed as a place of "licensed sexual and social metamorphosis, where the boundaries of self and other, of family allegiance and of

gender, were miraculously abolished as man and wife became 'one flesh'" (327). Each embodied aspects of the other and became an active participant in the other's deeds. Shakespeare also utilizes this philosophy in *Hamlet* when the title character decries the incest committed through the marriage of his mother and uncle. He says, "Father and mother is man and wife, man and wife is one flesh" (4.3.53-4).

Early in the play, Othello tells the Senate that Desdemona said "She wished/ That heaven had made her such a man" (1.3.66-7). While the line can mean that she wishes she were sent a man like that, it can also be interpreted as meaning that she wishes she were such a man. She seems to yearn for an adventurous, masculine side which she finds in Othello. Deats contends that "Desdemona perilously internalizes the total identification between husband and wife intrinsic to the consensual, companionate marriage" ("'Truly, an obedient lady'" 244). The union of the couple as a single unit is so strong that, after Desdemona's death, both parties cease to exist as individuals. Neill writes that Desdemona and Othello are stripped of their identities at the end. As at the opening of the play, Othello is referred to "only as 'the Moor,' and it is as if killing Desdemona had annihilated his sense of self to the point where he must repudiate even his own name" (317). Lodovico, looking upon the scene of bodies, says, "The object poisons sight,/ Let it be hid" (5.2.383-4). He does not perceive the distinct bodies of Othello and Desdemona, but views them as a single "object." No longer people, they are the remains of a former unit of identity. Desdemona's claim of self-murder suggests that she identifies herself as a part of a single self.

When Othello talks "of killing" (5.2.33) the once eloquent Desdemona barely protests. "I hope you will not kill me," she says (5.2.35). When Othello orders her,

"Peace, and be still," she responds, "I will so" (5.2.51-2). She tells him she knows no guilt, but acknowledges her perceived participation in her death when Othello asks her to consider her sins. She tells him that her sins "are loves I bear to you" (5.2.44). This line has been read as an allusion to the sexual aspect of their relationship, as she potentially claims that she is sinful for loving him. The proximity of this concession to her death, however, and her knowledge of Othello's intentions, suggest that she may be referring to suicide instead. Suicide was considered one of the worst sins in the church, and thus she admits her crime – she allows herself to be killed to remain obedient to the husband she loves. With this line, she may also acknowledge her excessive obedience and desire to please Othello; she knows it is wrong to allow herself to die, but cannot bear to disobey him. She refers to him as her "lord" throughout the play, including at the moment of her death. Upon her final breath, Desdemona says, "Commend me to my kind lord" (5.2.138). While "lord" can be used to mean "husband," it takes on an almost blasphemous connotation when it appears in these final words. Her adoration and deference to him has surpassed what is natural or proper and borders on impiety.

The marriage itself defies societal convention. In marrying Othello, "Desdemona steps outside of the prescribed behaviors that define good women. Although the couple enters into what appears to be a companionate marriage, the absence of her father's blessing opens Desdemona to the charges of deceit and infidelity laid generically against her sex" (Kemp 88). No matter how much Desdemona loves Othello, her marriage to him innately opposes Renaissance social convention. In this context, when she says, "That death's unnatural that kills for loving," her words suggest both that it is unnatural for

Othello to murder her for loving him, and that it is unnatural for her to sacrifice herself to him because of her love, although it is her choice to do so.

Desdemona's plea for additional time before Othello smothers her initially seems to contradict her incredible obedience. Desdemona appears to protest, "Oh, banish me, my lord, but kill me not!" (5.2.88). But instead of an entreaty for life, it becomes a negotiation, as she soon just asks for the time to say one prayer. Desdemona who once defended her freedom of choice before her father and the Venetian Senate asks not for forgiveness or even time to discuss Othello's perceived injustices, but simply time to prepare her soul for death.

Desdemona finds herself in a situation where her only options are to disobey her husband or to obey him and allow herself to be killed, which she considers suicide. This is the last of a series of conflicts of obedience that Desdemona faces throughout the play. These specific conflicts are reflective of the larger conflict Desdemona faces, the sexual double bind that many women in her time encountered. As Michael Bristol writes, women were expected to be simultaneously demure, innocent, and desirable; but also sexually compliant and submissive toward their husbands: "What is distinctive about Desdemona is the way she embodies the category of an 'ideal wife' in its full contradictoriness. She has been described as chaste or even as still a virgin and also as sexually aggressive, even though very little unambiguous textual support for either of these readings actually exists" (358).

She does perhaps appear an "ideal wife," but Othello punishes her for it. As Kemp explains, "The juxtaposition between the womanly ideal of passivity and obedience to the patriarchal authority on the one hand, and the ability to actively choose in matters of love

and desire on the other hand, likewise created serious anxiety about the truth of woman's love and her fidelity in marriage" (41). Like Ophelia, Desdemona finds it impossible to embody the innately antithetical qualities of the perfect Renaissance woman. This idealized woman, in all her contradictions, becomes someone Othello can no longer understand or control, so he kills her. Just as Othello kills Desdemona for her attempts to embody both impossible ideals, she allows herself to be murdered as a final act of obedience.

IV

Like Desdemona, Lavinia in *Titus Andronicus* does not directly commit suicide, but, unlike the Christian wife of Othello, Roman Lavinia may have wished to. While the silences of Juliet, Ophelia, and Desdemona are due to a lack of lines and, eventually, death, Lavinia's extends beyond symbolism to a physical inability to talk. Lavinia's desire for death is, like Ophelia's and Desdemona's, unclear; she has a strong potential motivation for suicide but, unlike Juliet, does not physically kill herself, obscuring her degree of autonomy in her death. While Lavinia proves that she still retains the ability to communicate, her use of this skill is limited and her own speech is replaced by that of men in the play.

The circumstances surrounding Lavinia's death in *Titus Andronicus* are perhaps the most bizarre and ambiguous in all of Shakespeare's plays. When viewed in the context of a rape victim in Roman times, Lavinia's death appears to be an assisted suicide of sorts. Following in the tradition of Lucretia, after Lavinia has informed her father of her attackers' identities, she would want to kill herself to end the resulting shame upon herself and her family. The situation is significantly more complicated, however, as

Lavinia does not, in fact, directly kill herself. Lavinia has been left without a tongue or hands, so her physical ability to communicate or commit suicide is questionable. Her father, for reasons left unexplained, stabs her at the end of the play after she has witnessed revenge exacted upon the family that caused her so much harm. Titus's motivation for killing his daughter, as well as Lavinia's own intentions for her future, are left for the audience to ponder. As Lavinia cannot tell her own story, her family describes her situation through stories of classic rape victims, chiefly Lucretia and Philomela. Her family places greater emphasis on the story of Lucretia, but Lavinia herself purposefully selects the story of Philomela for comparison. While, at first, Lucretia's story would seem to present a more positive model, as she is still able to communicate and has a number of people committed to seeking revenge for her, Philomela punishes her attacker directly rather than shifting sovereignty to others; she exhibits much more autonomy than it seems Titus wishes to allow Lavinia.

In both Roman and Shakespearean times, women who were participants in sexual indiscretions, whether willing or forced, were strongly condemned and thought to bring shame to themselves and their families. Ian Donaldson describes this idea as "transferred pollution," the result of a sexual indiscretion of any kind, as there was no distinction between adultery and rape in the sense of infidelity to one's husband (23). Pregnancy through rape would interfere with succession and inheritance, just as adultery would; thus, in Roman law, fathers were allowed to kill their adulterous daughters (Donaldson 23). After her rape, Lavinia is no longer even considered the same person; when Marcus brings her before Titus, he tells him, "This was thy daughter" (3.1.63). The former beloved Lavinia is gone, replaced by a shamed, mangled body. Lavinia's disgrace and

dishonor would have extended to her family; so Titus, head of the Andronicus clan and firm believer in traditional honor, is bound to kill Lavinia not just to preserve her honor, but to secure the reputation of the family. The stories of Virginia and Lucretia support the idea that suicide was the most honorable and moral action for rape victims in ancient Rome.

This view was shared by early Christianity, as seen through St. Jerome, who wrote that suicide was acceptable to avoid or rectify a loss of virginity. St. Augustine, however, made a distinction between adultery and rape and condemned the suicides that often followed (Donaldson 25). While the church forbade suicide, in early modern England suicide was not uncommon following sexual assault. The victims of rape often faced much more severe censure than the perpetrators of the crime. Few rapists were convicted, but bearing a child out of wedlock could be punished by time in prison or whipping in addition to public humiliation (MacDonald and Murphy 256, 285). As in the case of stoicism, although Christian doctrine explicitly prohibited suicide, Renaissance-era audience members shared some of the same philosophies of shame regarding sexual indiscretions, including rape. While they could not morally condone the actions of Lucretia and the other suicidal rape victims, they could likely understand the women's attempt to restore honor and escape shame.

Lucretia can be considered the ideal Roman rape victim: after telling her husband and father what occurred and who committed the crime, she stoically stabs herself, thus abolishing the current shame imposed upon her family and preventing future degradation. Titus's last words before he stabs his daughter echo this philosophy: "Die, die, Lavinia, and thy shame with thee" (5.3.46). Lucretia's husband and father also play their

appropriate roles, exacting revenge upon her attacker, as Lucretia has requested. Direct retaliation by Lucretia was not considered an option; she relied on her family to complete it for her (Donaldson 10). Thus, once Lucretia has transferred the knowledge regarding her rape to her male family members and pleads for revenge, her role is complete and she is able to kill herself, ending her shame knowing that her attacker will be punished on her behalf. Lucretia's story is referenced multiple times in *Titus Andronicus*, but Lavinia is rendered incapable of upholding this tradition of Roman chastity and honor, for death is thrust upon her instead of directly and unequivocally chosen.

In "Lavinia as Coauthor of Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*," Bethany Packard notes that Titus references the *Aeneid* in the beginning of the play and thinks of his daughter as the modern version of Aeneas's wife of the same name. Vergil's Lavinia, who, like Titus's, was the only daughter of nobility, was considered a symbol of purity and the birth of Rome. Packard writes that Titus desires a similar fate for his daughter; she could continue his lineage and return Rome to its former days of glory, but Lavinia spoils his plan when she is raped. His daughter, the very woman he had wished would purify the state, becomes a Lucretia figure when she is defiled and must be purged herself (283). If Lavinia had followed Lucretia's example, she would have told her father what had happened and killed herself immediately afterward. Lavinia's mutilation, however, complicates the situation, as it seems she can neither speak nor hold a weapon.

Reminiscent of Ophelia's silencing by the court, while Lavinia displays her ability to communicate, multiple characters attempt to speak for her, rather than encouraging her own expression. When Marcus first sees his niece after her rape and mutilation, he describes her in a horrifying blazon:

> Alas, a crimson river of warm blood,
> Like to a bubbling fountain stirred with wind,
> Doth rise and fall between thy rosèd lips,
> Coming and going with thy honey breath.
> But, sure, some Tereus hath deflowered thee,
> And, lest thou shouldst detect him, cut thy tongue. (2.4.22-7)

He references the story of Philomela and suggests that she might have been raped, but he does not attempt to elicit confirmation or denial of this assumption. Marcus further silences her by announcing his conjectures of her emotions. "Ah, now thou turnst away thy face for shame!" he speculates (2.4.28). "Shall I speak for thee? Shall I say 'tis so?" Marcus rhetorically asks (2.4.33). As Packard points out, Titus cuts his hand off partially in an effort to understand Lavinia, but, like his other efforts, he proves unsuccessful, as he is no closer to understanding her after his own mutilation (292). Titus later tells Marcus, "I can interpret all her martyred signs./ She say she drinks no other drink but tears,/ Brewed with her sorrow, meshed upon her cheeks" (3.2.36-8). He then tells Lavinia:

> Speechless complainer, I will learn thy thought.
> In thy dumb action will I be as perfect
> As begging hermits in their holy prayers…
> I of these will wrest an alphabet,
> And by still practice learn to know thy meaning. (3.2.39-45)

While at least Titus says he desires to understand her thoughts, he believes himself capable of interpreting them without seeking some more direct way to allow her to communicate. In this way, Titus inadvertently conceals her true emotions by claiming to know them and to speak for her, silencing her further.

The idea that Lavinia is unable to communicate, however, is called into question when she does, in fact, express to her family the details of her attack by improvising a writing system and referencing another famous rape story, that of Philomela. She identifies the crime and her attackers by writing "STRUPRUM. CHIRON. DEMETRIUS" (4.1.78). It seems bizarre that Lavinia does not try to communicate in this or another method before this point in the play. While Marcus suggests the method of writing with a stick in his mouth "without the help of any hand at all," he does not do so until three scenes after he finds Lavinia (4.1.71). It is also particularly interesting that she references Philomela at all since Lavinia is able to write her own story. Lavinia could have continued writing in the sand to delineate her attack, but chose to cite the Greek myth instead. This choice suggests that the story of Philomela, unique among mythical rape victims, holds special significance for Lavinia.

Philomela's story is especially important because, in addition to providing the source for both the attack and revenge, Philomela does not kill herself. Instead of seeking out men to exact revenge for her, Philomela, with her sister's assistance, designs and executes her own retribution. At the conclusion of the tale, she is transformed into a bird and avoids death. When Lavinia does reference Philomela, Titus and Marcus mention other rape stories, and then largely ignore the topic of suicide afterward. Titus references both Lucretia and Virginia, whose father decapitated her to prevent her loss of virginity. He asks Saturninus, "Was it well done of rash Virginius/ To slay his daughter with his own right hand/ Because she was enforced, stained, and deflowered?" (5.3.36-8). Titus redirects the stories to focus on the victim's relative who sought revenge. Marcus, as well, makes a reference to Lucretia: "Lord Junius Brutus sware for Lucrece' rape"

(4.1.91). These stories differ significantly from Philomela's in terms of the victim's amount of power controlling her life and role in getting revenge on the man who harmed or plotted to harm her. While Titus does reference Philomela's story, he ignores Philomela's participation in her own vengeance by imagining himself as the sole vindicator: "For worse than Philomel you used my daughter,/ And worse than Progne I will be revenged" (5.2.195-6).

Chiron and Demetrius attempt to silence Lavinia after their attack but, like Philomela, she discovers a way to communicate and participate in her revenge. Lavinia, however, is silenced again by the men who care for her. While she sought death before her rape, she expresses no desire and makes no attempts to die afterward, even though she proves herself capable of communication and controlling her handless arms. Titus is even silent regarding his perceptions of his daughter's wishes. When he kills her, he says, "Die, die, Lavinia, and thy shame with thee,/ And with thy shame thy father's sorrow die!" (5.3.46-7). He makes no reference to Lavinia herself wishing to die, but kills her to end his own suffering. While perhaps Titus thought Lavinia desired to die, we have seen that neither he nor Marcus show much interest in uncovering Lavinia's thoughts. Marcus devises a writing system for her only after she opens a book to the story of Philomela, sparking their curiosity. This is the single time in the play where Lavinia is encouraged to express herself. Once she does reveal her rape, the men immediately begin to speak of revenge. Even before Lavinia confirms her rape, Marcus says, "Oh, that I knew thy heart, and knew the beast,/ That I might rail at him to ease my mind!" (2.4.34-5). He wishes to punish her attackers to ease his own woes. The men do not question her further or attempt to uncover her feelings. The importance of Lavinia's rape and dishonor seem to

supersede the importance of Lavinia the person. The switch of focus from the victim of the crime to revenge for it seems very similar to the story of Lucretia. Donaldson writes that Brutus used Lucretia's rape as an excuse to seek revenge on Tarquin who killed Brutus's father and brother (9). Revenge for personal reasons became a priority over consideration for the raped woman.

Lavinia's story is unique because she has male figures who are willing to seek revenge for her, but, even in her mangled state, she participates in the revenge itself. Packard writes that the deaths of Lucretia, Virginia, and Philomela symbolize the sacrifices necessary to rid Rome of corrupt leaders and purify the state (283). It is important to note beyond what Packard writes that the main difference between the stories of Lucretia and Virginia as opposed to Philomela and Lavinia is that the prior two stories focus significantly on purifying the state, especially in a political sense, while the latter are primarily tales of revenge that include subplots of state purification. Out of the four stories, *Titus Andronicus* focuses the most on the idea of revenge and the unending cycle and snowballing nature of retribution. As revenge is shown to be of chief import to the characters in the play, Lavinia's choice to identify with Philomela is even more meaningful. Through her selection of story, Lavinia shows that she wishes to join her family in the quest for vindication; for her, partaking directly in the revenge plot is imperative.

To uphold Roman ideals, Lavinia must die to end her family's shame and her rapists must be punished, both of which happen in *Titus Andronicus*. Where the story diverges from the standard, however, is the order in which these things occur. By placing Lavinia's death after the revenge scene, Shakespeare shows that, while honor, chastity,

and extinguishing shame are all very important to the Andronici, revenge takes priority. If Lavinia had communicated to her family what events had occurred merely using the words she wrote in the sand, they likely would have followed the same course of events, but Lavinia's selection of the story of Philomela to help illustrate her situation suggests that she also cared strongly about how the revenge occurred – with her as a participant. After her rape, Lavinia does not shrink from the world as a shamed woman, but wants to seek retribution.

Lavinia's very participation in the revenge shows that her physical abilities have likely been underestimated by the other characters and the audience. Lavinia proves both that she is capable of communicating and using her body, so it would not be a stretch to assume that Lavinia then could have committed suicide or asked to be killed if she thought herself unable. Titus says, "Lavinia 'tween her stumps doth hold/ The basin that receives your guilty blood," proving that she is still capable of utilizing her limbs, as mangled as they are. Before her rape, Lavinia says that she would rather die than be unchaste: "O Tamora,/… with thine own hands kill me in this place!/ For 'tis not life that I have begged so long" (2.3.168-70). She pleads, "Keep me from their worse than killing lust/…Do this, and be a charitable murderer" (2.3.175-178). After her rape, however, it appears that Lavinia no longer desires that fate. Eaton writes that Lavinia would rather die than be seen by her family in her raped and disfigured state, but the text does not seem to entirely support that theory (185). Though silent, she continues to be an active participant in her life. Titus, however, does not accept this as an option for his daughter; a strict believer in the Roman codes of honor, Titus kills Lavinia to complete the symbolic purification and to restore a sense of honor. *Titus Andronicus* suggests that Lavinia does

not desire to follow in the footsteps of Lucretia, but to live. Titus, however, believes Lavinia must die to conclude the cycle of violence and complete the purification of Rome.

The final scene of *Titus Andronicus* shows conclusively how little her family regards Lavinia as an individual following her rape and mutilation. When Tamora asks Titus why he has killed his daughter, he replies, “Not I! ’Twas Chiron and Demetrius./ They ravished her, and cut away her tongue;/ And they, ’twas they, that did her all this wrong” (5.3.56-8). With this statement, Titus denies any personal blame for killing his daughter; he implies that she was murdered by Chiron and Demetrius, not himself. Following this implication, it seems that Titus is suggesting Lavinia has been dead since her attack. While Saturninus and Tamora seem shocked by Titus’s killing of his daughter, the other Andronici do not. After Saturninus kills Titus, Lucius says, “Can the son’s eye behold his father bleed?/ There’s meed for meed, death for a deadly deed!” (5.3.65-6). Lucius’s silence following Lavina’s death suggests that he approves of his father’s action. Lucius and Marcus then kiss Titus’s “pale cold lips” as they mourn him, but Lavinia receives no comparable recognition (5.3.153). Lucius tells his son to grieve for Titus and “Shed yet some small drops from thy tender spring,” but, yet again, he does not reference his dead sister or the sorrow young Lucius should feel for her loss (5.3.167). Young Lucius cries, “O Grandsire, Grandsire! Even with all my heart/ Would I were dead, so you did live again!” (5.3.172-3). The survivors mourn extensively for Titus, but do not even mention Lavinia until the conclusion of the play, when Lucius gives instructions for where Lavinia should be buried. None of the characters questions Titus’s actions in terms of morality or Lavinia’s own wish for death. They also do not openly mourn for her, as

they do for Titus. This is perhaps because they already mourned the loss of Lavinia with the loss of her purity and beauty.

V

Cleopatra is unique among Shakespeare's leading ladies – she is a strong and powerful leader, ignores orders, and uses and enjoys her sexuality rather than suppressing it. She is independent and, unlike all the previously discussed women, has no male relations attempting to assert authority over her. She further defies societal conventions by cohabitating with a married man. Her suicide is equally distinctive. While Shakespeare's other suicidal female characters kill themselves quickly after little public contemplation, Cleopatra discusses her suicide fairly extensively, but also struggles to commit it. Within her dialogue before her suicide, Cleopatra explains that she dreams of being reunited with Antony in the afterlife. No female character from the other plays considered appears to regard joining a loved one after death as a possibility. Cleopatra also has significantly more lines than any of the female characters discussed (Mann 243-4). While Cleopatra as a character and the circumstances surrounding her death seem quite anomalous in comparison to the other Shakespearean women discussed, there is one important commonality: silence.

Although Cleopatra speaks about her suicide in detail, like most of the other suicidal female characters, she never speaks directly to the audience. While other characters are simply deprived of explanation time, Cleopatra's silence is more complicated. Initially it seems that Cleopatra speaks about her death far more extensively than any of the female characters earlier considered, but her discussions of motivations and hopes of an afterlife are tainted both by her history with honesty and the fact that she

is never alone, and thus lacks an opportunity to fully develop through soliloquies. Like Juliet, Ophelia, Desdemona, and Lavinia, Cleopatra is silenced, but her inability to speak openly is disguised. Also as with the other women, Cleopatra's silence serves to conceal the strict social codes that help motivate her to commit suicide.

Antony and Cleopatra paints the female protagonist as a dramatic and theatrical woman who seems to speak freely but often performs to garner a reaction. Early in the play, Cleopatra instructs a servant to find Antony and "If you find him sad,/ Say I am dancing; if in mirth, report/ That I am sudden sick" (1.3.3-5). Cleopatra shows how willing she is to manipulate her words for a response. Although through much of her suicide discussion Cleopatra is only accompanied by her servants, the audience cannot be entirely assured that she is being honest and complete. A very public figure who never speaks alone on the stage, Cleopatra, like Ophelia, Desdemona, and Lavinia, has no soliloquy before her death. Catherine Belsey writes that soliloquies "put before us a single figure revealing, as it seems in private, the most personal, the most intimate thought processes, and… what, above all, the heroes truly *are*. The soliloquies are not designed to impress, persuade, or delude an interlocutor; they simply display a consciousness…at work" (86-7). Cleopatra's life seems to be on display – her relationship with Antony is constantly described and critiqued, Rome's leaders discuss her personal life, and she even dies with an audience.

As with Juliet and Ophelia, after Cleopatra's death, the surviving characters do not extensively discuss her possible motivations or the deeper significance of her death. When Caesar learns that Antony has killed himself, he does not wax upon the method chosen, but mourns his friend:

> Let me lament,
> With tears as sovereign as the blood of hearts…
> That our stars
> Unreconciliable should divide
> Our equalness to this. (5.1.40-8)

He does not show matched veneration for Cleopatra after her death; he belittles her suicide: "Her physician tells me/ She hath pursued conclusions infinite/ Of easy ways to die" (5.2.37-9). Cleopatra attempts to stab herself earlier but is stopped by Proculeius; she resorts to death by asp only after her original plan to die in the method of a classic Roman stoic was thwarted. Caesar appears uncomfortable giving Cleopatra the Egyptian queen equal admiration to Antony the Roman general. Instead, like Ophelia, Cleopatra's femininity is emphasized as the beauty of her corpse is praised. Caesar says, "She looks like sleep,/ As she would catch another Antony/ In her strong toil of grace" (5.2.349-51). Caesar does not herald her for her accomplishments in life or bravery in death, but for her powers of seduction. In *Hamlet*, Gertrude praises Ophelia's beautiful and innocent body after her death, knowing that Ophelia is no longer capable of being disobedient or becoming impure. Like Gertrude, Caesar's fears have subsided with Cleopatra's death. While her corpse retains her sexual allure, Cleopatra's powers of seduction are no longer threatening as a destabilizing force once she is dead.

Cleopatra's discussion of an afterlife, a consideration unique to her, is especially interesting because she is a pre-Christian character. While Juliet, Ophelia, and Desdemona live and die in a Christian era, Cleopatra is a classical Egyptian whose moral codes are not necessarily identical to those of Christianity. She asks: "Then is it sin/ To rush into the secret house of death/ Ere death dare come to us?" (4.15.83-5). Her wording

here is intriguing because, although Cleopatra predates Christianity, she uses the word "sin," as if she could still be judged by that moral code. She dismisses the idea almost as quickly as she conceives of it. Cleopatra appears to acknowledge that some view suicide as a sin, but she is not a member of that culture. She later says, "Let's do't after the high Roman fashion/ And make death proud to take us" (4.15.90-1). Unlike Christian characters, Cleopatra does not appear to think her suicide would be a sin, but merely an emulation of a valiant Roman conquering the self. Antony tells her, "Not Caesar's valor hath o'erthrown Antony,/ But Antony's hath triumphed on itself." She replies, "it should be, that none but Antony/ Should conquer Antony, but woe 'tis so!" (4.15.14-7).

Her actual suicide, however, does not exactly mimic the classic death of a Roman; Cleopatra's use of an asp as her weapon certainly distinguishes her as an Egyptian, as do her final words. She silences Charmian, saying, "Dost thou not see my baby at my breast,/ That sucks the nurse asleep?" (5.2.312-3). Her words are maternal, yet sensual. Cleopatra has the ability to combine Roman, Egyptian, and personal elements into a unique suicide that is very much her own. In the play, Egypt seems foreign and permissive when contrasted against conservative Rome, which, in many ways, parallels Renaissance-era England. Cleopatra is the only character I discuss in this thesis who lives in a realm that does not ascribe to Renaissance-era England's strict standards of morality for women. Her separation from restrictive social codes allows her to embody the aspects of stoics that she admires as well as a sexually confident woman. Unlike Juliet, Ophelia, Desdemona, and Lavinia, who face chastisement from strict sexual codes, Cleopatra seems free to act independently, unconstrained by reputation, more like a man in Renaissance England than a woman. She is only punished for her actions and resulting

reputation when Rome comes to Egypt, bringing its values and misogyny. Cleopatra escapes Rome's influence not only through her suicide itself, but in her idea of an afterlife where, unlike the other women, she imagines a world where she can live happily with her lover, free from dogmatic conventions.

Cleopatra's exact motivations for her suicide are difficult to discern, but, as is the case for other Shakespearean women, they reflect her relationship with men in the play: Antony and Caesar. While Cleopatra's faked death seems to cast some doubt that her love for Antony was her main motivation for her death, it was a supporting motivator for her actual suicide. For her false suicide, she orders her servant Mardian to tell Antony:

> The last she spake
> Was "Antony, most noble Antony!"
> Then in the midst a tearing groan did break
> The name of Antony. (4.14.29-32)

Cleopatra toys with Antony's emotions to elicit a response as his anger toward her is not enough for her to actually kill herself, but after his death she often speaks of joining him. Cleopatra tells Dolabella that she "dreamt there was an emperor Antony./ Oh, such another sleep, that I might see/ But such another man!" (5.2.76-8). As she continues, it seems as if she considers meeting him again less of a passing dream, and more of a true possibility. "Show me, my women, like a queen," she instructs her attendants. "Go fetch/ My best attires. I am again for Cydnus,/ To meet Mark Antony" (5.2.227-9). In her last speech before she dies, Cleopatra says:

> I have
> Immortal longings in me…
> Methinks I hear
> Antony call. I see him rouse himself

> To praise my noble act, I hear him mock
> The luck of Caesar…
> Husband, I come!
> Now to that name my courage prove my title! (5.2.283-91)

Even with these words, some of her last before her death, Cleopatra's honesty is unclear. When she talks earlier with Dolabella, it is possible that she speaks to gain his sympathy in order to extract information. In her speech just before her death, besides those around her, Cleopatra seems to view Antony himself as a spectator of her act. In addition to her desire for a romantic reunion after death, Cleopatra says that she imagines Antony to be pleased that her suicide is depriving Caesar of an Egyptian trophy.

One strong possible motive for Cleopatra's suicide is the prospect of humiliation and degradation if she is captured by Caesar. A proud, vain, and independent woman, Cleopatra understands what captivity and life in Rome would hold for her. Her power as a military leader is one of the many aspects that seems to separate her from Roman women. She is also sexually liberated and does not seem ashamed to live with an adulterer. In the play, Cleopatra seems to represent the entire country of Egypt, an otherworldly, exotic place that values love above politics. Antony and Caesar even refer to her on occasion as "Egypt" (4.15.41, 5.2.115). While Cleopatra's qualities and actions are acceptable in Egypt, they are used as ammunition in Rome. Cleopatra's foreignness is alluring to the Romans, where she is known for her beauty, but once Antony becomes seriously involved with her, she is attacked via her sexuality.

While, at first, Cleopatra seems to live in an isolated world where she can act as she chooses without concern for her sexual reputation, Shakespeare shows that even she cannot avoid judgment. In Egypt, separated from Rome's scrutiny, Cleopatra does not

need to worry about the repercussions of her reputation, or even that she has a reputation. Once Rome feels threatened by her sexuality, however, it demeans her through its puritan codes of propriety. Although Cleopatra is an independent, authoritative leader of a nation, Rome does not fear her military, but her sexual power. Caesar tells Lepidus that Antony

> Fishes, drinks, and wastes
> The lamps of night in revel, is not more manlike
> Than Cleopatra, nor the Queen of Ptolemy
> More womanly than he. (1.4.7)

Philo says of Antony, “The triple pillar of the world [is] transformed/ Into a strumpet’s fool” (1.1.12-3). Many of the Romans believe, and correctly so, that Antony is ignoring his duty in exchange for his romantic relationship and is destabilizing the triumvirate. Caesar and Pompey cite Cleopatra’s enchantment for the approaching civil war and potential collapse of the empire (Singh 422). Antony tells Cleopatra, “Let Rome in Tiber melt, and the wide arch of the ranged empire fall!” (1.1.33-4). He is willing to forsake his obligations and his country for Cleopatra.

However, rather than hold Antony accountable for his actions, many of the Romans portray him as the victim. Antony, like his compatriots, places the blame for his political neglect upon Cleopatra; he says, “These strong Egyptian fetters I must break,/ Or lose myself in dotage” (1.2.120-1). Antony even places fault for his military deficits on Cleopatra’s sexuality (3.11.65-8). As Neely writes, Cleopatra’s political power and dominance in her relationship with Antony wanes as Antony humiliates her and forces her into submission (*Broken Nuptials* 147). The males seem threatened by Cleopatra’s power to affect politics through seduction. Enobarbus says that Cleopatra “pursed up his [Antony’s] heart, upon the river of Cydnus” (2.2.191-2). Even before Antony, Cleopatra

was known in Rome for having entranced another great leader. Agrippa says that "She made great [Julius] Caesar lay his sword to bed./ He plowed her, and she cropped" (2.2.232-3). Threatened by Cleopatra's power over men, the Romans degrade her and attack her character in the realm where Renaissance-era women were supremely vulnerable.

In conservative Rome, Cleopatra is infamous for her perceived sexual impropriety. Early in the play, Antony angrily orders a messenger, "Name Cleopatra as she is called in Rome" (1.2.106). While Cleopatra's actions suggest that, unlike Ophelia, she is not concerned with her reputation, her sexuality can still be used against her. Cleopatra's notoriety in Rome supports her assumption that, despite his promises of kindness, Caesar plans to display her as a spoil of war. Neely writes that Cleopatra's worst fear is not that Caesar will imprison her, but that she will be degraded as a sex object (*Broken Nuptials* 159). Antony angrily predicts her future, telling her Caesar will take her "And hoist thee up to the shouting plebeians!/ Follow his chariot, like the greatest spot/ Of all thy sex" (4.12.33-6). Cleopatra knows that Caesar does not respect her as a queen, but thinks her a whore, fit to be paraded through the streets of Rome.

Cleopatra explains that she will turn to suicide before being taken captive, saying, "Not th' imperious show/ Of the full-fortuned Caesar ever shall/ Be brooched with me" (4.15.23-5). After Proculeius steals away her dagger, she tells him:

> This mortal house I'll ruin,
> Do Caesar what he can. Know, sir, that I
> Will not wait pinioned at your master's court…
> Rather a ditch in Egypt
> Be gentle grave unto me. (5.2.50-6)

Not only is her freeing or conquering her soul a consideration, but she wishes to destroy her body so it cannot be used by Caesar. Cleopatra identifies death as a safe-haven of sorts, saying, “If knife, drugs, serpents, have/ Edge, sting, or operation, I am safe” (4.15.25-6). She tells her servants, “We have no friend/ But resolution, and the briefest end” (4.15.93-4). For Cleopatra, suicide allows her to evade Rome’s continued influence and degradation.

Although Caesar tries to stop her through Proculeius, Cleopatra still kills herself in the method of her choosing and in a quite dramatic fashion. She says of the man who brings her the asps, “He brings me liberty” (5.2.237). Through her death, Cleopatra escapes the threats of Caesar and Rome’s judgmental social codes. As Caesar says, Cleopatra “took her own way,” embracing her Egyptian culture and propensity for melodrama. While, like Ophelia, Cleopatra sees death as an escape, her suicide echoes Juliet’s assertion of autonomy. Traditional, Renaissance-era English society, embodied in Caesar, wants to punish her for her sexual freedom, but Cleopatra chooses death and the possibility of a reunion with her lover in the afterlife.

While, initially, Cleopatra’s political power, sexual freedom, and large amount of dialogue seem to set her apart from Shakespeare’s other suicidal women, she encounters the same struggles. As with the other women, Cleopatra’s silence somewhat conceals her motivations for committing suicide and the issues that push her toward death. Her silence, however, is more complex than that of the other characters discussed. While the other women have few lines and are relatively private with their emotions; Cleopatra speaks often, but the audience can never be sure when she is being honest. Her amount of speech does not necessarily make her beliefs easier to discern, as her theatrics merely

force the audience to speculate which claims are truthful. Shakespeare examines this problem of always having an audience by never showing Cleopatra alone and portraying her like an actress, performing for those with her. By showing others around her, especially those who openly criticize her, Shakespeare reflects how an audience always judges characters based on their own value systems. Although Cleopatra herself does not always seem to mind having an audience, this situation makes it difficult for the actual spectators to distinguish truth from embellishment as well as reminds them of their own inherent prejudices. Cleopatra's complicated silence is frustrating for audiences who desire a simple explanation for her suicide and forces them to explore her death more closely, perhaps even more intently than the deaths of the other women discussed.

Like Juliet, Cleopatra chooses to disobey strict social conventions for relationships, but in an even bolder way. She does not seem to face condemnation from the liberal Egyptian society, however, but Rome, representing attitudes towards women typical of Renaissance England, judges her as they would one of their own women and blames Antony's ineptitude upon her supposed seductiveness. Like the other women, Cleopatra cannot avoid condemnation. As she is judged by Renaissance-era social codes, but does not herself subscribe to them, Cleopatra has the unique freedom to imagine a world without these rules, where she can, again, live free from degradation. *Antony and Cleopatra* was the last of the plays I discuss to be written. With the character of Cleopatra, Shakespeare seems to progress from his earlier portrayals of silenced women who test social boundaries to a woman who completely defies them. The previous women had limited stage time and little dialogue, but even their silences could draw audience sympathy and curiosity. Shakespeare tried something new with Cleopatra: he portrays a

woman who altogether disregards Renaissance-era precepts of sexual propriety but who is still engrossing and difficult to disregard as a reprehensible villain. Cleopatra's complex silence allows her a large stage presence in which the audience can grow to like and even respect her. Even more so than with the other women I discuss, the character of Cleopatra forces audiences to question their own strict moral judgments of women who commit suicide.

While Renaissance-era English theatre-goers knew that suicide was a felony and a heinous sin, Shakespeare's portrayals of suicidal women encourage sympathy and a closer consideration into the circumstances surrounding the characters' deaths. Through the characters' silence, Shakespeare urged an audience already inclined to question deaths to search for answers. Although death juries forced English citizens to definitively classify a death as an accident or a suicide, thus allowing individuals to decide whether a person's death was innocent or inherently sinful, Shakespeare blurs the line between "good" and "bad" deaths. He replicates the tension between the desire to understand an ambiguous death and the discomfort surrounding women's suicides, and does not allow audience members to easily make definitive judgments about the characters. Shakespeare gives the audience enough information to question the simplest explanations of the women's deaths as well as making the characters emotionally compelling so they could not be easily discounted as "bad" women. By promoting this exploration into the women's silent and ambiguous deaths, Shakespeare incited audience members to recognize accepted beliefs and social codes in their own society that pushed women to suicide. Careful not to blatantly address the issues in an aggressive manner, through his

silent women, Shakespeare allowed audience members to discover the inherent misogyny in their social system.

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