

SHAKESPEARE AND ALIENATION IN THREE PLAYS

By

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## Abstract

A pervasive sense of alienation infected the lives of women in the Early Modern period. William Shakespeare's *Othello*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and *As You Like It* subtly highlight the expectations for women in contemporary English society, and acknowledge those expectations' tendency to degrade an individual's desires, power, and autonomy; the three plays also interpret alienation as accompanying a variety of additional topics, including race, platonic relationships, and aging. Shakespeare indicates violence as a hegemony's common response to violations of the social order—a connection that he even includes in his comedies, which contain dark undertones of physical assault, coercion and repression. The purpose of this thesis is to identify those within these plays who (both individuals and groups) become alienated in response to the dominant social expectations of the Early Modern period, as well as how their alienation manifests itself. Due to the significant relevance of contemporary culture and politics in examining Shakespeare's plays, I will utilize multiple primary and secondary sources to yield a portrait of the world that inspired his characters, settings, and messages.

A pervasive sense of alienation infected the lives of women in the Early Modern period. William Shakespeare's *Othello*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and *As You Like It* subtly highlight the expectations for women in contemporary English society, and acknowledge those expectations' tendency to degrade an individual's desires, power, and autonomy; the three plays also interpret alienation as accompanying a variety of additional topics, including race, platonic relationships, and aging. Shakespeare indicates violence as a hegemony's common response to violations of the social order—a connection that he even includes in his comedies, which contain dark undertones of physical assault, coercion and repression. Rosalind in *As You Like It*, for example, loses her ability to influence other characters at the play's end after uncovering her identity as a woman; Oberon, in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, determines the final marriage pairs by enchanting the minds of helpless youths and forcing them into decisions they would not have made otherwise. The tragedy *Othello* likewise carries a dark insinuation that Desdemona's sexuality (if she were truly guilty of adultery) warrants her execution. It is no secret that Shakespeare's plays were popular in their time, which begs the question as to why authorities seemed to ignore their flagrant questioning of the social order. The answer revolves around power; It was important for Queen Elizabeth to focus on patronizing the arts to "[negotiate] with the city for the power and authority she would need for effective rule" (Mullaney 24). Though her watchful eye would not have missed Shakespeare's subtle references and jabs, perhaps Queen Elizabeth avoided prosecuting him because of his consistent reliability in restoring the social order at the end of each play.

Then why, the reader's line of questioning might continue, should these three plays receive special attention if Shakespeare's vast repertoire is ripe with social and political commentary? Shakespeare explored themes of alienation throughout his entire canon, so I could

have picked any number of his plays; the scope of my research, however, required that I limit analysis to three. I also wanted to examine at least one tragedy and one comedy to highlight the effect of genre conventions on Shakespeare's presentation of alienation. *Othello* comes to mind, for the former, because of its depiction of manipulation, physical violence against women, and themes of race. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is a good choice for the latter because the entire play is built around the marriage of Theseus and Hippolyta, which exemplifies contemporary marriage culture. *As You Like It*, another comedy, highlights gender and romantic conventions, aging, and class differentiation, and identifies their alienating effects.

The purpose of this thesis is to identify those within these plays who (both individuals and groups) become alienated in response to the dominant social expectations of the Early Modern period, as well as how their alienation manifests itself. Due to the significant relevance of contemporary culture and politics in examining Shakespeare's plays, I will utilize multiple primary and secondary sources to yield a portrait of the world that inspired his characters, settings, and messages. I also propose that alienation accompanies at least one of two circumstances: A conversion to object and removal of independence, and/or a lack of audience.

## *Othello*

Othello is vulnerable to manipulation because of the social differences that his race emphasizes; though other characters typically hide feelings of superiority, they reveal them at points of extreme anger. Desdemona, on the other hand, is subjected to repressive social laws regarding marriage and kinship—a perfect point at which to begin to contextualize women’s struggle for autonomy in the Early Modern period with popular, contemporary arguments.

There were, in Shakespeare’s time, established authors who decried women (in general) publicly. A particularly infamous example is Joseph Swetnam who, in his essay *The Arraignment Of Lewde, idle, froward, and unconstant women*, amplified many common contemporary views in a tone both angry and mocking. In addition to repeatedly comparing women to common animals—dogs that “bark more [complaints] than Cerberus” (Swetnam 192), conspiring “night crows” (199), and “venomous [spiders gathering] poison” (193), among others—he characterizes most women as “lascivious and crafty, whorish, thievish, and knavish” (193). Thus, in Swetnam’s mind, women have common characteristics rather than individual personalities, and are beastly rather than human.

Such views were not isolated to one or two vocal spokesmen; misogyny was common within England’s culture during the Early Modern period. In *Othello*, it characterizes Iago’s banter with Emilia and Desdemona:

Come on, come on, you are pictures out of doors,

Bells in your parlors, wild-cats in your kitchens,

Saints in your injuries, devils being offended,

Players in your housewifery, and housewives in ...

Your beds!" (*Othello* II.i.109–13)

In the portrait that Iago presents, women are by nature deceptive ("pictures out of doors," "Saints in your injuries," "Players in your housewifery"), overly emotional ("devils being offended"), talkative ("Bells in your parlors"), and tend to vacillate between tyrannical and cold within the household ("wild-cats in your kitchens," "housewives in... / Your beds!"). These generalizations group all women together in a way that reinforces not solidarity, but pejorative stereotyping.

Iago uses religious language while generalizing ("Saints" and "devils"), mimicking a crucial element of Swetnam's rhetoric; both deem their subjects particularly unholy—a technique especially common throughout history in arguments against "the other." Swetnam, for example, relates that women not only embody evil but act primarily with the purpose of victimizing men:

Then who can but say that women sprung from the Devil? ...because men are taken by them as fish is taken with the hook. ...betwixt their breasts is the vale of destruction; and in their beds there is hell, sorrow, and repentance. Eagles eat not men till they are dead, but women devour them alive. (Swetnam 201)

Here he identifies the specific cause of man's ruin as being both parties' sexuality. Though a lustful, innate instinct drives *both* Swetnam's man and woman, it renders man passive and enslaved while woman becomes active and monstrous. Such ideas, when one accepts them, are often anxiety-inducing to the apparent victim. Swetnam's would-be-hooked male bachelor is naturally encouraged to abide by the author's advice or risk misery: a man should marry a young woman who doesn't yet exhibit the "corrupt and disordered behavior" of having been in an

earlier relationship (widowed), but is instead “flexible and bending, obedient, and subject to do anything according to the will and pleasure of her husband” (210).<sup>1</sup> Though there isn’t extant a contemporary opinion of Swetnam’s treatise, the fact that it was reprinted at least 13 times in the 1600s, and five more in the next century, indicates its popularity (van Heertum). His use of religious primary sources and mythological contexts reinforces the fact that much of his rhetoric had already been deeply ingrained within English society for centuries. For Swetnam and those who held similar beliefs, sexual autonomy was the weapon of an unholy woman, while chastity and obedience were tools of the devout.

Fathers, whose rulings only church or state could override, acted as the main authority of the household in England’s Early Modern period. Brabantio sees father-daughter relationships as being comparable to a ruler and his subjects; exercising autonomy without prior approval is “treason” against one whom—as English society believed—God ordained, and Brabantio reacts to Desdemona’s secret marriage accordingly: “O heaven, how got she out? O treason of the blood! / – Fathers, from hence trust not your daughters’ minds / By what you see them act” (*Othello* I.i.167–9). The question, “how got she out?” helps emphasize the degree to which society expected not just daughters, but women in general, to stay confined at home doing “all the work within doors which belongs for a woman to do” (Swetnam 213). Women thus became obligated to act as extensions of their fathers and husbands, due to the common expectation to remain obedient and maintain the house (regardless of personal desire), and their confinement within a specific area significantly limited their ability to interact with the world. Women were

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<sup>1</sup> This would not have been considered radical and it, in fact, fits rather well with the standard model of marriage in the Early Modern period.

alienated from larger society and from any chance of a sympathetic audience, including other women experiencing similar isolation.

The expectations that women faced in Early Modern society call into question the possibility of escaping the period's father-daughter dynamics. After Brabantio confronts her, Desdemona reasons with him by acknowledging his authoritative role and the societal conditions that obligate her to serve: To you I am bound for life and education: / My life and education both do learn me / How to respect you; you are the lord of duty" (*Othello* I.iii.182–4). She then, however, immediately complicates the validity of his desires by arguing that, under society's rules, her new husband also reigns over her actions:

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

And so much duty as my mother showed

To you, preferring you before her father,

So much challenge that I may profess

Due to the Moor my lord. (I.iii.185–9)

Through Desdemona, Shakespeare argues that women can only escape the father-daughter dynamic by substituting one authoritative influence for another—and indeed, Brabantio relents at her point ("God be with you, I have done" (I.iii.190)). Unfortunately, the husband-wife dynamic is virtually the same, in many ways, as the father-daughter relationship for both Desdemona and women in Shakespeare's time.

Indeed, Desdemona's new marriage to Othello carries the same expectations as her relationship with Brabantio; following orders is essential, and Desdemona notes that regardless



of Othello's character (213n89) or any personal reservations, society obligates her to accept commands: "Whate'er you [Othello] be, I am obedient" (III.iii.89). The most critical condition behind the marriage's success, however, is chastity. Desire (sexual or otherwise) acts as a major source of opposition to outside control, as it is virtually impossible for one to manipulate within another—leading to an ever-present sense of anxiety for the one in power. It is precisely this anxiety (among others that I will later discuss) that causes Othello to believe Iago so quickly. He laments, "O curse of marriage / That we can call these delicate creatures ours / And not their appetites!" (III.iii.272–4)<sup>2</sup> Iago is aware that calling attention to Desdemona's desires will heighten Othello's anxieties, so he directs him to the contemporary rhetoric against women that permeates their culture.

A universal method to try to control another's thoughts is to tap into their own fears. Othello, in turn, tries to manipulate Desdemona by contemptuously questioning her favor with God, and—using some of Swetnam and Iago's rhetoric—urges her to erase her alleged sin with devotional acts:

This hand of yours requires  
 A sequester from liberty, fasting and prayer,  
 Much castigation, exercise devout,  
 For here's a young and sweating devil, here,  
 That commonly rebels. 'Tis a good hand,  
 A frank one." (III.iv.39–43)

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<sup>2</sup> Also note this quote's dehumanizing language ("delicate creatures") and generalization of all women.

Desdemona, assured of her own innocence and unaware of the charges (which the line about her “frank” hand passive-aggressively indicates), remains unphased. Shakespeare then laces her response with irony: Desdemona reasons, “You may indeed say so, / For ‘twas that hand that gave away my heart” (III.iv.44–5), trying to assure Othello of her devotion by reminding him that she had run away from her father towards marriage, yet for Othello this statement can only confirm her infidelity.

Thus, having failed to elicit a remorseful response and still assured of Desdemona’s guilt, the only option that Othello now perceives is violence. Perhaps most telling, as well, is the speed at which his anger escalates. Othello’s resolve to “tear her all to pieces!” (III.iii.434) comes in response to Iago’s “proof” that Cassio dreamt of Desdemona. This response to such a claim is absurd in its extremity, not only because the audience is assured of Desdemona’s innocence but because Cassio’s behavior (if the story were true) may simply indicate a one-sided fantasy. One might then consider the unflinching readiness to believe Iago’s baseless claim to be indicative that Othello already believes she’s guilty—specifically by nature (the inherent qualities Swetnam fervently preaches)—before receiving this “proof.” His later resolve that “she must die, else she’ll betray more men” (V.ii.6) also characterizes Desdemona’s alleged cuckoldry as habitual. It’s possible that Othello is simply trying to convince himself to kill Desdemona here, but a primary belief of his, in this situation, is that death is the justified consequence of adultery.

The viewer should then consider the dark insinuation that if Desdemona *had* committed adultery, her death would have been justified in the eyes of both the supporting characters and contemporary audiences. The viewer might claim that Othello’s reaction to the alleged adultery showcases cultural values surrounding sexuality in general, rather than women, as Othello also calls for Cassio’s death (“Within these three days let me hear thee say / That Cassio’s not alive”

(III.iii.475–6)). I claim instead that Shakespeare uses Emilia to identify Othello’s reaction and the play’s tragedy as feminist issues.

Jane Anger’s 1589 treatise, *Her Protection for Women*, responds to much of the misogynistic rhetoric that Swetnam would repeat decades later. One of her arguments, that men “become ravenous hawks, who do not only seize upon us, but devour us” (Anger 178) (note the animal comparison), echoes in Emilia’s complaint that, “’Tis not a year or two shows us a man. / They are all but stomachs, and we all but food: / They eat us hungerly, and when they are full / They belch us” (*Othello* III.iv.104–7). Both statements highlight the same anxiety and uncertainty over marriage’s contemporary power imbalance; Anger and Emilia’s man changes upon successful courtship, and the woman is at the mercy of whatever he may have been stifling when they first met—wantonly victimizing her for nourishment. Emilia also notes that, “I do think it is their husbands’ faults / If wives do fall... / The ills we do, their ills instruct us so” (IV.iii.85–102), which parallels Anger’s “our behaviors alter daily, because men’s virtues decay hourly” (Anger 179). Anger and Emilia’s woman thus responds to man’s behavior, instead of having an innate drive towards lust and deception, and Emilia herself views Othello’s coldness as following a common degradation of man’s character after marriage. The comparison to digestion, on the other hand, suggests that woman’s youth and autonomy decay in tandem with this degradation, in addition to foreshadowing Desdemona’s death. Desdemona’s alienation—her pressure to remain chaste and obedient—thus becomes inescapable because of the societal requirement to indulge the men in her life.

Racial tension, and Othello’s own anxieties around the subject, also help drive much of his behavior towards the characters in the play. A theme of deception pervades *Othello*, of course, in both Iago’s actions and the contemporary views on women that Shakespeare plays on,

but it takes a third, more subtle form in the pretensions to which most of the characters subscribe—especially those relating to the respect that Othello’s high military rank requests. The other characters exchange many of the racist remarks against Othello behind his back, such as Roderigo’s “What a full fortune does the thicklips owe / If he can carry’t thus!” (*Othello* I.i.65–6), Iago’s “your daughter covered with a Barbary horse; / you’ll have your nephews neigh to you, you’ll have / coursers for cousins and jennets for germans!” (I.i.110–2) (again, note the animal comparison), and most frequently, everyone’s tendency to refer to him as “the moor” (138n48–9). These moments identify the true thoughts of the characters in question as they hold Othello separate from their ideals of a homogenous society. Their insults specifically regard, for the most part, his race—the ever-present, unalterable element of Othello’s being that profoundly separates him from everyone else in the cast, even in the unlikely circumstance that he doesn’t pick up on any racial tension while characters are interacting with him normally.

There are, however, several moments in the play in which characters reference Othello’s race while he’s present; the more confrontational displays occur when Brabantio (as mentioned earlier) and Emilia drop their pretensions of politeness in response to transgressions of which Othello is a main, acting party. Emilia, responding to Desdemona’s death, tells Othello that “She was too fond of her most filthy bargain!” (V.ii.153) and, continuing the grimy imagery that specifically ties into his skin color (318n160), calls him “As ignorant as dirt!” (V.ii.160), while Brabantio argues that Othello, not specifically mentioning his race but identifying him as “other” all the same, should never have been allowed to marry Desdemona in the first place:

Mine’s not an idle cause, the duke himself,

Or any of my brothers of the state,

Cannot but feel this wrong as 'twere their own.

For if such actions may have passage free

Bond-slaves and pagans shall our statesmen be (I.ii.95–9).

This example also indicates to Othello that others around him may share the same negative opinions yet remain secretive in his presence, while both examples continue to imagine him apart from homogenous society—and even subhuman, as Brabantio openly desires the loss of his rights. Brabantio also, in questioning Desdemona's judgement at having fallen in love with Othello in a later passage, influences the play's outcome:

To fall in love with what she feared to look on?

It is a judgement maimed and most imperfect

That will confess perfection so could err

Against all rules of nature, and must be driven

To find out practices of cunning hell

Why this should be. (I.iii.99–104)

Here Brabantio relates Othello's appearance as monstrous, and their union as unnatural. Though he remains unphased, this monologue sets the foundation for a more emotionally vulnerable Othello to believe Iago who, in a less aggressive manner, successfully persuades him of almost the exact same idea:

Not to affect many proposed matches

Of her own clime, complexion and degree,

Whereto we see, in all things, nature tends –

Foh! One may smell in such a will most rank,

Foul disproportion, thoughts unnatural. (III.iii.233–7)

Two different characters have, at this point, related to Othello a degree of unnaturalness in interracial relationships and questioned Desdemona’s intentions. One distinction between the two characters’ statements is that Brabantio blames Othello by saying he drugged her (“That with some mixtures powerful o’er the blood / Or with some dram conjured to this effect / He wrought upon her” (I.iii.105–7))—which he knows to be false—while Iago argues that Desdemona may have ill intentions. Othello cannot claim that this is false with absolute certainty, of course, and the ongoing racial tension—combining with his status as the sole “moor” among the cast—convinces him that Iago’s idea must be true. He then enters a permanent state of despondence which the awareness of his race propagates: “What sense had I of her stolen hours of lust? /.../ He that is robbed, not wanting what is stolen, / Let him not know’t, and he’s not robbed at all” (III.iii.341–6). One might consider Othello, at the start of the play, to view himself as successful (in both his career and recent marriage), but Brabantio and Iago have, by Act III, “revealed” bigotry possibly only veiled by respect for his military rank. A sense of individual merit beyond his race is, for Othello, now nothing more than fantasy. Furthermore, that Iago specifically alienates Othello from Desdemona and Cassio is important because it separates him from his most intimate connections—leaving him with no audience to validate his experiences.

### *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

This play draws a clear parallel between the father-daughter relationship of Egeus and Hermia and that of Brabantio and Desdemona; both sets of characters reinforce the idea that the causes of alienation are largely institutional and serve to propagate the power of those in charge. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* shares *Othello's* exploration of the treatment of women in the Early Modern period but differs crucially in its status as a comedy, rather than a tragedy. In the first two lines, “Now, fair Hippolyta, our nuptial hour / Draws on apace” (*A Midsummer Night's Dream* I.i.1–2), Shakespeare establishes Theseus and Hippolyta's marriage as the story's overarching frame—creating an overall tone of celebration that shrouds this play's depiction of violence and alienation.

In early exchanges with his daughter, Egeus makes it clear that his objective at the start of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is to subdue Hermia into complying with the marriage partner of his choosing: “And what is mine, my love shall render him; / And she is mine, and all my right of her / I do estate unto Demetrius” (I.i.96–8). In declaring his support of Demetrius, Egeus also calls attention to the specific function that daughters, for their fathers, served in the Early Modern period. In typical behavior for families of higher social class, a father would exchange his daughter's chastity with a bachelor, for whom it was critical that she remain a virgin beforehand, to further raise their social standing (Ferguson 98–9):<sup>3</sup> “a deflowered heiress could be disinherited, since her virginity was an indispensable part of her dowry; by its loss, she would deprive her father of the possibility of selling her to a husband whose family line she could perpetuate” (Ferguson 98). Society thus regarded women as assets to be traded from fathers to

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<sup>3</sup> Society also expected women of all classes to remain chaste, even if their families did not have the social influence for an arranged marriage (Ferguson 99).

sons-in-law, and Egeus is outraged because his daughter's choice in Lysander ignores the power that he feels his status as father entitles him to; from his point of view, Hermia's autonomy diminishes his own and he lobbies to punish her accordingly.

Since Hermia and Lysander remain unmarried before the play begins—whereas Desdemona and Othello had already eloped in secret—Egeus holds more sway with the judging third-party Theseus than Brabantio does with the duke. The consequences that he proposes for his own daughter are particularly telling:

I beg the ancient privilege of Athens:

As she is mine, I may dispose of her,

Which shall be either to this gentleman,

Or to her death, according to our law

Immediately provided in that case. (*A Midsummer Night's Dream* I.i.41–5)

Egeus' proposal—as well as Demetrius and Theseus' acceptance of it—highlights the severity of punishment that came with transgressions committed by women, and, in calling this specific capitol rule the “ancient privilege of Athens,” Egeus relates that such punishments were long-standing in society.

It's then important to determine why, for Egeus, Demetrius, and Theseus, Hermia's “crime” was of the highest degree, and identifying an answer becomes more plausible when we consider two constants within *A Midsummer Night's Dream's* settings:



- 1) Athens<sup>4</sup> and the forest's social orders require constant maintenance from those who benefit from them.
- 2) Theseus, and later Oberon, personify androcentric values.

Egeus and Demetrius, seeing Hermia's display of choice as dissent against contemporary marriage culture, prefer her death because of anxieties that the social order will collapse. They approach Theseus with her resistance because they expect him, being the warden of order within his city, to uphold the cultural values that keep them (and Theseus himself) in power.

Theseus' acceptance of Egeus' proposal is but one of many instances in this play in which characters in power maintain order by force. Though casual audiences will likely identify Theseus and Hippolyta's marriage as contributing to a celebratory tone within the entire play, the former's early statement of, "Hippolyta, I wooed thee with my sword, / And won thy love doing thee injuries" (I.i.16–7) insinuates a dark backstory of violence, including rape (122n16–17), that is easy to miss or forget due to a scarcity of further textual evidence. Oberon's act of enchanting Titania, Lysander, and Demetrius, though more noticeable, requires audience members to first deny the distractions of Shakespeare's use of heavy comedic situations and interactions before they can identify its similarity to the act of drugging. While casual audiences delight in the absurdity of Titania desiring Bottom's mule-like appearance (even calling him "my lover" (III.i.192)), for instance, they may gloss over the objections that she would have raised otherwise as, lacking the enchantment's influence, her "eyes do loathe his visage now!" (IV.i.79). Similarly, Demetrius makes his objections to Helena's advances clear from the beginning, noting that he is "sick when I do look on thee" (II.i.212), and is the only character to remain under the

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<sup>4</sup> Though *A Midsummer Night's Dream* uses Greece as its setting, Shakespeare is still commenting on English culture.

enchantment's influence at the play's end because *A Midsummer Night's Dream's* happy ending requires it. Theseus and Oberon's status as rulers of their respective domains, combined with their roles in these details of the narrative, casts a dark shadow over what many likely consider a traditionally lighthearted story as they alienate other characters from their own autonomy; violated subjects carry out the wills of those who rule over them. In representing Theseus and Oberon as absolute law, Shakespeare shows the ability—and tendency—for general society, and those who decide its customs, to mold, objectify, and break down individuals into adhering to the social order.

It's important to consider the other sides of these displays of power. Regarding Demetrius and Helena, we must first emphasize the unenchanted former's transparency in his lack of interest towards the latter. Demetrius' "Or rather do I not in plainest truth / Tell you I do not, nor I cannot love you?" (II.i.200–1), draws out the peak of Helena's subjection:

I am your spaniel, and Demetrius,

The more you beat me, I will fawn on you.

Use me but as your spaniel: spurn me, strike me,

Neglect me, loose me; only give me leave,

Unworthy as I am, to follow you.

What worser place can I beg in your love

(And yet a place of high respect with me)

Than to be used as you use your dog? (II.i.203–10)

Shakespeare makes multiple readings of Helena's behavior possible. For instance, Helena may simply be masochistic, her fetishizing of Demetrius' disdain contributing to the play's comedy, or maybe she desires the inequality present in many contemporary relationships because it integrates her within society—where being used as a “spaniel,” “spurned” and “struck” is a better alternative than isolation and ineffectuality; she even cites Demetrius himself as a representation of “all the world” (II.i.224), praises his presence and wonders “how it can be said I am alone, / When all the world is here to look on me?” (II.i.225–6). If the latter possibility is the case, then Shakespeare may be trying to emphasize that a “solution” to alienation lies in embracing the power systems causing it, which only ends up further frustrating people like Helena. Whatever the reason for the nature of Helena and Demetrius' interactions both before and after the latter's enchantment may be, however, Shakespeare uses the two characters as a vehicle for exploring the decaying friendship of Helena and Hermia.

There is, in fact, already distance between them from the start of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* that Demetrius' interest in Hermia initiated. Despite Helena's outward jealousy, Hermia places trust in Helena to keep secret her and Lysander's secret escape through “the wood, where often you and I / Upon faint primrose beds were wont to lie / Emptying our bosoms of their counsel sweet” (I.i.215–7), and it is important that she does so, because Helena's decision to tell Demetrius represents (due in no small part to the setting) a rejection of their time together in the past—and a now-unfixable fragmentation of their bond. Helena's later accusation and the ensuing argument in the wake of Lysander and Demetrius' enchantment, that Hermia is “[renting] our ancient love asunder / To join with men in scorning your poor friend?” (III.ii.215–6), cements Helena's misplaced distrust, which “I will not trust you, I, / Nor longer stay in your curst company” (III.ii.340–1) marks. That Helena claims having “[kept] your counsels, never

wronged you, / Save that in love unto Demetrius” (III.ii.309–10) is ironic because of the severity of this particular act of breaking Hermia’s trust. It also emphasizes that Demetrius’ (and possibly Lysander’s) presence in the woods is specifically what separates Hermia and Helena from the days in which they “grew together / Like to a double cherry, seeming parted / But yet an union in partition” (II.3.2.208–10). The new relationships that Hermia and Helena have sacrificed each other for do not, in fact, evoke any strong displays of happiness in the end (240n189), with the latter lamenting that her belief of Demetrius pretending to love her prevents the happiness she sought: “ And I have found Demetrius, like a jewel / Mine own, and not mine own” (IV.i.190–1). Hermia, on the other hand, had foreshadowed a sense of distrust in Lysander much earlier, while swearing to meet him in the woods: “And [I swear] by that fire which burned the Carthage queen / When the false Trojan under sail was seen, / By all the vows that ever men have broke / (In number more than ever women spoke),” (I.i.173–6), alluding to Dido and Aeneas, the latter of whom woos the former but later abandons her (133n173–4). Lysander’s sudden, unexplainable interest in Helena during Act II removes Hermia’s ability to fully trust him, and makes his love appear less genuine. Highlighting the males’ interference with female bonds, Shakespeare comments on androcentric society’s ability to corrupt; at the play’s end, Helena and Hermia (who is now also wary of her father) remain distrustful of their new husbands and alienated from each other—both women unable to seek the sympathetic audience that they would have found before the play, and thus fundamentally alone.

As Hermia and Helena’s bonds diminish from the indirect effects of Oberon’s enchantment, so too does the integrity of Titania’s promise to her votaress. Though the votaress carries the distinction of not being present in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, their relationship from before the play parallels that of Hermia and Helena, as Titania explains that the votaress

“gossiped by my side, / And sat with me on Neptune’s yellow sands / Marking th’embarked traders on the flood” (II.i.125–7). It is because of this bond that Titania accepts the deceased votaress’ son as her ward: “And for her sake do I rear up her boy; / And for her sake, I will not part with him” (II.i.136–7). Titania’s pledge casts the boy—notably absent from any of the scenes—not as a tangible being but as a symbol of their friendship. The comic absurdity of Titania falling in love with Bottom serves to distract the audience from Oberon’s objective in enchanting her in the first place:

For meeting her of late behind the wood,  
 Seeking sweet favours for this hateful fool,  
 I did upbraid her, and fall out with her; ...  
 ... I then did ask of her her changeling child,  
 Which straight she gave me, and her fairy sent  
 To bear him to my bower in fairy land. (IV.i.47–9, 58–60)

Here Oberon relates that he used his influence on her, through the enchantment, to take custody of her ward. Though this is the last mention of the boy, and by extension the votaress, those who are careful enough to consider their related sub-plot may view this moment as another parallel to Hermia and Helena; the purity of Titania’s long-standing bond with the votaress decays through outside interference from male characters—in this case not only Oberon, who alienates her from her sense of agency and conviction in preserving the votaress’ memory, but also Bottom, whose presence while Titania is enchanted causes her to “seek sweet favours,” ignorant of her loss all the while.

Hippolyta experiences, in addition to sexual assault and coercion into marriage (“I wooed thee with my sword, / And won thy love doing thee injuries” (I.i.16–17)), the loss of her community before the play begins. Hippolyta, a mythological Amazonian (119n2), is a prisoner within an unfamiliar environment. The Amazonian myth, conventionally presenting a community of women (though sometimes with male slaves), includes practices of breast removal that differ from most other societies. If the breast symbolizes a separation of women from men, “both visually and functionally” (Schwarz 147), and in most societies, a restriction to “the social parts to which [women’s] body parts confine them” (148), then a mythological context involving its removal is significant. The Amazonian practice of excising a single breast acts as a partial rejection of conventional women’s roles and embraces the traditional autonomy of masculinity; leaving the other breast intact, however, preserves power in maternity: “whether exposed for the sake of nursing or fashion, the breast threatens always to signify an excess of female control” (153). The Amazonian myth presents a monstrous portrait indeed, for the androcentric culture of England’s Early Modern Period, as its archetypes resist suppression: “the female body, apparently veiled or displaced by masculine acts, returns through the insistence on maternity, eroticism, and sexual violence” (161). This isn’t to say that a return to subjugation is *impossible*, though, as *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* shows; Theseus’ domestication of Hippolyta—forcing her to adhere to Athens’ social order—is perhaps (in light of the strong beliefs against traditional gender roles that she likely has) only possible through physical violence and separation from her community.

### *As You Like It*

Though *As You Like It* connects with *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Othello* in its focus on women's alienation, it is especially expansive in its subject matter. Prominent themes that relate to alienation in the play include Gender conventions (highlighted by cross-dressing), popular misconceptions of romantic love, and differences in urban and rural settings.

To contextualize *As You Like It*, it is important to examine Early Modern debates about cross-dressing. *Hic Mulier: Or, The Man-Woman: Being a Medicine to cure the Coltish Disease of the Staggers of the Masculine-Feminines of our Times* sought to reform women who dressed as men, or rather those whom, in 1620, the anonymous author describes as “neither men nor women, but just good for nothing” (*Hic Mulier* 270). More than a simple insult, this claim of liminality is central to *Hic Mulier's* arguments against women crossdressing—as the writer interprets clothing as not just functional, but symbolic: “But such as are able to buy all at their own charges, they swim in the excess of these vanities and will be manlike not only from the head to the waist, but to the very foot and in every condition: man in body by attire, man in behavior by rude complement, man in nature by aptness to anger, man in action by pursuing revenge, man in wearing weapons, man in using weapons” (269–70). Here, a woman's decision to crossdress is first a response to financial freedom, and her clothing bestows masculine characteristics within and upon her. By instilling clothing with determinative power, silently likening the nude figure to a near-blank slate,<sup>5</sup> the author stresses that the importance of wearing women's clothing lies in its ability to reinforce contemporary gender conventions, such as “bashfulness in your cheeks, chastity in your eyes, wisdom in your words, sweetness in your

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<sup>5</sup> Sexuality appears to be the sole default characteristic, for the author of *Hic Mulier*, in the absence of clothing.

conversation, and severe modesty in the whole structure or frame of your universal composition” (271). With instructions paralleling those of Swetnam, *Hic Mulier* urges women to dress not only to exhibit these qualities but to suppress the desires of themselves and others:

But for those things which belong to this wanton and lascivious delight and pleasure (as eyes wandering, lips billing, tongue enticing, bared breasts seducing, and naked arms embracing), oh, hide them, for shame hide them in the closest prisons of your strictest government! Shield them with modest and comely garments, such as are warm and wholesome, having every window closed with a strong Casement and every Loophole furnished with such strong Ordinance that no unchaste eye may come near to assail them, no lascivious tongue woo a forbidden passage, nor no profane hand touch relics so pure and religious. (271–2)

The treatise asserts that the cross-dressing woman, while rejecting contemporary gender conventions, embraces sexual desire. *Hic Mulier* is interpreting clothing as a symbol of societal rules and values—an assessment that was even embedded in legislation during the Early Modern period; a “Statute of apparel” (274) primarily emphasized differences in class (274n44). And though much of the rhetoric that *Hic Mulier* uses directs its appeals towards women, the author eventually identifies men, who become wardens of the social order, as those responsible for ensuring that women abide by the treatise’s various propositions: “To you therefore that are Fathers, Husbands, or Sustainers of these new Hermaphrodites belongs the cure of this Impostume” (275).

The theme of control within this argument is not lost on the anonymous writer of *Haec Vir; Or, The Womanish-Man: Being an Answer to a late Book entitled Hic-Mulier*, a response (as the title indicates) that countered many of *Hic Mulier*’s arguments and pointed out a growing



contemporary tendency for men to adopt “feminine” clothing and qualities in 1620. Perhaps confirming the metaphor of women’s clothing as prison and androcentric society as its guard, the writer of *Haec Vir* offers an explanation for the existence of the very same “qualities” of gender that *Hic Mulier* seeks to reinforce: “Bondage or Slavery is a restraint from those actions which the mind of its own accord doth most willingly desire, to perform the intents and purposes of another’s disposition, and that not by mansuetude or sweetness of entreaty, but by the force of authority and strength of compulsion” (*Haec Vir* 281). In other words, where *Hic Mulier*’s author sees “bashfulness,” “chastity,” and “severe modesty,” among others (*Hic Mulier* 271), as natural qualities present in all women, and which their designated clothing strengthens, the author of *Haec Vir* identifies these qualities as artificial—as signs of repression; the writer even backs up this argument by noting that culture varies by country: “For us to salute strangers with a kiss is counted but civility, but with foreign nations immodesty; for you to cut the hair of your upper lips, familiar here in England, everywhere else almost thought unmanly...etc. I might instance in a thousand things that only Custom and not Reason hath approved” (*Haec Vir* 283–4). The writer even calls on contemporary men to “Cast then from you our ornaments and put on your own armor; be men in shape, men in show, men in words, men in actions, men in counsel, men in example” (288), pointing out a significant double standard and relating it as a mocking solution to *Hic Mulier*’s objections: “Then shall you find delight in our words, pleasure in our faces, faith in our hearts, chastity in our thoughts, and sweetness both in our inward and outward inclinations. Comeliness shall be then our study, fear our Armor, and modesty our practice” (288).<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> This acts as a perfect parallel to Jane Anger’s treatise, when she says, “Our behaviors alter daily, because men’s virtues decay hourly” (179). The two are making the same argument.

Although *Hic Mulier* was published four years after Shakespeare's death, *As You Like It* anticipates these treatises' idea of clothing as a determinative entity not only through the contrast between Ganymede and the women of the play, but through her sheer devotion to the role, for which she denies certain small desires and impulses in accommodation: "I could find in my heart to disgrace my man's apparel and to cry like a woman, but I must comfort the weaker vessel, as doublet and hose ought to show itself courageous to petticoat" (*As You Like It* II.iv.4–7). Perhaps Rosalind's excitement for becoming Ganymede, which, matching *Hic Mulier's* later predictions, prompts her to quickly consider carrying "A gallant curtal-axe upon my thigh, / A boar-spear in my hand, and in my heart" (I.iii.114–5), also indicates her dissatisfaction with the social laws and expectations surrounding her sex that's central to her character. This dissatisfaction is apparent as early as her first scene, in which she cites a lack of equity between men and women: "I would we could [mock Fortune], for her benefits are mightily misplaced – and the bountiful blind woman doth most mistake in her gifts to women" (I.ii.34–6), with the specification that "Fortune reigns in gifts of the world not in the lineaments of Nature" (I.ii.41–2). Though this claim is easily applicable to class, its implications on sex and gender suggest that the changeable aspects of men and women—such as clothing—are what reinforce the imbalance in "Fortune's" favor, rather than physical anatomy ("lineaments of Nature"). Her later statement, that "Beauty provoketh thieves sooner than gold" (I.iii.107), may appear to contradict this idea, yet Rosalind says this during her and Celia's plan to disguise themselves as men, and multiple characters note Ganymede's fairness despite her new appearance. Therefore, outward displays of beauty primarily link (at least for Rosalind) to one's material presentation.

Indeed, the very qualities that Duke Frederick exiles her for, while she remains undisguised, are similar to those that Swetnam and *Hic Mulier* charge as innate in the

contemporary woman: “She is too subtle for thee, and her smoothness, / Her very silence and her patience / Speak to the people, and they pity her” (I.iii.74–6). When Rosalind engages in the behavior that society expects of her as a woman, being “silent” and patient,” she garners positive feedback from the public; because Duke Frederick’s reasons for wanting her exiled likely revolve more around his validity as Duke, her father, and a growing sense of unease at Rosalind’s hidden opinion of the topic, the audience may view his reasoning (calling her “subtle” and “smooth”) as borrowing from common contemporary rhetoric against women rather than anything tangible. Nevertheless, Rosalind’s adherence to expectations on gender roles fails to continue securing her spot in society, as the Duke exiles her from the support of the people—well aware that detaching her from her audience is the only method, short of death, for ensuring that he stays in power.

This works as a reasonable example of Rosalind’s treatment while presenting herself as a woman, but *As You Like It* showcases the contrast between her and Ganymede’s own measures of power through the characters of Audrey and Phoebe in a way that’s more comprehensive. The former silently accepts both a marriage declaration by Touchstone and the hand of William, who “lays claim to [her]” (V.i.7) before Touchstone’s arrival in Arden. Phoebe, though more autonomous in her initial rejection of Silvius and aggressive pursuit of Ganymede—and whom, as such, Shakespeare exaggerates into a ghastly caricature—learns of Ganymede’s secret and, due to the terms of their deal, passively accepts Silvius (towards whom she suddenly expresses a convenient acceptance). Ganymede orchestrates a collective marriage day, determining and summarizing all of the final pairings with authority, which represents a degree of control that Rosalind would not have been able to exert.

Orlando's dramatic idealizing, however, presents a significant obstacle to the longevity of her marriage that she spends much of *As You Like It* minimizing. Many of Ganymede's monologues warn Orlando that their marriage is bound to disappoint if he continues over-romanticizing: "men are April when they woo, December when they wed. Maids are May when they are maids, but the sky changes when they are wives" (IV.i.137–9). Rosalind considers it necessary to alter Orlando's mindset because of the dangers of idealization; subscribing to fictional romantic conventions denies reality and prevents intimacy. Disguised as Ganymede, she mocks Orlando's overuse of Petrarchan clichés in his love poetry. According to Nancy Vickers, Petrarchan conventions (such as the blazon) contribute to women's alienation by fragmenting her body: "her image is that of a collection of exquisitely beautiful dissociated objects. Singled out among them are hair, hand, foot and eyes" (Vickers 234), and the subject essentially remains mute, as "direct discourse from her is extremely rare" (244). The poet thus leaves no room for autonomy or individualism beyond her physical attributes. Rosalind and Celia can hardly resist mocking such lines because they see his poetic idealizing as both conventional and ridiculous. Rosalind's objective is thus to lead Orlando away from romantic conventions and towards seeing and treating her as a three-dimensional human being—broader than a collection of parts.

Rosalind (as Ganymede) gives a preliminary test of her lessons' effectiveness after their mock wedding, when Orlando makes his promise to return. Rosalind renders his failure to do so punctually as more significant than a simple delay; she states that "Time is the old justice that examines all such offenders, and let Time try" (*As You Like It* IV.i.187–8). Through other characters, Shakespeare emphasizes time—with its ability to ravage relationships, people, and innocence—as a more prominent theme. Jaques muses that "one man in his time plays many parts, / His acts being seven ages" (II.vii.143–4)—cycling through roles until an ending of

“second childishness and mere oblivion, / *Sans* teeth, *sans* eyes, *sans* taste, *sans* everything” (II.vii.166–7) occurs. In addition to the horror of such a thought, the total absence that “oblivion” presents includes identity and experience. Orlando, however, enters immediately after Jaques’ speech while bearing Adam’s feeble and incapacitated body. Orlando’s respect for Adam displays a degree of optimism, with some individuals choosing to take care of their elders, that stands in stark contrast to Jaques’ pessimism. The natural, physical changes that Jaques attributes to time are uncontested, however, and Oliver acts as an antagonistic foil to his brother’s good character.<sup>7</sup>

Oliver’s hatred of Orlando unceremoniously denies Adam of the stability he deserves in his old age, even sending him away with an insult: “Is ‘old dog’ my reward? Most true, I have lost my teeth in your service. God be with my old master, he would not have spoken such a word” (I.i.88–90). In that instant, Oliver undoes Adam’s decades-long service, with Shakespeare reinforcing the idea, along with Ganymede’s mock marriage, that the passage of time renders lives *more* unstable. A successful attempt at reclaiming his previous lifestyle is virtually impossible as, he notes, “At seventeen years many their fortunes seek, / But at fourscore it is too late a week” (II.iii.73–4, pp 202). Additionally, if we assume that Jaques is referring to Orlando when he speaks of a “fool i’th’ forest” (II.vii.12), and we recall Rosalind’s statement that “Fortune reigns in gifts of the world not in the lineaments of Nature” (I.ii.41–2), then this moment gains a special meaning: we can read Orlando’s “[railing] on Lady Fortune in good terms” (II.vii.16) as attributing Adam’s incapacitation to the social hierarchy, and their exile itself. Adam’s old age weakens the integrity of his social power and security, starting from the

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<sup>7</sup> Shakespeare does not entirely confirm Jaques’ worldview through Oliver, as Orlando’s acts of kindness poke holes in his idea of a world void of worth.

point at which “we rot and rot” (II.vii.27), and he implies that *use* is essential for having a place within society: “When service should in my old limbs lie lame / And unregarded age in corners thrown” (II.iii.41–2). Adam’s age alienates him from the ability to pursue alternate forms of income, and thus makes him more vulnerable during instances in which the social order collapses.

Oliver and Duke Frederick violate their social contracts by unceremoniously deposing Adam despite his long service, usurping the throne, leaving Orlando “at home unkept” (I.i.8) and away from education, and exiling Rosalind even though she’s popular and adheres to social expectations. Shakespeare, in the typical fashion of his comedies, quickly restores order at the end of the play, however. Throughout *As You Like It*, the forest of Arden acts as a place of rebirth for its visiting characters. Adam’s introduction to the forest, for example, includes his resuscitation: Duke Senior gives him food and calls him a “venerable burden” (II.vii.168)—troubled in body, but respectable because of his experience—reversing the effects of his exile; Rosalind experiences a newfound influence in her disguise, using it to buy a house and help Orlando understand love’s mutuality.<sup>8</sup> Even Oliver, after expressing profound hatred towards his brother, reconciles with Orlando after the transition from urban to rural setting.

It is important to identify some of the differences between Arden and the court. Violence accompanies the position of Duke within the kingdom, for example, as Duke Frederick usurps his predecessor solely to gain power and exiles Rosalind due to his anxiety of losing it. Duke Senior, in experiencing this violence before the play begins, finds solace in Arden—with “a many merry men with him, and there they live like the old Robin Hood of England...carelessly

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<sup>8</sup> Shakespeare puts forth the possibility, with Rosalind’s successful “education” of Orlando, that her marriage will be more equitable; this possibility does not extend to Celia’s marriage, however, nor Touchstone and Audrey’s.

as they did in the golden world” (I.i.110–11, 113). His tendency towards hospitality may be the specific factor that affords him a place within a new group, but he is nevertheless free from the pressures and obligations of his old station and previous culture. Oliver has similar pressures while in the city as, becoming the sole executor of his father’s will, he’s responsible for the wellbeing of Orlando and Jaques de Boys. The audience can infer that his initial hatred of Orlando is due to this responsibility, because Oliver explicitly states that he doesn’t know why he hates his brother (“my soul – yet I know not why hates nothing more than he” (I.i.154–5)), and does so after Orlando lobbies for more independence. In Arden, Oliver’s legal obligation is gone; his encounter with the lion helps him consider that kind people, his brother being his savior, still care for others in the absence of obligation. Touchstone and Corin’s discussion, on the other hand, highlights differences in custom between Arden and the court: “Those that are good manners at the court are as ridiculous in the country as the behaviour of the country is most mockable at the court. You told me you salute not at the court but you kiss your hands. That courtesy would be uncleanly if courtiers were shepherds” (III.ii.43–8). Here Corin argues that Arden’s rural, necessity-focused way of life renders the court’s need for formality frivolous and counterintuitive. Touchstone’s assertion that Corin is “damned, like an ill-roasted egg, all on one side” (III.ii.35–6), due to having “never sawst good manners” (III.ii.39) subtly reveals that formality is an essential tool for maintaining one’s place within a society that emphasizes social and legal obligation (the court). Perhaps Corin *would* be mistreated in the city, but in Arden—an environment more communal—his class, with its focus on necessity, affords him a simple life: “Sir, I am a true labourer. I earn that I eat, get that I wear; owe no man hate, envy no man’s happiness; glad of other men’s good, content with my harm; and the greatest of my pride is to see my ewes graze and my lambs suck” (III.ii.70–4). Corin’s class does not alienate him within

Arden, as his philosophy is that of labor and acceptance. Shakespeare thus reverses Corin's role: the old shepherd, being a pastoral stock character, becomes wiser and less absurd than the society that is supposed to laugh at him. *As You Like It* mocks its urban audience who, typically assured in their superiority, don't realize that their customs and beliefs may contribute to violent institutions and societal pressures.



If we consider the ways in which Shakespeare presents themes of alienation across all three plays, we can identify his interest in both highlighting the dominance of cultural institutions—including marriage, gender, family structures, and the law—and interpreting their effects on the social order; the constant maintenance that the social order requires comes at a high cost to the individual. Certain characters in *Othello*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and *As You Like It* experience at least one of our two criteria for alienation: a conversion to object and removal of independence, and/or a lack of vocal solidarity. The society in which Desdemona lives limits her interaction with others to those whom her father and husband approve; Hermia is in the same situation, and both Brabantio and Egeus appeal to state authorities in hopes of enforcing control. That both fathers approach their societies' primary authority indicates that, in these particular examples, misogyny is ingrained in the law. It also reminds us that the primary objective of a society's authoritative force is to uphold order. Shakespeare makes obvious Theseus and Oberon's roles in restoring the social order by the end of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and he highlights their contributions to the deterioration of relationships between women: Theseus separates Hippolyta from her Amazonian community with physical violence; Oberon drugs Titania and forcibly takes custody of her ward, invalidating her promise to the votaress. Shakespeare even emphasizes clothing, in *As You Like It*, as an authoritative force in its own right, when the audiences see Rosalind enjoy more social power as Ganymede. Alienation thus occurs in response to society's attempts to maintain the social order.

*As You Like It* is perhaps most different from the other two due to its exploration of what *determines* cultural values, in addition to the discussion of who enforces them that is present in all three plays. The court is in disarray at the beginning, as Oliver and Duke Frederick have violated the social order by ignoring their obligations; Oliver refuses to comprehensively carry

out his father's will, and Duke Frederick deposes Duke Senior and banishes Rosalind. Legal pressures and anxieties cause these violations, as Oliver is responsible for the rest of his family after his father's death, and Duke Frederick is worried that Rosalind's popularity will outrage the public due to his treatment of her and her father. Both characters lash out from the pressures of maintaining their newfound power. Arden's culture is different, as it emphasizes order through natural cycles and necessity. Corin's philosophy indicates that the formalities of urban cultures are frivolous—potentially even existing to widen class disparities and keep rulers in power. Shakespeare thus argues that although alienation occurs as a response to society's attempts to fix the social order, and separates individuals from larger communities, rules that target difference are not necessarily inevitable; they *become* inevitable due to the collective beliefs that people within a community subscribe to, and remain due to the efforts of ruling institutions of power.

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