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ABSTRACT

An informal survey revealed that graduate students presented with Shakespeare's works felt academically unfit and powerless. These student-teacher-text power relationships parallel the power relationships between the dominant patriarchy and the female characters in "Othello"--Desdemona, Emilia, and Bianca. However, "Antony and Cleopatra" presents an alternative model of distributing power that teachers and students might find instructive. In "Othello," the female characters are ultimately ineffective in changing the power relationship between the dominant culture and themselves. Desdemona's virtue, faithfulness, and simplicity make her an ideal in the patriarch's private world of women, yet she cannot hold her own in the world of men. Of all the characters, Emilia shows the greatest change as she moves from "tolerating men's fantasies to exploding them and from prudent acceptance to courageous repudiation." Bianca threatens the male order with her sexuality and straight speech, but she remains a marginalized figure on the fringes of the patriarchy. In "Antony and Cleopatra," however, Shakespeare offers the most hope of building a marginal voice that is strong enough to speak against and outside the dominant discourse. Both main characters contribute to the creation of this new order. Antony's acceptance of mutuality over dominance in love (the latter being the norm) might serve as a model for a pedagogy in which power does not reside solely in the inner circle of text and teacher, nor completely in the margins with the students who feel intimidated by both teacher and text. (SAM)

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Kimberly Lynch

Power, Patriarchy, and Punishment in Shakespeare's *Othello*

In a survey of graduate students in an advanced Shakespeare course, I was struck by the irony of Shakespeare's power. Not in the Romantic sense--the power of his words to open eyes and minds; but instead the power of this writer and his works to intimidate students of all levels. Survey responses indicated anxiety about "lack of experience," "being exposed as ignorant," "being way in over my head," "having nothing to say." As graduate students presented with Shakespeare and his works, we felt academically unfit and powerless.

In "Power, Patriarchy, and Punishment," I want to draw parallels between the student-teacher-text power relationships and the power relationships between the dominant patriarchy and the female characters Desdemona-Emilia-Bianca in *Othello*. Then I want to look briefly at a Shakespearean couple outside *Othello* (Anthony/Cleopatra) as an attempt at alternative model for distributing power—one he suggests in texts (and which ultimately fails) and one we can adopt as readers or teachers of Shakespeare.

Power and the Dominant Culture

How is a woman, according to the painful elaborations of Julia Kristeva and others, to avoid the Scylla of silence or madness and the Charybdis of alienated masculine discourse?

(Gohlke 166)

Is it possible to not only speak against, but outside a phallogentric, patriarchal structure? For as long as the oppressed have been struggling for power, there have been two primary ways to dismantle the dominant culture, both of which can be equally impotent. The first is to adopt the dominant culture (putting all demolition on hold) and enter the center of it to start a revolt from within. Audre Lord calls this using the master's tools to dismantle the master's house.

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The second way is to completely reject the dominant culture, to stay outside it and build up "marginal" allegiance that grows strong enough to overthrow the current, dominant culture. While both of these options can create a new power, both also have the potential to reinforce the power that exists. A co-opted usurper can become too comfortable within the inner circle and fail to overthrow it; a border allegiance can invest great energy into screams and protests that are never heard because the margins are too wide and far apart.

Then of course, there is the role of punishment, an important piece that can't be left out of the power puzzle. Even sympathetic cultures don't take kindly to threats from within or without. Shakespeare makes full use of intratextual powers of punishment. His punishment of female characters sends mixed messages to readers who dare to listen to his ambiguously weaved signals. While he sketches characters who seem capable of deconstructing the culture, he simultaneously deconstructs them himself by inflicting punishment in the form of madness, disgrace, death, or all of the above.

So on to the characters.

Desdemona/Emilia/Bianca

In *Othello*, female characters are ultimately ineffective in changing the power relationship between the dominant culture and themselves, but the strata is complex. While Desdemona is inside the inner circle and Bianca is outside it, Emilia seems to move in spheres connected to both.

Throughout much of the play, Desdemona is a woman firmly in control. She is sexual and assertive without carrying the baggage of madness. Mary Beth Rose calls Desdemona a "soldier-spouse," because she adopts the language of an epic quest. In her encounter with the senate, she not only uses the master's words, but

his tools of persuasion as well. Inductively and diplomatically, Desdemona builds a case for matrimonial loyalty superseding paternal loyalty. Skillfully she constructs a **logical** (therefore masculine) rhetoric that Brabantio cannot deny: "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" (1.3.184-187). Othello, himself, corroborates the image of Desdemona as a woman using the master's tools of discourse to woo him and to encourage him to woo her ("She gave me for my pains a world of kisses/upon this hint I spake").

For the reader, Desdemona is almost too good to be entirely believable. Her virtue, faithfulness, and simplicity make her an ideal in the patriarch's private world of women, yet she can hold her own in the public world of men. Since Shakespeare paints Desdemona as clearly more than a stereotype, the reader sees Desdemona, while Othello increasingly sees only Iago's Desdemona, which is a snapshot of infidelity, a potential castrator, a threat to male patriarchy. When Othello accepts Desdemona as stereotype rather than individual, her behavior that was once laudable, now stacks the deck against her. Rose says, "Desdemona's loyalty, liveliness, and self-assertion take a bitterly ironic and self-defeating form after her marriage, when she focuses on pleading for Cassio, her suspected partner in adultery" (149).

In terms of power, Desdemona has the tools to speak against the inner circle. In fact, she overtly questions the military structure which makes Othello remove Cassio as his lieutenant. By this stage in the play, however, it's clear that Othello and Desdemona are talking at cross purposes. The opportunity to realign their power differential is lost. Each has an agenda (she to reinstate Cassio; he to ferret truth about her handkerchief and therefore her fidelity) which blocks any connection, even when Desdemona's poetic line takes up where Othello's left off:

OTH: Fetch me the handkerchief! My mind misgives.
DES: Come, come!
You'll never meet a more sufficient man--
OTH: The handkerchief!
DES: A man that all his time
Hath founded his good fortunes on your love,
Shared dangers with you--
OTH: The handkerchief!
(3.4.89-95)

Desdemona starts the play enchanting the ear of the patriarch (wooing Othello, persuading the senate), and she seems to have the assertiveness to challenge that system. Iago recognizes the threat of a sane, assertive woman in the circle of war/military/power. Since he can't drive her mad or silence her, his only recourse is to garble the discourse that keeps Othello and Desdemona together.

The couple's relationship was born from words: "She'd come again, and with a greedy ear/ Devour up my discourse" (1.3.148-9). So Iago can sever it with words. First, by planting seeds of false discourse, and then by covertly directing their conversation in opposing missives, as the extended dialogue above illustrates. Iago orchestrated Othello's obsession with the handkerchief and he also orchestrated Desdemona's plea for Cassio. After disconnecting their discourse so fully, it's not surprising that Othello first resorts to physical violence, and carries out murder almost *before* Desdemona even knows her alleged crime. The *manner* of her death is no accident. It is a fitting end.

Eamon Grennan says, "As Desdemona argues passionately for the life of her body, it is the argument (speech) itself that Othello smothers, taking away her life. Loss of speech, in her for whom it was the exact embodiment of self, is loss of life" (289). Her punishment matches the crime, the challenge to power and patriarchy.

Desdemona's death moves Emilia into the inner circle, momentarily, to speak for her. Even when Othello warns her, with threatening words and sword, to be

silent, she continues: "Thou hast not half that pow'r to do me harm./ As I have to be hurt. O gull! O dolt!/ As ignorant as dirt! Thou hast done a deed--/ I care not for they sword; I'll make thee known,/..." (5.2.163-65). And to Iago who also tries to silence her: "I will not charm my tongue; I am bound to speak:/ My mistress here lies murdered in her bed" (5.2.184-85).

It takes Desdemona's polar character, Bianca, to show most clearly why Emilia is the perfect understudy, taking over Desdemona's leading role in her brief attempt to dismantle the patriarch. Bianca offers a strong voice from the margins, but hers is a voice seldom heard through the background noise of "whore," "strumpet" that surrounds her. As a point of comparison between words (debasing names) and actions (loving concern), Bianca "brings into sharper focus the moral deficiencies of the world that would condemn her" (Grennan 283). While Desdemona speaks against the order from within, Bianca speaks against it from without.

Both sides of resistance tug at Emilia. She has embraced just enough of the patriarchal order to reject the outer most margins represented by Bianca; this is most obvious when Emilia adopts the language of the dominant to berate her. She says, "Oh fie upon thee, strumpet!" (5.1.122), colloquial language not all that different from Iago's address "O notable strumpet!" (5.1.78) a few lines before. But from Emilia who walks the margins rather than being inside or outside of them, Bianca rejects the word and the title: "I am no strumpet, but of life as honest/as you that thus abuse me" (5.1.123-24).

Bianca's sexuality and straight speech threaten the male order and therefore threaten Emilia when she is most appropriated by that order. In her position between lady and whore, inner circle and outer margin, Emilia does much of the play's dirty work. Her culturally mandated obedience to her husband makes her a chief agent of Iago's plot; her growing allegiance to Desdemona disrupts his plot,

even though that disruption is too late and short. Of all the characters, Emilia shows the greatest change, moving "from tolerating men's fantasies to exploding them and from prudent acceptance to courageous repudiation. She ceases to function as the reconciler of the views of the men and women, and the separations between them becomes absolute" (Neely 234).

Although Bianca, Emilia, and Desdemona do not dismantle the patriarchal structure, their work from inside and outside does at least threaten to put a chink its armor. Still, the call is not for a victory of the dominant or the oppressed, but perhaps a union of the two. For Shakespeare in the classroom I'm suggesting a union of the inner circle of power (the text and the knowing teacher) and the outer margins (students intimidated by the power). I want to look at two of Shakespeare's couples for attempts at this union--attempts that fail, however, because the union takes place within the dominant circle or completely outside it, reinscribing some of the same futile patterns of protest.

Couples caught in Power, Patriarchy, and Punishment

In "Shakespeare's Inscriptions: the Voicing of Power," Jonathan Goldberg questions the simple masculine/feminine dichotomies in relation to power. In particular, he questions inscribed assumptions that men are always on the inside and that women are always "other." Goldberg claims that "power entails a disturbing heterogeneity, owned by no one voice" (135). It is from this premise that I move from the inner and outer circles of power voiced by female characters to the voice of a tragic couple outside the circle of power. In particular, Antony and Cleopatra, who show mutuality and balance in their textual voicing, in their shared textual power.

Each character begins the play inside and isolated within a warring inner

circle that their existence as a couple critiques. Antony is within Rome; Cleopatra, Egypt. Shakespeare gives this couple the opportunity to build up marginal allegiance, to create a new empowered culture outside the dominant culture. But ultimately they fail. Some critics claim victory in their deaths, a transcendence or apotheosis that defeats the competitive cultures they leave behind, but evidence supports an opposite conclusion. In many ways the dominant cultures are stronger after the couples exit; Caesar is sole ruler of the world.

To underline my reasons for looking at this couple, rather than simply the female character, Cleopatra, it's important to note that Antony perceives himself as feminized by his lover.

Antony

You did know/ How much you were my conqueror, and that/My sword, made weak by my affection, would/ Obey it on all cause. (3.11.65-68).

For Antony this is a struggle to accept mutuality over dominance in love, the latter being the norm. In the character of Mark Antony, there is movement toward acceptance after his initial aversion to anything less than complete male dominance. Early in the play he understands the risk: "These strong Egyptian fetters I must break/ Or lose myself in the dotage" (1.2.117-18).

Antony and Cleopatra

In *Antony and Cleopatra*, Shakespeare offers the most hope of building a marginal voice that is strong enough to speak against and outside the dominant discourse. It is the most hopeful because both main characters contribute to the creation of this new order. Early in the play, Antony makes claim for this new, shared power: "The nobleness of life/ Is to do thus; when such a mutual pair/ And such a twain can do't, in which I bind,/ On pain of punishment, the world to weet/

We stand up peerless" (1.1.36-39). From the beginning, Antony views Cleopatra and himself as superior beings, but it takes the winding course of the play, and treks between Rome and Egypt before he understands their superiority in non-patriarchal, non-Roman terms.

If, up to this point in my discussion, I can loosely translate women inside the dominant culture as "ideal," good women, and women outside the locus of power as strumpets, madwomen, bad women, then Cleopatra seems to define her own space on the margins of power. Antony, too, is not solely a warrior, nor completely a lover. His military conquests can't be erased, but "Antony's identification with maternal bounty gives his masculinity its liberatory, subversive quality" (Erickson 134). Erickson claims, "their love involves a collaboration to which Antony contributes a new male identity, the counterpart to Cleopatra's exceptional female identity" (129).

Unfortunately, these new identities which begin as an experiment, end in failure. Antony and Cleopatra leave Rome and attempt to fashion a world in Egypt, a scary, messy world that they have not the tools to completely construct nor to maintain a non-patriarchal way. Ultimately, of course, Antony and Cleopatra are cannot fashion a new, positive relationship between men and women, the powerful and the powerless. Caesar rules the world. Antony can no more live with an irrevocable loss of Rome (desertion of masculine) than he can live with his loss of Egypt, his Cleopatra (appropriation of feminine).

At times power, patriarchy, and punishment seem to be built from a cultural house of cards, precarious, ready to fall; at other times, the foundation seems concrete, indestructible. Either way, the cost of demolition is high. Whether from the inside or the outside, any challenge sacrifices the relative comfort of the status quo, though those on the inside have more to lose.

Still, there's always the fear that a new regime, grown strong from the margins, will find its own way to oppress, repress the "others" of its culture. The real challenge is to find an alternative way to redistribute power, one that is neither appropriated nor marginalized, one that speaks to, but not for, the dominant culture. Shakespeare provokes this challenge; 400 years later, in our positions as teachers and readers of Shakespeare, we can do something about that redistribution of power which currently places the author, his works, and the teacher/authority at the center. I'm suggesting a pedagogy in which power doesn't reside solely in the inner circle of text and teacher; nor completely on the margins with students who feel intimidated by both the teacher and text.

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