

**CENTRAL WOMEN CHARACTERS AND THEIR
INFLUENCE IN SHAKESPEARE, WITH
PARTICULAR REFERENCE TO *THE MERCHANT
OF VENICE, MACBETH, JULIUS CAESAR AND
ANTONY AND CLEOPATRA***

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DEDICATION

This study is dedicated to my beloved children, Ntsike, Sifundo, Simo, my mom, Sibongile, and my family and friends who have continually given me support through their motivation, inspiration and prayers.

DECLARATION

I declare that this thesis represents original work by the author and has not been submitted in any form for any degree or diploma to any other university. In cases where other authors' works have been referred to or used, due acknowledgement has been made.

**Central Women Characters and Their Influence in Shakespeare, with
Particular Reference to *The Merchant of Venice*, *Macbeth*, *Julius Caesar*
and *Antony and Cleopatra*.**

By

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PREFACE

Shakespeare portrayed women in his plays as people who should be valued. This is an opinion I held in the past, and one I still hold after intense reading of his works and that of authors such as Marlowe, Webster, Thomas Kyd and others. Shakespeare created his female characters out of a mixture of good and evil. When they interact with others, either the best or the worst in them is brought out: extreme evil in some cases and perfect goodness in others.

I hope the reader will enjoy this study as much as I did, and that it will enhance their reading of Shakespeare's works and cultivate their interest in him. This study is intended to motivate other people to change their view that Shakespeare's works are inaccessible. Those who hold this view will come to know that anyone anywhere can read, understand and appreciate the works of this the greatest writer of all times.

In his study *Shakespeare's World*, Johanyak says, "I wrote [it] to help students appreciate the depth and breadth of Shakespeare's global awareness. Shakespeare was not only a London playwright, but a man of the world who dramatized his perceptions to create a lasting legacy of his times" (2004: ix).

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THESIS STATEMENT

This thesis attempts to present various examples of women figures in Shakespeare in order to register the wide-ranging nature of his examination of such women. The thesis is inspired by questions about the liberation of women in traditional, male-dominated societies, and the role that Shakespeare might have had in fashioning models for such liberation. These questions also have a historical dimension: have Shakespeare's representations of women influenced the processes which have culminated in the political liberation of women centuries after his plays were written? They also have a continuing practical dimension: can Shakespeare's depictions of women influence thoughts and attitudes in a liberating way today?

INTRODUCTION

Historical Background

In Shakespeare's England, just as in other parts of the world, there was a widespread conviction that women were unsuited to wield power over men. John Knox, writing on the eve of Queen Elizabeth's accession to the throne, was determinedly against female rulers. In his 'First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstrous Regiment of Women', he says: 'To promote a woman to bear rule, superiority, dominion or empire above any realm, nation, or city, is repugnant to nature, contumely to God, a thing most contrarious to His revealed will and approved ordinance, and finally it is the subversion of good order, of all equity and justice' (Schoenbaum 1979:103).

As DusiBerre points out, the fact that women's physical weakness debarred them from the battlefield might have seemed an even stronger argument against their involvement in politics than Knox's ideological argument (1996:272). Others might have recognised that the queen ruled by wisdom rather than the sword, and that this measured the advance of civilisation, not the inadequacy of the woman ruler. Shakespeare and his fellow playwrights and poets such as Spenser certainly register the devaluing of women consequent on their lack of physical strength, but in their writing express the fascination of the period with questions of women's political capacity (1996:273).

Knox's views were considerably out of line with what was actually taking place in England and in Europe at the time. In the sixteenth century this region boasted a plethora

of women holding the reigns of political power: bloody Mary Tudor, also known as Catholic Mary, who persecuted the Protestants and provoked Knox's original outburst against female Catholic monarchs, Catherine de Medici, Mary Queen of Scots, the Queen of Bohemia, Anne of Denmark, Princess Frederik, and Queen Henrietta Maria, and, of course, Elizabeth I (Dusinberre 1996:273, Palmer & Palmer 1981:75).

Elizabeth reigned as Queen of England from November 1558 to March 1603. She was the daughter of Henry VIII and Anne Boleyn, who was executed when Elizabeth was just two years and eight months old. Anne was a highly intelligent woman and well educated. She could speak French, Italian, Spanish, Latin and Greek. Elizabeth's half-sister, Mary, was the daughter of Henry's first wife, Catherine, and ruled for three years before Elizabeth, after Edward, son of Henry's third wife Jane, died in 1555. Mary was a Catholic extremist and a threat to Elizabeth's life (Schoenbaum 1979:14-16). By contrast, Elizabeth's political flair enabled her to establish and maintain a compromise settlement in religious affairs while retaining some freedom of action in war and diplomacy (Palmer & Palmer 1981:75). These women continued to have national and local influence until 1623 (Palmer & Palmer 1981:viii).

Elizabeth loved lavish entertainment: she enjoyed music, dancing, singing, masques and plays; and allowed the theatrical company associated with Tilney and Tarlton to carry the name The Queen's Men from 1583 onwards. This is the group of performers Shakespeare first joined. During her reign, between 1596 and 1602, Shakespeare's company presented some 20 plays (Palmer & Palmer 1981:77).

Social Background

England before and during the reign of Elizabeth I and James I (sixteenth-seventeenth centuries) was a male-dominated country where all the highest ranks were occupied by men, except, notably, that of the queen, who stood at the head of the state and exerted considerable influence over it. Women in general were cast in the role of underdogs. The women who were queens were more remarkable exceptions because of this.

Adulthood, in Shakespeare's England, was measured by marriage, not by age (Kastan 1999:87,96; Rowse 1979:543). Thus Shakespeare entered adulthood at the age of eighteen, when he married Anne Hathaway three months before she gave birth to their first girl-child (Burgess 1970:56-7). Age-wise Shakespeare was still very young, but he was forced to marry this woman to avoid shame and to take responsibility for his actions. Following such a strict moral code had its converse, as Kastan notes; people strayed from the straight and narrow, and there was a high incidence of infidelity (Kastan 1999:96-7). Divorce was rare but marriages did break down and separations occurred (Kastan 1999:87). Women tended to be treated as property. Forced marriages, prostitution, adultery and wife sale were common. A husband could treat his wife as a whore or in any other way he pleased (Fido 1996:111).

Men had to be superior to their wives. Those who failed to maintain their authority were humiliated by being called names (Fido 1996:80; Kastan 1999:86-88). This authority was exercised over relations within the household, where women normally lacked any voice,

let alone a public voice. The patriarchal order also stipulated that a wife had to be chaste, silent and obedient (Kastan 1999:87).

In contrast to this prevailing order, the powerful figure of the queen undoubtedly influenced Shakespeare in creating his characters, and her success as a political ruler would have strengthened his convictions about women's capacity for public life. His central female characters differed from the queen, however, in that after marriage they generally assumed traditional social roles as submissive wives to husbands who were heads of families. Hence we find women in Shakespeare writers referring to their husbands as 'My lord'. The queen never married. What is fascinating here is the probable difference between outward forms of tradition and the inner nature of the individual; surely a woman like Portia in *The Merchant of Venice* would not really succumb after marriage to the norms of society as expressed in such a conventional address to a husband? At times Shakespeare does express the inevitable process whereby resolute individualism is made to submit to prescribed and subservient modes of behaviour. An extreme example of this occurs in *The Taming of the Shrew*.

Shakespeare portrays many of his female characters in a positive light, despite the odds that faced them. This fact is of considerable interest, given the social pressures of the time, and it suggests to me not only Shakespeare's fundamental absence of prejudice in his creation of characters, but also the influence on his imagination of the figure of the sovereign, Elizabeth. Powerful women did exist in English literature prior to his time. One has only to think of the Wife of Bath and other characters in Chaucer's *Canterbury*

Tales. Nevertheless, the proliferation of important women figures in Shakespeare's work is striking, considering the normal social circumstances of women. Thus powerful women such as Portia in the *Merchant of Venice*, Portia in *Julius Caesar*, Lady Macbeth, Fulvia, Cleopatra, Desdemona, Viola, Cordelia, Goneril, Regan, and others, assert themselves against the values of the societies in which they are living, in which there is discrimination between males and females. Some characters in Shakespeare's plays have to transform themselves to be able to fit the expectations of the day. For instance, Portia must disguise herself as a man because Venetian society expects a lawyer to be a man: like all high-ranking and professional positions it is not a career open to women.

Many of Shakespeare's major female characters are influential in their husband's lives. Lady Macbeth is the obvious case in point, though Desdemona and Regan are as influential in other ways. From a consideration of the events in the trial and the scene of the ring in *The Merchant of Venice* one can speculate that Portia, too, would go on to influence Bassanio in their marriage. Although this is not made explicit, we are led to infer it because during the trial Portia proves that women can be as powerful as men. Her example shifts our expectations. Perhaps if her gender had been disclosed, the society represented in the play might have changed its attitude towards women and even its general values and standards.

Whereas Shakespeare's society expected women to behave according to its standards and expectations by being submissive wives, his plays give a variety of roles to women, many of them central. He sees men and women as equal in a world which declared them

unequal, and so his women characters are at times involved in political issues and share political power with men. The fact that women's parts would have been played by men dressed as women (who would sometimes cross-dress as men), must have challenged social assumptions and expectations about gender and about sexuality. Shakespeare does not divide human nature strictly into masculine or feminine, but observes within the individual a variety of arrangements of opposing impulses and emotions. His characters combine contradictory traits such as good and evil, aggression and compassion. His female characters, too, are presented as entire human beings, not as objects or property to be owned. He produces women characters who are independent and assertive, who show initiative, are vocal, and are politically minded. They are even given a chance to show professional expertise; as mentioned earlier, Portia, in *The Merchant of Venice* plays the part of a lawyer. His central female characters represent women who have freedom of thought, and such women challenge their husbands because they are impossible to control; they will not be subjected.

The marriage relationship, as he represents it, is not a yoke but a partnership, a mutual duty. The negative example of this is Lady Macbeth, who works with her husband to kill Duncan. The positive is Lady Macduff, who complains that her husband has left her by herself to take care of their family. Although some women are unable to stand up to their husbands, let alone persuade them to do things or reveal secrets, a strong woman like Portia in *Julius Caesar* can rebuke her husband, Brutus, by reminding him of the marital relationship: 'Dwell I but in the suburbs / Of your good pleasure? If it be no more, / Portia is Brutus's harlot, not his wife' (II.i.285-287).

Of course it must be conceded that Shakespeare's female characters influence their husbands in both negative and positive ways, and that their influence differs in degree. Calphurnia's influence is positive rather than negative because she tries to prevent Caesar from going to meet his fate, but it is not as powerful as the negative influence Lady Macbeth wields over her husband. Perhaps Calphurnia's influence is weak because Shakespeare's society would have seen her as subservient to Caesar in the social and political domain. Yet he also presents the counter example of Cleopatra who is given both private and public voice to potentially change English norms through her African influence. Antony leaves his wife, Octavia, to be with her. This may be against the prescribed norm, but the play invites us to understand the situation and so open our minds to other possibilities about marriage.

The theoretical framework that will be used to analyse codes of gendered conduct in Shakespeare's plays is Marilyn French's theory of the 'gender principle'. Although her work dates back to 1982, in my view it is still relevant because it seems to align itself with the social norms and beliefs of Shakespeare's society in regard to women, and thus enables one to highlight the difference of the women characters he creates. Chapter 1, my first substantial chapter, offers an outline of this theory.

CHAPTER ONE: THE GENDER PRINCIPLE

In Marilyn French's book, *Shakespeare's Division of Experience*, the concept 'gender' does not refer to the distinct male and female representatives of the separate sexes. To French, gender can also be used of a member of either sex who might exhibit both masculine and feminine qualities. The concept 'gender' is not identical to the gender which defines a person's sex. French uses the concept to refer to the traits which any person possesses or displays, irrespective of being male or female. French labels these traits 'feminine' and 'masculine'. She says she calls the two opposing poles masculine and feminine not because they are accurate descriptions of human capacity or human experience but because there are no other terms to describe how humans have conceptualized their experience (1982:16). Nevertheless I would see what she discusses in her theory as rooted in her own perception of the world.

French is also of the view that women and men think, speak and act differently because of their cultural programming. She recognizes the crossover situation where some men act like women and women act like men but her broad focus is on Western people in general because 'no one raised in Western culture, even in the 'enlightened' century, is free of the associations of the gender principle' (ibid. 16).

According to French, Shakespeare deals continually with the poles that she calls the feminine and the masculine gender principle (ibid. 16). She does not mean that Shakespeare thinks in terms of these principles. The point is that since Shakespeare has

both male and female characters in his plays he has to think of how these genders act, think and speak. And he has to know how their different needs and desires are judged by different standards by society.

French argues that there is a continuum along which to observe and assess the behaviour of the two genders. According to her, the pure forms are located at the extreme ends of a 'continuum'. She also states that there are human beings whose behaviour lingers along the continuum, belonging to neither the masculine nor the feminine end. Such people possess traits of both genders; thus one might see a male behaving like a female or a female behaving like a male. The essential contrast between the extremes, though, is that 'the masculine entails the ability to kill while the feminine one entails the opposite ability to give birth' (ibid. 21). This does not mean that males have only a tendency to kill or women only a tendency to produce life or give birth. According to French anyone who promotes growth and life is 'feminine' and anyone who threatens to destroy it is 'masculine'. Simply stated, the feminine supports production and multiplication of life, welfare and wellbeing, whereas the masculine wants to take away life and cause havoc, misery, greed, jealousy, fighting and all other such negative qualities and activities. In fact every human being has components of both genders since at some stage one may feel jealous of certain things, or fight against others, either physically or emotionally, in a masculine way. The opposite is also true.

The masculine principle concerns itself with 'prowess and ownership, courage, assertiveness, authority, independence, rights and legitimacy' (ibid. 21). This principle

claims 'to defend and administer justice' (ibid.). 'Power-in-the-world' rests on the masculine principle and its immediate goal is to attain and maintain such power-in-the-world (ibid. 22). Doing so is possible through 'force' or 'authority' (ibid. 22).

It is true that men are against female dominion. We can find evidence of this in Shakespeare's time in the words John Knox uttered on the eve of Queen Elizabeth's accession to the throne, words reflecting his negative reaction to the regime of women in general and to that of the queen specifically: 'To promote a woman to bear rule, superiority, dominion or empire above any realm, nation, or city, is repugnant to nature, contumely to God, a thing most contrarious to His revealed will and approved ordinance, and finally it is the subversion of good order, of all equity and justice' (Schoenbaum 1979:103).

According to French, the masculine principle is 'linear, temporal and transcendent in nature, and is concerned with time and mortality (1982:22.). For her, the masculine gender is immortal and can sublimate from one form to another. Thus unlike the feminine principle which accepts mortality and hence identifies with nature and its cycles, the masculine principle tends to fight against nature and its phenomena. Indeed, French argues that the essential relation between man and nature is dominion, control and power. In her view humans have only two forms of control over nature: to 'tame or domesticate or crossbreed it, which is a form of ownership; or to kill it' (1982:15). Since human functioning within nature works best when it is done in a cooperative manner, involving both taking and giving back, nurturing it as it nurtures us, and understanding and abiding

by its forces, such subjugation of the earth can mean only its destruction. In summary, the masculine principle is associated with powerful natural phenomena and the control of civilization; things such as thunder, lightning, the heavens, human warfare, industries, cities, human occupations (like farming, art, mining, fishing and governing). And all of these are associated in turn with power and control, cruelty and aggression, and might and energy (ibid.).

By contrast, the feminine principle is perceived and described by French as ‘circular’, ‘atemporal’ and ‘accepting’ of mortality. It is thus opposed to the linear and transcendently biased nature of the masculine. The feminine principle is associated with natural phenomena like the moon, the sea, women’s cycles, seasons, fruitfulness and sexuality. And unlike the masculine principle, the feminine principle has a dual nature. Its two components are ‘benevolent’ and ‘malevolent’. French says the latter component entails the destruction and subversion of human constructions, which do not generate life but take it away. Because of this duality, French believes that females are balanced – possessing qualities of both loving and hating (ibid.). Nature is like the feminine principle in including both malevolent and benevolent qualities. Nature produces life and living organisms just as women produce life through falling pregnant and giving birth. Yet the varying seasons of the year manifest nature’s dual character: fruitful in spring with the beauty of buds, flowers and growth, yet followed by the withering, fruitlessness and dullness of winter.

According to French, power differs for each of the gender principles. Female power has a triple nature. Women are seen as saints and goddesses (of sexual desire, wedded love, fruitfulness and virginity); as whores (cheap assets for male pleasure); and as wise old hags (threats to male power) (ibid.). The power of the feminine principle is rooted in the fact that the masculine gender is threatened by any pleasure other than sexual pleasure. Rather, it focuses on aggression and usurpation which, among other things, include violence, brutality, mercilessness, cruelty and abuse. This is in sharp contrast to the feminine principle which tends to be peaceful, kind, loving, sweet and compassionate. This hostility in the male principle encompasses 'hierarchy, legitimacy and respect for structure'. Men think that power is legitimately theirs, given to them by the natural order of things; that they are ordained by God to be at the top of the hierarchy of the world. And such power is a permanent possession (ibid. 23).

French highlights the dual nature of the feminine principle by presenting it as consisting of 'inlaw' and 'outlaw' qualities (ibid.). Outlaw qualities are those of darkness, of the flesh, of magic, evil and sexuality. Female figures who attempt to exercise control or authority or the ability to kill operate within the outlaw principle, and consequently are condemned as 'fiends', 'witches' and 'devils' – terms that emphasise their unnatural or supernatural aspects (ibid., 28). We might think of the play *Macbeth* with its female characters like Lady Macbeth and the witches in whom these qualities are reflected and manifested. The witches especially want to undermine the masculine principle – by taking control of situations and executing their power in perpetrating evil. The sexuality of the feminine principle is dynamic and nearly irresistible, which means that its power

cannot be controlled but gets out of hand. One might expect a woman to behave according to French's inlaw nature, but then the outlaw nature in her takes over. It is because of this uncontrollable energy that female characters in this play end up committing crimes and evil deeds (ibid.). The outlaw threat to the masculine principle is at its most intense when males see females taking over their power. Outlaw women behave like men, being power hungry, and showing the desire to control and to dominate others. Men find this unnerving and intolerable because they see women taking over their world as well as their power.

The inlaw feminine principle, on the other hand, is untainted, uncorrupted by such malevolent traits; it is pure and does not contain any of the 'dirty' components of the outlaw principle. Women who follow the inlaw principle are not obsessed by power; nor are they dominating or controlling in nature. Such women behave differently to men and to outlaw women. They are 'good': good-hearted, caring and loving. They follow the predominant mode of benevolent feminine behaviour. We might think of characters such as Lady Macduff in *Macbeth*, Portia in *Julius Caesar*, Portia and Jessica in *The Merchant of Venice*, Cordelia in *King Lear*, Miranda in *The Tempest*, Desdemona in *Othello*, amongst many others. Other writers than Shakespeare have also created characters who reflect the traits mentioned above: Webster's *Duchess of Malfi*, for example or Kyd's Bel-Imperia in his *Spanish Tragedy*.

Other personality traits associated with the inlaw principle are the abilities to nurture, to create happiness, and to show compassion. For this reason, according to French, inlaw

qualities emphasize the importance of community rather than the individual. For them, the saying ‘a person is a person because of other people’ is very apt. These people see themselves as part of a bigger picture and strive for harmony and goodwill, often putting the community before their own needs and happiness. And because feeling is more important than action, and sensation more important than thought, they listen to their hearts more than to their heads. Their feelings towards other people are emphasized. Their focus is on the good of all people rather than themselves. They reach out to help others and obtain satisfaction when they manage to do so. In short, the inlaw principle tends to stress the unselfish nature of women – it is ‘impersonal’ as well as ‘altruistic’ (ibid. 24). Because of this, French argues, such women are subordinate and relinquish power in a voluntary way; they do not try to hold on to power or to be superior to men. And of course if women behave thus, men do not feel threatened, because their sense of being in charge and in control is maintained.

According to French, the split in the feminine principle has been deliberately set up by tradition and culture to make sure women’s outlaw nature is tamed. It is necessary to ensure the subordination of the malevolent aspect of female nature so that men will be superior to women and the natural order of things will be preserved. In similar vein, Thompson remarks of his introduction to the Cambridge edition of *The Taming of the Shrew*: ‘women should submit to men because they (women) were created by God as inferior beings and were moreover responsible for the Fall of man from paradise’ (29). The inlaw principle is supportive of men by subordinating women to them, giving men their place to control and to exercise permanent power.

In French's opinion, women have for centuries been seen as static figures operating in a world of male experience, and denied a chance to exist as human beings in their own right, capable of making choices and informed decisions. They exist in relation to men (ibid. 30). This is because men provide the 'human' standard. The essence of being 'human', as French views it, relates to being able to change: men can transcend their nature but females cannot. Truly human figures are mobile and dynamic, and so men can grow, learn, fail, succeed and make mistakes. They possess both moral excellence and fallibility. Female figures, on the other hand, may suffer injustices or inflict pain and suffering on others, but, whatever experience they have, it can never really change them (ibid. 27). Being human, therefore, is judged in male terms, not female. Men act out the human role, make mistakes and correct them, experience 'the continuum of emotion and adaptive behaviour', while women act out the static / archetypal and stereotypic types imposed on them and are perceived as just 'statues' in the male-dominated world (*The Winter's Tale* exemplifies this well) (ibid.).

The traditional division of experience expects females to be morally superior to males, hence the subduing force of the inlaw component of the feminine gender principle. Even when females try to act like men and exert power, they are still inevitably bound within themselves by the inlaw feminine principle and so in due course will give up that power. As the two gender principles occupy different poles on the continuum, they can never be equal. The feminine principle is accepted by men if and only if it structures itself in inlaw terms, that is as subordinate to the masculine principle and helping it to control and

transcend (as Portia does in *The Merchant of Venice*), not in outlaw terms which pose a threat and are thus condemned. By contrast, men have the energy and freedom to do whatever they like because of the masculine principle.

These patterns are widespread. In almost all parts of the world powerful positions are occupied by men, although the trend might be seen as changing slightly in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries with women coming to power as presidents and governors. Such women would be categorised by French as belonging to the outlaw component of the feminine principle because of their ambition to be above men in positions of power. In the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, too, there was a deviation from the trend. During this period, women became prominent figures in the so-called male world: such women as the wives of Henry the Eighth (Anne Boleyn, Jane Seymour, Anne of Cleves) and their daughters Elizabeth and Mary who became queens after their father's death (Schoenbaum 1979:16). Most women in the Elizabethan era, however, were under the same pressure to conform to the image set up for them by Western culture of being subordinate. They were not expected to exercise their rights, power or minds on matters of choice, authority or control. They were expected to use their capabilities to tend to home chores and other simple jobs such as making clothing and providing food. And so the positions they occupied were very low.

According to French, traces of the gender principle and its categorization of experience can be found in every human tradition: in language, law, religion, art, philosophy, and

science. And to her the fullest and most easily accessible expression of these ideas occurs in literature, especially in the work of great artists such as Shakespeare (ibid. 16).

In literature, men tend to be identified with the masculine principle and women with the feminine. Of course, there are exceptions. Yet given the cultural norm and the religious belief (be it Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, or any other) that men are superior to their wives, men are generally expected to exhibit the qualities of the masculine principle, and women are seen only in relation to men, not as independent human beings. This is evident in the emerging role of female characters in the theatre of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Such characters had to be played by men, as women were not allowed to appear on stage. Acting was not a woman's role, it was men's work; and so men had to 'transform' themselves into women by dressing like women. And, ironically, although the women's roles they played might reflect characters with full capacity, ability and power, they were still not expected to be a threat to the male characters but to show them support.

The gender principle operates in interesting ways in Shakespeare's work, because he both shares and challenges these common prejudices. *The Winter's Tale*, for example, supplies a striking image of a woman 'statue' in a male-dominated world. Portia, who plays the part of a male lawyer, gives up her role at the end of *The Merchant of Venice* in order to marry, to become a wife. A character like Lady Macbeth, who tries to renounce her feminine personality, ends up destroying herself because of her involvement in the masculine deed of killing Duncan. And, as I will go on to show, the three daughters in

King Lear show the feminine principle at play in different ways. Goneril and Regan enact the outlaw principle. Instead of taking care of their aged father, they strip him of everything he has, his land, his wealth and his dignity; they force him out of their homes into the storm which causes him to rail against the extremes of human cruelty. Cordelia is the victim of the impulses of both her sisters and her father who disinherits her of everything. But her inlaw nature cannot be consumed by her family's resentment. She remains loyal, compassionate, forgiving and devoted, and retains her sense of duty to her father, just as the feminine gender principle would expect. In the course of this thesis, however, I will argue that some women characters do hold on to their power and status until they die, such as Cleopatra in *Antony and Cleopatra*.

Thus, for me, the real interest of French's study is not the traditional Western attitudes and values she highlights, but the ways in which the workings of her theory can be traced in Shakespeare's works. To her, 'reading Shakespeare in the light of the gender principles can illuminate Western attitudes and the analysis of values may illuminate some dark corners in Shakespeare's works' (1982:18).

Before beginning an application of French's theory to Shakespeare, I would like to look at a few contemporary dramas, in order to explore their treatment of gender issues, and their presentation of women characters: Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*, Webster's *Duchess of Malfi*, and Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta*. This will provide a context for the brief consideration of Shakespeare's *King Lear* that follows.

The Spanish Tragedy

For my purposes, the most important character in *The Spanish Tragedy* is Bel-Imperia, the Duke's daughter. Bel-Imperia is powerful, strong-willed and independent. She is a person who will not by any means tolerate subjection to male power even if it results in her death. Her courage is revealed when she challenges her two bullying brothers who want to order her around, and to force her to marry the man of their choice after the death of her lover. Instead, she does what she feels is right for her to do.

Bel-Imperia participates actively in the revenge plot of the play. Together with the father of her lover Horatio, she devises a strategy to perform a play in which Horatio's murderers have roles to play. They are able to do so with no suspicion of foul play because performance is a common form of entertainment and their targets – Lorenzo and Balthazar – are quite willing to take part. This play-within-the-play is performed on the same day as Horatio's murder, and re-enacts it. Hieronimo thus gets revenge on Lorenzo for his son's death, and Bel-Imperia for her lover's. She pretends to be grieving, and says she would have paid revenge if she had been able to do so. So saying, she stabs Balthazar, without the audience becoming aware that she is actually doing so. She then turns the knife on herself and dies. Hieronimo feels sorry that she cannot witness the shock on the faces of the Duke, the Spanish king and the king of Portugal when they realize that the play is real.

In Bel-Imperia one can see a balanced human being who operates across the entire spectrum of the feminine principle. She possesses qualities that are both outlaw and

inlaw. Her very daring nature, observed when she challenges her twin brother to listen to her, shows how brave she is. Tradition would not expect her to initiate affectionate relationships, as she does with Horatio, her late lover's friend. She is at times very impatient: she finds it difficult to accept the slow reaction of Hieronimo to avenging the death of Horatio. She co-plans the murder of Balthazar and her brother Lorenzo in revenge for the deaths of her lovers because she feels it is her duty to do so. Her craftiness is portrayed when she falls in love with Horatio and justifies this as something that would help her keep alive the memory of his friend and her lover. And she is able to set a trap for Balthazar and Lorenzo without their realizing what she is trying to do. Her defiance, her rebellious nature and her fearlessness would be perceived by French as outlaw.

At the same time, there is evidence in her of feminine, specifically inlaw qualities. She is loving and affectionate. She puts her own life at risk just to be with the man she loves. And even though she initiates the relationship with Horatio, she feels ashamed of doing so, which shows that she goes along with the gender norms of the society she lives in. She offers to die in the place of Horatio when Balthazar, Lorenzo and their two men seek to murder him: 'O save his life and let me die for him! / O save him brother, save him Balthazar: / I loved Horatio but he lov'd me not' (II. Iv. 56-8). She wants to protect him by lying: by saying that it is her fault that he is with her. Nor is she afraid of death. Indeed a person who puts others first and herself after befits the inlaw qualities of the gender principle.

Likewise Bel-Imperia's death by stabbing herself demonstrates several aspects of her nature. Of course it shows how brave she is. More than this, it shows how strategic she has been in her determination to get justice. She has gone to such lengths in order to avenge both Andrea, her former lover, and Horatio, her recent lover. Her quest for revenge is so intense that she engages in a highly risky and complex endeavour to ensure that the murderers who have made her suffer so much pay with their lives. Her quest is successful. Her death by her own hand frees her from the oppression and torture she is likely to suffer at the hands of the king. She transcends the barriers of being a woman and commits an act expected only of men. And yet it also shows her faith, since in killing herself she seeks to be reunited, after death, with the men she loves.

The Duchess of Malfi

Like Bel-Imperia, *The Duchess of Malfi* is presented as a brave woman, a young widow who knows what she wants and makes sure she gets it regardless of the consequences. Also like Bel-Imperia, she is very forward. She makes advances on the man she loves because she is not afraid to let a man know her feelings for him. Although she comes across as a jolly, lighthearted person, she is also loving, caring and sensuous. Her feminine wiles are seen in the way she woos Antonio. Calling him to write her will, she agonises over how she would have preferred to have a husband who would take care of this for her. Antonio teases her that she should leave all her assets to him. The Duchess explicitly tells Antonio that she would like him to be the 'overseer' (I.i.375-7). This hide-and-seek word game continues until the Duchess sees that one of Antonio's eyes is red. She offers him her late husband's ring as a cure.

One of your eyes is blood-shot – use my ring to't,
They say 'tis very sovereign – 'twas my wedding ring,
And I did vow never to part with it,
But to my second husband (I.i.404-7).

When Antonio protests that she has made him stark blind with the ring she tells him to remove the devil that he claims has caused his blindness. He asks how to do this and she tells him to put the ring on his finger. She does so herself. Underlying the badinage is a serious intent: clearly she is asking Antonio to be her husband. In fact, giving him the ring is marrying him and he gladly accepts although he is worried about her brothers' likely reaction.

The Duchess's feminine side is evident in her enjoyment of the passionate times she spends with Antonio. In attending to her own affectionate needs, she is also fulfilling the inlaw role of a woman by loving Antonio. Her sensuous nature is obvious to Ferdinand who, when saying goodbye to her, calls her a 'lusty widow'. She later falls pregnant and bears two children to Antonio, whom her brothers loathe. By creating these new lives she multiplies nature. Her feminine side is also evident in the tolerance and patience with which she endures the torture and torments of her brothers, especially her twin brother Ferdinand, and in her inability to take her own life during her torture by the madmen.

Yet she is also inventive, quick-witted and strategic, as we see when she hides Antonio and plans his escape to Ancona, and in her ability to make effective excuses to conceal her pregnancy and confinement. She is also resilient, defiant and rebellious. She challenges social rules, values and expectations by remarrying when she knows she

should remain a widow. She challenges the rule of her brothers by refusing the man they have chosen for her, one whom they think will preserve the good name of the family, and not disgrace them. She challenges Ferdinand by insisting that she is young and beautiful and that she should be allowed to marry whom she pleases, and by asserting that she is officially married to Antonio, and not just cohabiting with him (III.ii). Her resilience is evident in her ability to withstand the torture that her brother subjects her to, through the madmen who eventually murder her; and in her dying, which is painful and extended. She does not regret having loved Antonio, and she is not fearful when shown the coffin her brothers have sent for her. In fact she declares to Bosola that she is not and should not be afraid of death since dying will take her to the other world and the 'excellent company' of her beloved ones (IV.ii.210-5). She mocks her brother with the message that they could not have given her a better gift than death. Before she dies, she challenges her executioners: 'Pull and pull strongly, for your able strength must pull down heaven upon me' (ibid. 231). It is only after seeing Antonio, whom she has presumed dead, that she dies, with his name on her lips. The resolution she shows is almost masculine; and perhaps it is for this reason that her death is avenged, when Bosola stabs Ferdinand and gives the Cardinal a final blow.

And so we might say that the Duchess combines both inlaw and outlaw qualities, even though she does not, like Bel-Imperia, go so far as to undertake the masculine act of self-murder.

The Jew of Malta

In Marlow's *Jew of Malta* we encounter a character who is principally of inlaw nature, an example that could better be used to illustrate French's feminine gender principle. Her inlaw nature is most evident in her relations with her father, Barabas, the Jew. Abigail loves her father and is prepared to do anything for him. She knows their vulnerability as Jews; she is aware of the ill treatment that Jews generally receive. Her father suffers injustice at the hands of the Christians, and he is forced to forfeit his home to the nuns to use as a convent. When her father tells her that everything he owns has been repossessed by the state, she offers to go to the senate house and reprehend them for this until they agree to reduce his penalty. While we might be tempted to view her drive to confront the senators as outlaw in nature, the form it takes corrects this: her threat to scream and pull her hair is very feminine. When her father asks her to help retrieve his precious stones and the money that he has hidden by pretending to be a Christian convert and joining the nunnery she agrees, even though it puts her life at risk. She sets her father's needs above her own because she is loyal to him and wants to correct the injustices that have been done to him. Unlike Jessica in *The Merchant of Venice*, she is not tempted to steal from him or cheat him in any way. She is an inlaw person, and complies completely.

This compliance continues even though her father exploits and abuses her. Her inlaw nature is obvious in her tolerance of her father's treatment of her. He insults her and calls her names, 'paltry silly girl' (II. iii. 286). He never makes requests but only issues commands like, 'What ho, Abigail; open the door, I say' (II. iii. 222), and, 'Give me the letters. Daughter, do you hear?' (II. iii. 226). Her father uses her to cause conflict

between the governor's son Lodowick and Lodowick's friend Mathias by inducing them both to fall in love with her. The fight that ensues leads eventually to both their deaths. During her father's trickery of the two friends, she has to pretend to love Lodowick: 'He has my heart; I smile against my will' (II. iii. 289).

This compliance comes at considerable cost to her. When she is forced to lie to Lodowick, to pretend to love him, she breaks down, and Lodowick is able to see the drastic change on her face when her father gives her to him as his wife. Fearing that she might let the truth out, her father tries to cover up: 'O, muse not at it, 'tis the Hebrews' guise / That maidens new-betrothed should weep a while' (II.iii.327-8). We know, however, that Abigail is crying because of the guilt she feels, her regret for deceiving Lodowick: 'O wretched Abigail, what hast thou done?' (III.iii.322). We see from this how innocent, honest and pure she is, and how vulnerable she is to the manipulation of her father. She knows she has no choice but to do as her father commands her, but she suffers because of it.

Abigail never gets out from under her father's domination. All along she does what she wants. Never once does she enjoy being a young, independent, free woman. And yet there is a quiet line of determination in her that sees her resist being wholly defined by him. He hopes Abigail will turn out like him: 'Daughter, a word more; kiss him, speak him fair; / And like a cunning Jew so cast about/That ye be both made sure ere you come out' (II.Iii.236-8). But she never does become cunning. Her innocence is quite evident in her acknowledgement of her guilt. As well as trying to treat her like a pawn, he tries to

sow seeds of hatred in her. He says of Lodowick, ‘Use him as if he were a – Philistine / Dissemble, swear, protest, vow to love him; / He is not of the seed of Abraham’ (II. iii. 226-232). His incitement is unsuccessful because hatred does not take root in her, neither for Christians nor for him. Indeed, she does manage the secret rebellion of falling in love with Mathias, and remains true to this love despite all her father throws her way. Indeed, it is this love that helps her to see her father for what he is: ‘As sure as heaven rained manna for the Jews, / So sure shall he and Don Mathias die: / His father was chiefest enemy’ (II.iii.250-30). It is the death of Lodowick and her true love, Mathias, that leads to her decision to become a real nun and convert to Christianity. She realizes how corrupt and deceitful her father is and appeals him to repent of his sins. In her letter she writes:

Hard-hearted father, unkind Barabas,
Was this the pursuit of thy policy,
To make me show them favour severally,
That by my favour they should both be slain?
Admit thou lovest not Lodowick for his sire,
Yet Don Mathias ne’er offended thee.
But thou wert set upon extreme revenge,
Because the prior dispossess thee once,
And couldst not venge it, but upon his son,
Nor on his son, but by Mathias’ means
Nor on Mathias, but by murdering me.’ (III. iiii. 39-49).

Of course this appeal is bound to be in vain. She has seen how her father loathes and despises Christians, and the extent to which he will go in order to avenge himself. If she becomes a nun she can well imagine that he will hate her forever for this betrayal. As indeed he does: ‘For she that varies from me in belief / Gives great presumption that she loves me not, / Or loving, doth dislike of something done’ (III.iv.9-11).

The most extreme form that her endurance must take, though, is accepting the death he sends her way by intentionally and deliberately poisoning her and all the nuns. This forces her to further self-reflection and self-judgement. On the verge of death, she confesses to being used by her father in the killing of Mathias and Lodowick, but requests the friar never to divulge this confession to anyone. Her heart is burdened with guilt, it is true, but the main reason she wants the confession to be kept secret is because she knows that her father will surely be killed if the state finds out. Even after all he has done to her, even though, ironically, it is he who has killed her, she still seeks to protect and cover for him. She dies a more mature and experienced person than the naïve girl she has been. She tells the friar that she has run away from the nunnery because she has been 'frail' and 'unconfirmed' and was 'chained ' to the 'follies' of this world, but now experience and grief have made her see the 'difference of things' (III.iv.62-6).

She thus remains an honourable, caring and loving person to the very end. She does not demonstrate any of the outlaw qualities of challenge or rebellion. Rather she earns our sympathy through her pathos: she loves a man she is unable to marry, and indeed is forced to be implicated in his death; she is loyal and faithful to a father who abuses and ultimately murders her. Her confession is an attempt to cleanse herself because she is unable to keep any 'dirty' secrets inside her. The death she dies is one we might call 'feminine' since it does not come about as punishment for undertaking any 'masculine' activities. Rather her purity and honesty, her obedience and her endurance of suffering place her firmly within the inlaw realm.

King Lear

Unlike *The Jew of Malta*, *King Lear* has not one but three women characters who offer variations on the feminine principle. Goneril and Regan are both ‘outlaw’ figures, defined as such mostly but not only in terms of their father. Cordelia, like Abigail, is very much an ‘inlaw’ figure. Perhaps we take her more seriously than Abigail because the character of Lear, and especially the anagnorosis he undergoes, has a moral profundity that Barabas never desires let alone achieves. Like *The Jew of Malta*, the play has a hard and bleak ending, yet its tragedy has depths that Marlowe’s play will never plumb.

As indicated earlier, the qualities with which ‘outlaw’ women are associated include darkness, the flesh, magic, sexuality and evil. Female figures who attempt to exercise control or authority are aligned with this principle, and consequently are condemned as ‘fiends’, ‘witches’ and ‘devils’. Both Goneril and Regan operate firmly within the outlaw realm. Regan’s inclinations are to struggle for power and possession. She desires tangible material things in order to know that she is loved. Riches are all important to her. She thus takes advantage of the fact that her father, King Lear, wants to be flattered, seizing the opportunity to own a third of his kingdom. She is hypocritical, flattering her father by pretending to love him in order to gain the kingdom and land he offers in exchange. But this is not enough. Together with her sister Goneril, she conspires to overpower him by stripping him of all the wealth and valuable goods he owns. She is also wicked and cruel. Even her husband regards her as a monster (IV.ii.60).

Regan is a deceitful person who is shallow, loveless, pitiless and abusive. She is also heartless, ungrateful, and corrupt and has no conscience as to right or wrong. Indeed, she is so wicked that she presents a great threat to her society. In the process of pursuing power she becomes a murderer, killing Gloucester's servant by stabbing him in the back (III.vii.80). She is also vicious, torturing Gloucester with her husband Cornwall's help: plucking out his eyes to leave him blind. Having done so, she dismisses him, 'Go thrust him out at gates and let him smell / His way to Dover' (III.vi.98-99). The servants who witness this comment, 'If she live long, / And in the end meet the old course of death, / Women will all turn monsters' (III.vii.99-101).

Her greed exceeds the desire for material things. It is sexual too. Although she has a husband she lusts after Edmund, and after the death of her husband takes him as her lover. In fact both sisters pursue Edmund, which leads to the conflict between them that culminates in the elder Goneril poisoning the younger Regan. This makes the reader perceive both sisters as adulteresses.

Like Regan, Goneril is presented as a power hungry person. Goneril is the initiator of the evil, although turns out not quite as bad as Regan, since she does not engage in face-to-face acts of torture and murder. Goneril is an opportunist; at the outset she is the one who seizes the chance to lay hands on her father's wealth. She capitalizes on his weakness of wanting to be flattered and uses it to achieve what she desires most: authority, power, and wealth. Goneril is astute enough to see her father's foolishness in asking them how much they love him. She is eloquent in her speech, and flatters her

father so effectively that he wants more of it from the other two sisters. This flattery leads Regan to claim to love him even more than Goneril; but it makes Cordelia decide not to say anything rather than to be untrue to him. This flattery thus blinds him to the real love of Cordelia; and leads, indirectly, to his downfall.

Goneril is very cruel, treating her father like a dog and turning him out of his home once she has got what she is after. She is ungrateful to him. She might at least have given him shelter and food but she sends him off with nothing. Ultimately she poisons her sister Regan so that she can have Edmund to herself. She even asks her lover Edmund to slay her husband who is now an obstacle to their love (IV.vi.252-5).

Neither Regan nor Goneril seems to possess any inlaw qualities. They are both located on the extreme end of the feminine principle which is outlaw in nature. Indeed, even the outlaw seems to have no place for these two, whose overt cruelty and malice place them in the realm of the most destructive masculine behaviour.

The elder sisters' hypocrisy and greed for money and power lead their youngest sister, Cordelia, to suffer severely at the hands of her father. She is not greedy like her sisters. She would rather inherit nothing, even be banned, than flatter her father so as to get a third of his kingdom. She has her own unique values distinct from those of her sisters. Hence she refuses to flatter him by telling him, in exaggerated terms, how much she loves him. Her sisters see her as a fool for opting to get nothing instead of flattering her father to inherit the riches. Yet Cordelia is frank, upright and honest; she is a person of

integrity, sincerity and worth. She tells her father that she loves him as any daughter would love a father, without overstatement or amplification. Unlike them, she is also caring and sincerely loving, and her love for her father is genuine and pure. She is pained by what she sees her sisters do to him. She feels pity for him for being too blind to see through their flattery.

Unlike her sisters, too, she is absent for much of the play. We do not learn much about her beyond her humble and obedient nature. She has been the apple of her father's eye, but after refusing to flatter him she becomes the most hated. The close ties between them are replaced by distance. King Lear wants her so far away from him that he gives her away to the French king as a wife. She reluctantly yet obediently marries the king of France and lives with him until her return to England to help her father. The huge gap created by this drastic change leaves one to wonder if reconciliation will ever be possible. And yet despite being treated so badly by her father, she is able to forgive and forget, and so when she is needed, she returns to England to help him, to take care of him when he is blind and homeless. One might think she bears no hatred for her father. Indeed, she seems incapable of hating anyone. Their reconciliation is shortlived, since she is quickly put to death. Her death causes her father great grief and his madness becomes evident in his agonizing over her. At least she is united with him before she dies.

Unlike her sisters, there is no part of her that reflects masculinity. Like Abigail in *The Jew of Malta*, Cordelia is entirely inlaw. Within this realm, she has courage to assert herself and her own values in spite of all that happens to her and to those around her.

The Gendering of Death

All's cheerless, dark, and deadly.
Your eldest daughters have fordone themselves,
And desperately are dead (V.iii.288-290.)

This is what Kent says in the last moments of *King Lear*.

In bringing this chapter to a close, I wish to comment on the deaths of the various women characters I have considered in the light that French's model might bring to them. French would argue, I think, that a woman who tries to operate along the lines of the masculine principle is likely to die as punishment for trying to be masculine. A woman like Bel-Imperia, for example, is not acceptable in the world since she is a threat to men. She needs to be tamed of her wild nature so that the male principle can be reinforced. The death she suffers releases her from the threat of further torment, and promises to reunite her with those she has loved. Yet it also serves to restore the balance of masculine power, by removing the threat of an outlaw woman. Because of its gruesome nature and the revenge that motivates it, her death might itself be termed 'masculine'. This is ironic, but also fitting, since she has been successful and effective in enacting revenge. In both her life and her death, she has transcended the barriers of being a woman.

Like Bel-Imperia, the Duchess of Malfi is a balanced person, who displays qualities of both genders. Like Bel-imperia, dies a violent death, being strangled like a criminal. She does not take her own life but the way she dies is neither a peaceful one nor is it from natural causes. So we might also see her death as a corrective to her quest for the outlaw qualities of independence and assertion.

Abigail in *The Jew of Malta* is the kind of a woman who would most accurately fit the description of feminine: she completely meets the requirements of being an inlaw woman, submitting, accepting and enduring all that the masculine world throws in her path. She is the epitome of a submissive woman who will never threaten the masculine gender but will always guarantee its support. Men should feel comfortable around a woman so inlaw in nature. We might predict, from French's model, that such a goodhearted and well-behaved woman, who has no trace of the outlaw about her, would die a peaceful and natural death. But she does not. Although she seeks refuge from the masculine world in the convent, she cannot escape the reach of her father's revenge, and she dies by poison at his hand. Even so, she dies with forgiveness and protectiveness in her heart. Her death, like her life, manifests all the qualities of an inlaw woman.

Both Goneril and Regan, in *King Lear*, die well-deserved deaths. Both women have operated at the extreme ends of the outlaw, carrying out unwarranted acts of violence and cruelty, and conducting themselves in ways that completely exclude the inlaw qualities of women. A woman such as Goneril, for example, seems to be a man in a woman's body: she schemes, conspires, cheats and murders. She is no woman at all, and by usurping masculine qualities, she poses an extreme threat to the masculine world. Regan is married to a man who would be good, and indeed turns out to be good after her death. But her powerful nature is what dismisses and suppresses the good in him. She is also prone to acts of extreme cruelty, turning the knife, metaphorically, on her father, and, literally, on the servant of Gloucester, when she stabs them both in the back.

Whereas Regan kills only one person, Goneril is a double murderer and a suicide, since she poisons Regan, instigates the hanging of Cordelia, and then stabs herself. The violence of her death emphasizes its masculine nature: by wiping her out it seems the masculine order is restoring itself. By contrast, both Regan and Cordelia are victims. Regan is differentiated from Cordelia, however, by dying unmourned. Given the evil she has perpetrated it seems a fitting punishment that sees such an outlaw woman through to her end. Cordelia's death is different. Obedient, honest and loving as she is, we do not expect her to be punished by death. And yet she is not obliterated by death as Goneril and Regan are. Of course her death is what finally tips Lear over into madness, since he deceives himself into believing she is still alive: 'Do you see this? Look on her! Look on her! / Look there! Look there!' (Vi.iii.308-309). And it is characteristic of Lear that he should see what he wants to see. But in doing so here he gives Cordelia a kind of immortality: she lives on because she lives on for him.

In conclusion, both male and female characters may overlap each other's realm of existence, and incorporate qualities of each of the gender principles. But they can do this only to the extent that will not threaten the main principle to which they belong. As has been demonstrated above, there are few characters who fall solely into either the outlaw or the inlaw principle. Of course, death comes to us all, and so we might be left wondering as to the validity of the notion that a masculine death is a punishment for behaving in a masculine way. Yet the deaths of the characters explored above shed

interesting light on the lives they led, and the gendering of death, like the gendering of life and of power, is an issue that will receive further attention in the chapters that follow.

What will be explored in this thesis is the extent to which characters in the plays under discussion, *The Merchant of Venice*, *Julius Caesar*, *Macbeth*, and *Antony and Cleopatra*, exemplify which aspects of the gender principle, and how far they therefore reflect the norms of society or challenge those norms. Though the female parts would have been played by males, as indicated earlier, what is crucial is that the roles are female not the actors. In this thesis I hope to show that Shakespeare's powerful women challenge these norms more than simply reflect them.

CHAPTER TWO: *THE MERCHANT OF VENICE* AND *JULIUS CAESAR*

The Merchant of Venice and *Julius Caesar* are both ‘problem’ plays that are hard to categorise. For one thing, it is not easy to fix when the two plays were written. Analysts speculate that looking at certain criteria such as structure, language, sequence of events, may suggest an order of composition. Bloom places *The Merchant of Venice* between 1596 and 1597, along with *Henry IV Part One*, though gives no clear-cut date; and places *Julius Caesar* 1599 with *Much Ado about Nothing*, *Henry V* and *As You like It* (1998:xv). Bloom is of the view that *The Merchant of Venice* may be Shakespeare’s first ‘dark comedy’ or ‘problem play’ set in a city of psychic dark corners (1998:177).

For another, when one reads the titles of the two plays, one expects that the characters referred to will dominate the plays from beginning to end, but this is not so. From the title of *Merchant of Venice*, one would anticipate that Antonio, the merchant, will be the main character and appear in many scenes of the play but he is, in fact, very scarce. Instead, Portia and Shylock seem to be at the centre of the play. The merchant is only vital to the court scene, in which he presents himself to render his pound of flesh. When that does not happen, he goes on to issue an ultimatum to Shylock to convert to Christianity and to give up half his wealth. In the process, Shylock is stripped of his riches as well as his religious identity, and effectively destroyed. Similarly, one might expect Caesar to be central to all the events in the play that bears his name, but he is not. He appears only in a

few scenes. Caesar is murdered early on, and his ghost then represents him in the scenes that follow. Brutus and Antony, by contrast, feature prominently throughout the play.

The third reason I think these plays might be termed 'problem plays' is the question of genre. Is *The Merchant of Venice* a comedy or a tragedy? Is Shylock's total breakdown and stripping of wealth not tragic? Does tragedy conclude only in physical death? To me, Shylock's loss of all that makes him what he is, is tragic enough to warrant classifying the play as a tragedy. I do not perceive it as comic because one cannot, with much humour, celebrate the fall of another person. I then begin to ask myself: if Shylock were a Christian, would the play still be called a comedy? Similar questions arise in regard to *Julius Caesar*. Is it a political play? or a history play? Since politics cannot be divorced from history, I am tempted to conclude that it reflects elements of both. Shakespeare was writing during Elizabeth's reign when the situation was tense and everything done or said was scrutinised, and anyone found or suspected of being against the queen severely punished. A writer had to be very cautious not to step on the toes of the queen through his writing lest he be regarded as rebellious.

Having looked at the reasons for classifying these plays as problematic, I would like to see whether Shakespeare portrays the female characters in them also in problematic ways. I will do so by focusing on their natures, the roles assigned to them and played by them, their silences, their non-verbal behaviour, the crucial scenes in which we see them exerting their influence, and the responses they elicit. In doing so, I hope to come closer to a sense of the relative worth of French's model for a reading of the problem plays. Will

it give us insight into how Shakespeare deviates from general perceptions of women in the society of his time; how he includes aspects of their nature that do not coincide with what is generally expected of them; how he, for example, raises them out of the domestic sphere and extends their influence in political ways, or into the legal sphere? Such presentations of women make them similar to men in character, potential, status, mentality and power. Maybe his imagination opens a new page for women; ‘creates’ a new England in which women are capable of doing and achieving what the community has assumed can be achieved only by men. Through this Shakespeare’s audiences would witness the empowerment of women.

The women characters in the two plays offer us instances to experience both gender principles, that is, masculine and feminine. This makes these plays the obvious choice for a first exploration of the theoretical framework outlined in Chapter 1. In some instances, I expect these characters to align well with the model whereas in others they won’t. Both *The Merchant of Venice* and *Julius Caesar* have significant women characters named Portia. These women have some qualities in common, yet they are quite different in circumstance and stage of life. Both plays also have less significant women characters, called, respectively, Jessica and Calphurnia, who, while interesting in themselves, also shed light on their more important counterparts. My aim in this chapter is to explore these four characters, since between them they offer variations on the outlaw and inlaw components of the gender principle. Jessica and Calphurnia are rather more inlaw in nature than the two Portias, who seem to have qualities of both genders. For the purpose of this chapter, I will first focus on *The Merchant of Venice* before analysing *Julius*

Caesar in order to test the theoretical framework outlined in chapter one. My exploration of this last play will pave the way for a later discussion of the later Roman play, *Antony and Cleopatra*, though of course the concerns in this earlier play are more political and military and less romantic. Overall, this first substantial analysis of these two problem plays will help towards an evaluation of French's model.

The Merchant of Venice

As indicated above, the main female character in this play is Portia, the daughter of a rich man who has recently died. Before studying her in depth, though, I would like to examine the minor character, Jessica, because she is important for an understanding of the position of Jews in the Christian society of her times. She is also useful for measuring the extent to which the character of Portia can be analysed in terms of French's model.

In Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta*, Barabas's daughter Abigail is sympathetic towards her father and does not steal from him even though she has every opportunity to do so. Abigail is good natured and so exemplifies well French's model of the inlaw gender type. Like her, Jessica is portrayed as a person who is kind, gentle, sweet and feminine. Unlike her, Jessica is ashamed to be her father's daughter; she deserts him and steals from him in the process. She is different from Abigail in that her strength is revealed in the love she has for Lorenzo which helps her conquer the challenges she encounters, including the burden of guilt she carries with her for doing so. She is also a woman of strong will and determination who takes a major decision that will lead to her independence.

Jessica is the daughter of Shylock, and so, unlike Portia, has a father who is still very much alive. Shylock watches over her like a hawk, notices her every movement and expects her to do house chores. He wants her not to be tainted by Christians so he keeps her at home under lock and key. As Shylock's daughter Jessica is forced to endure the oppression of her father as well as racial strife and prejudice.

Despite this, she manages to attract the attentions of Lorenzo, and to fall in love. Although Lorenzo is a Christian, Jessica sees that as no barrier to their relationship. And although Jews are a race greatly resented by Christians at the time, Lorenzo too falls in love with her. Perhaps Shakespeare is making the point that female Jews are not as despised as male ones because they do not own businesses or lend money. Perhaps he is trying to show that love conquers all. Certainly, he is showing that Jessica is tired of being kept a prisoner in her own home. In Act II scene iii, when contemplating eloping, she reflects to her father's servant:

Farewell good Launcelot.
Alack, what heinous sin is it in me
To be ashamed to be my father's child!
But though I am a daughter to his blood
I am not to his manners: O Lorenzo
If thou keep promise I shall end this strife,
Become a Christian and thy loving wife! (II.iii.15-21)

Jessica shows, in these lines, how disappointed she is in her father's attitude to life and how ashamed she feels to have his blood in her. She feels this is the only link connecting them since, she consoles herself, she does not resemble him in her behaviour. Instead of sympathizing with him for being isolated and discriminated against and ill-treated as a

Jew, she dissociates herself from him. While she also suffers the ridicule of the Christians, she does not live like him, in hatred. Her choice is love.

Indeed, it is the love she has for Lorenzo that helps her overcome the obstacles she encounters. Despite some uncertainty about what Lorenzo will do ('O Lorenzo / If thou keep promise...'), she is herself quite clear about what she wants. She is desperate to marry Lorenzo, convert to Christianity and thus be rid of the racial strife she is enduring. She is tired of living her father's miserable life, being a victim of society; and marrying Lorenzo is the bridge to her freedom. She thinks that becoming a Christian through marriage will, at least for her, end the conflict between Jews and Christians. She is not just using Lorenzo to escape, however. She loves him sincerely. In her words, 'Become a Christian and thy loving wife', we see her view that a wife cannot just be a wife, but must be loving and caring to her husband.

To do so she must sever her ties to her father. Because her father disapproves of her relationship with Lorenzo, and keeps her a prisoner in her own home, she cannot simply open the door and go out; nor can she do so during the day. Instead she must leave through a window at night when her father is asleep. In doing so, she takes the further step of stealing from him a kind of dowry to give to Lorenzo. This is unexpected: in it, we see another side to her that is usually hidden. The person we have considered good-natured and humble is shown to be a fake. She has always been the apple of her father's eye, reminding him of his late wife. We have never seen him ill-treat her. And so her

stealing from him puzzles us. It makes her similar to the other characters in the play who are not what they seem to be.

She comments, as she throws her goods as well as the stolen treasure out of the window:

Here catch this casket, it is worth thy pains.
I'm glad 'tis night – you do not look on me –
For I am much ashamed of my exchange:
But love is blind, and lovers cannot see
The pretty follies that themselves commit,
For if they could, Cupid himself would blush
To see me thus transformed to a boy. (II.vi.33-39)

She is forced to dress up as a boy. The disguise is necessary, but it is risky, since tradition at the time did not allow women to wear trousers, and, if caught and exposed, Jessica would face the shame of being made a laughing stock. As a woman masked as a boy for the sake of disguise, she is ashamed of her disgraceful figure. But it is for the sake of her love for Lorenzo as well as for her own independence that she is prepared to venture into the unknown and travel at night. The disguise is thus interesting because it serves as a transitional identity between being Shylock's daughter and becoming Lorenzo's wife. In making this transition she is renouncing her position as a Jew and the culture associated with it. And perhaps the masculine identity she assumes helps her mask the burden of guilt she carries with her, as an inlaw woman, for stealing from her father.

Jessica is a good-natured person, but later on she alludes to the discrimination, taunts, teasing and humiliation she has suffered as a Jew. She says that Shylock's servant, Launcelot, 'tells me flatly there's no mercy for me in heaven, because I'm a Jew's daughter; and he says you are no good member of the commonwealth, for in converting

Jews into Christians, you raise the price of pork' (III.v.28-32). She puts this jokingly to avoid anger and confrontation, but underlying the joke is the hurt she has bottled up for quite some time, and I sense that she has decided to let Lorenzo and his friends know how she feels about the humiliation and suffering she has endured. Her psychological and emotional maturity is evident in her resignation: she has accepted that as a Jew she will always be discriminated against, as a Jew she will be looked down upon. But she no longer cares about the negative pressures directed at her, because she has now shed this identity in marrying a Christian.

Portia is like Jessica in some important respects. Even though she has lost her father (a very rich man), he continues to exert considerable influence over her life because he has taken it upon himself to protect his daughter from men who may woo her for her inherited wealth. Early in the play, Portia speaks about the fact that her suitors have to choose the right casket to win her hand; that she is not free to choose a man she loves:

If to do were as easy as to know what were good to do, chapels had been churches, and poor men's cottages princes' palaces. It is a good divine that follows his own instructions. I can easier teach twenty what were good to be done, than be one of the twenty to follow mine own teaching; the brain may devise laws for the blood, but a hot temper leaps o'er a cold decree – such a hare is madness the youth, to skip o'er the meshes of good counsel the cripple; but this reasoning is not in the fashion to choose me a husband. O me the word 'choose'! I may neither choose who I would, nor refuse who I dislike, so is the will of a living daughter curbed by the will of a dead father: is it not hard Nerissa, that I cannot choose one, nor refuse none? (I.ii.11-23)

In this passage we see the absurdity of a situation in which a living daughter's wishes are hindered by her dead father's will. This emphasises the contrast between the living and the dead which evokes our pity for the woman who finds herself in this situation. As a

daughter she is bound to respect her father's will, even from beyond the grave. Although he is dead, he is still in control of her life because she cannot 'choose' nor 'refuse' but must be chosen. The norm in days gone by was like this, stemming from a culture which stipulated that a woman could not approach a man in order to start a relationship; it had to be done the other way around.

We also clearly see how frustrated Portia is by the fact that her father has set up mechanisms to protect her from the 'vultures' who might take advantage of her and her estate. She reveals her helplessness at not being able to choose for herself. Even though her father has her interests at heart, he comes across as a patriarch. The phrase, 'O me the word "choose"!', and the repetition of the key word a few lines later express her emotional powerlessness in this matter. There are other linguistic effects that reinforce her predicament, like the rhymed binaries 'choose / refuse' and 'one / none'. From the first lines she reflects on the fact that it is easier for a father to preach than for a daughter to do. Giving advice to others is always easier than following that advice. Her emotions reinforce her reasoning. She wants confirmation from Nerissa that her situation is awkward; she also wants pity and sympathy from Nerissa, agreement that, even if the brain sets principles, limitations, restrictions for our bodies (or 'blood'), it is the body's desires that overcome the mind's (or 'brain's') laws. The words 'I may neither choose ... nor refuse' also clearly show us Portia's intelligence at work. The negatives 'neither ... nor' tell of her oppression. It is not that she is incapable of choosing or refusing; it is circumstances manipulated by someone else that prevent her from doing so. Her intelligence is curbed so that she may not execute her own decision but must accept her

father's terms. Her use of language indicates that she has a clear appreciation of her situation and clear objections to it. This ability to reflect on her situation, and to use language in verbal play over it, is a measure of her intelligence and also suggests, even at this early stage in the play, her independence of mind.

In Act II scene I she goes on to explain:

In terms of choice I am not solely led
By nice direction of a maiden's eyes:
Besides, the lott'ry of my destiny
Bars me the right of voluntary choosing:
But if my father had not scanted me,
And hedged me by his wit to yield myself
His wife, who wins me by that means I told you,
Your self (renowned prince) then stood as fair
As any comer I have looked on yet
For my affection. (II.i.13-22)

Her father's strategy to find her a husband is to insist that the right man choose correctly from three caskets of gold, silver and lead. Her father is working on the assumption that 'looks are deceiving', and seeks, through this game of choice, to weed out those who have the wrong values. His protective impulses are understandable, even praiseworthy, but their effect is to belittle and to control his daughter. The implication is that she is an inexperienced woman who will not be able to choose the right man for herself. Instead she must submit to her father's will, even from beyond the grave. In the world she inhabits, a dead father is assumed to have more insight than a living daughter. Yet what if this assumption proves untrue? What if no attraction exists between her and the man who chooses right? What if a psychologically cunning fortune-hunter were to guess correctly by reflecting on the proverb 'all that glitters is not gold'? What if the wrong person made

the right choice, forcing her to accept a man such as the County Palatine, the Neapolitan prince, the prince of Morocco, or the prince of Arragon? Like Jessica, Portia is at the mercy of the world of men, the world of the father. Unlike Jessica, she cannot choose the man she loves, but must submit to her father's will.

Does Portia deserve this? Should she be subjected to such treatment? Should the tradition of parents choosing husbands for their daughters go unchallenged? On the one hand, the play makes it clear that her values correspond to those of her father. The type of person who would choose the lead casket is the type of person to whom she would be attracted. And in fact, Portia is just like any other woman who longs for a husband to take care of her now that her father is dead. By the end of the play she is a very happy woman who is totally committed to her husband, and submits to him as the new head of the family. She is selfless and humble towards him and no longer refers to her home as 'hers' but 'theirs' (III.ii.166-171). By so doing, she is acting according to normal expectations of marriage, acknowledging that the two are now one and accepting the man as head of the family. She readily assumes her role as one of inferior status to her husband, and does not demand to be the 'princess' in charge of the household. She could dominate Bassanio, as she is rich, but she chooses not to. Instead, she refers to him as 'My lord' (III.ii.224), which shows her respect and submission. Portia is very much in love with her husband. She is a caring and loving woman, who goes to great lengths to protect those she loves, including his friends, and welcomes them unreservedly to her home – not only Gratiano, but Lorenzo, Jessica and Antonio too.

And yet Portia is also like Jessica in that she is not what she seems to be. Initially it is naïveté that makes her vulnerable to the spendthrift Bassanio. Her judgement seems to be clouded by her feelings for him: she is blinded by love and inexperience and so she fails to see through him. Naïve as she is, however, we then see her feminine wiles coming into play. While pretending to be true to her father's wishes, she aids Bassanio in getting access to her heart by giving him clues to choosing the right casket. She plays sweet music and makes him relax for two days before choosing so that he will have enough time to think about the importance of real values as opposed to material possessions. She is being strategic, which reinforces our sense of her independence. It might also lead us to think of her as a fake, as someone who is really different to the person she seems to be. This being the case, it is not surprising that she is attracted to another fake, Bassanio, who pretends to be a wealthy man but is not.

In the guise of Balthazar, Portia is also shown to possess unexpectedly more wisdom than a man. She is able to outwit Shylock in court. Although not educated as a lawyer, she gets the legal knowledge she needs from her cousin Bellario from Padua (V.i.267-268). (Bellario is incidentally an interesting figure, a man sympathetic to a woman's plight.) Why is it Shakespeare makes her seem a wise learned lawyer to the audience when the characters in the court already know of Balthazar's letter (IV.i.150-163)? I think this reflects Shakespeare's empowerment of his female characters to stand out from others. As a woman Portia would not be allowed to enter the masculine arena of the a court, as a defence attorney. Hence we see her transform herself by dressing as a man into the fictional figure of Balthazar. We have seen similar cross-dressing by Jessica – another

example is that of Viola in *Twelfth Night*, which, as a comedy, allows for a great deal of humorous irony at her expense. What we see here is Portia's determination, against all the odds, to find a way to defend Antonio, her husband's best friend. And in enacting this role, she earns the respect of all in court for her wisdom. Even the Duke, the highest authority in Venice, does not oppose her verdict that Shylock be dispossessed of all his wealth (IV.i.393-4).

During Antonio's trial Portia addresses Shylock thus:

Tarry a little, there is something else.
This bond doth give thee here no jot of blood,
The words expressly are a 'pound of flesh',
Take then thy bond, take thou thy pound of flesh,
But in the cutting it, if thou dost shed
One drop of Christian blood, thy lands and goods
Are (by laws of Venice) confiscate
Unto the state of Venice. (IV.i.301-08)

These lines show the workings of Portia's intellect. Before coming to court, she has thoroughly prepared herself in terms of procedures and consequences with the help of her cousin. In these lines we see her knowledge of how the law functions, if Shylock fails to do what is expected of him, all his goods and land will be forfeited to the state. She comes up with details that have been ignored by others (IV.i.320-8), and the sentence she proposes speaks of her confidence in her knowledge of the law. Indeed she is able to play Shylock at his own game. By conceding him his bond she seems at first to be on his side; but while he is relishing his triumph she lets loose on him the full force of her wisdom. She grants him his bond exactly: that is, on condition that Antonio's flesh should weigh exactly a pound when put on the scale, and that no blood be shed. She knows it is

impossible not to bleed when one's flesh is cut. Being driven by the desire for revenge, Shylock has overlooked this consequence of his bond. This results in tragedy for him, and triumph for her. Indeed she has so much power that she is able to crush a wealthy man to nothing. Her gender has not hindered her from executing the substantial and complex task before her. She performs it so well that everybody in court is amazed at her intelligence and her integrity. She is a woman and yet she is more intelligent than the men around her.

And yet there are ethical questions that arise about her conduct in the courtroom. One might even see her as a trickster, who leads Shylock into self destruction. The Duke has suggested a half-half situation (V.i.365-67), but Portia insists that everything Shylock owns be given over to the state of Venice. I think what happens in the court room shows her up as being like the other Christians, Antonio, Gratiano, Bassanio: cruel, discriminatory and prejudiced against Jews. Her phrase, 'One drop of Christian blood', makes one wonder if her emphasis is because she is a Christian, or because Christian blood seems to the society of Venice to be more valuable than Jewish blood. Even though we are glad that Portia has succeeded, we feel sorry for Shylock. This is an example of Shakespeare's power of characterisation, related to the way he frees women from the prejudice of the gender principle. In fact, Shylock is no criminal. What he demands is contained in a legal contract agreed to and signed by Antonio when he was of sober mind. The terms Shylock insists on are inhuman and immoral, it is true. But are they beyond the remedy Antonio might have sought if their situations had been reversed? I think Antonio would have done the same or even worse. Antonio seems to hate Shylock for being a Jew. We see him taking pride in kicking and spitting on Shylock, he even

calls him a dog which he will spurn. Shylock reciprocates the hatred, yet we do not see him spitting at or kicking Antonio or any other Christian. Antonio has a large hand in the final destruction of Shylock, and Portia supports him. Like Antonio, Portia seems to want to get even with Shylock. In doing so, is she not being cruel to Shylock, failing to empathise with him? How can she say she is showing him mercy when she tricks him out of his life's savings and strips him of everything, even his identity? What punishment could be more severe than that?

In doing so, Portia complicates our ethical reading of the play. As a Christian she might be expected to suffer in some way for following Old Testament principles of an eye for an eye. Christians, after all, are expected to forgive. Of course, sixteenth-century Christians might have found her conduct in the courtroom more acceptable than their twenty-first century counterparts. And we should also acknowledge that the justice system does not always follow Christian principles. Portia's treatment of Shylock may not be legally offensive, but it is religiously so. Because she is carrying out the legal duty of defending Antonio, her resolute ill-will towards Shylock escapes our censure. Yet if we read her in terms of French's model we expect her to show some sympathy towards Shylock even though he is an immoral and extreme person. And we expect her to pay in some way for the pain she causes Shylock. This does not happen.

Like Shylock, Portia seems to have an odd understanding of the notions of mercy and kindness. In I.iii.133-139 Shylock tells Antonio and Bassanio that, because he is 'kind', he will not charge Antonio interest on his loan but will instead have his pound of flesh

from Antonio's body. Is cutting someone's flesh 'kind'? Maybe Portia does show a degree of mercy in preventing Shylock from being put to death for 'attempted murder'. Of course, Shylock gets a taste of his own medicine when Portia gives the verdict that he should be stripped of everything. But perhaps when Portia tells Shylock that she will show him 'mercy' she is directing her message to both Shylock and Antonio in an attempt to change the hatred they bear for each other. At IV.i.374 she asks Antonio what mercy he can show Shylock, and Antonio seems to understand and share Portia's concept of mercy. He offers to give his share of the fine to Lorenzo, Shylock's son-in-law, after his death. Shylock would never have done this. We thus see real mercy and justice being played out. And perhaps she is inviting us to evaluate ourselves, spiritually, as well.

An important further context for our reading of Portia is supplied in the episode of the ring. The last movement of the play sees her return to Belmont and resume her feminine identity as Portia. It also sees the enactment of her judgement of Bassanio.

I must be plain with you –
To part so slightly with your wife's first gift
A thing stuck on with oaths upon your finger,
And so riveted with faith unto your flesh.
I gave my love a ring, and made him swear
Never to part with it, and here he stands:
I dare be sworn for him he would not leave it (IV.I.166-173).

She has earlier set him up, in a strategic way, by giving him a ring as a symbol of their love, and enjoining him not to part with it to anyone. As Balthazar she has requested this very ring in payment for her defence of Antonio. Indeed, she will accept no other payment. When Bassanio reveals to Portia now that he has surrendered the ring, she rebukes and reproaches him for having betrayed her trust by giving away her ring. She

pretends to be furious with him, enacting the jealousy and anger that any woman might display at her husband's lack of faithfulness. She insists that if Bassanio and Gratiano were truthful and truly committed to their wives, they would have not given away their wedding rings no matter how grateful they were to the lawyer and his clerk. Of course there is humour in the predicament she has placed Bassanio in. The humour tells of a fun-loving nature, and of a woman aware of the limitations of making and sticking to promises. Portia is able to see how weak Bassanio is, which shows us her quick wits. It also puts Bassanio firmly in her power, and it is fortunate for him that she chooses to forgive him: to show him mercy not justice. In this we see an acknowledgement of the bond between her husband and the friend whose life the 'lawyer' saved. We also see her capacity for forgiveness and her willingness to move on – once the terms of their relationship have been clarified.

Towards the end of the play, the following passage occurs. From it we get a sense of how Portia appreciates nature, and how she is able to draw from nature important points about her own life.

The crow doth sing as sweetly as the lark
When neither is attended; and I think
The nightingale if she should sing by day
When every goose is cackling, would be thought
No better a musician than the wren!
How many things by season, seasoned are
To their right praise, and true perfection.
Peace! How the moon sleeps with Endymion,
And would not be awaked! (V.i.102-110)

She loves the music made by various kinds of birds, but from her observation she concludes that everything in nature has its place. The nightingale sings only at night,

when it sings beautifully. If it were to sing during the day while geese are making their ugly noise, its song would be lost, its music robbed of its beautiful melody by the noise of the geese. To the listener, it would be just as unmusical a songbird as the wren. This emphasises that certain things are good if done at the right time. What follows from this is that what is meant to happen will happen when the time is right. This is certainly the case with Bassanio and Antonio. Portia has become optimistic that fate will favour her. The caskets perhaps have made her realise that if things had not been destined to be they were, she might as easily have been forced to marry the wrong man, such as the County Palatine or the Neapolitan prince. Once her fate has been secured she is ready to step outside the bounds of nature and the stereotypes of gender to become 'masculine', to become 'a nightingale singing among geese'. Paradoxically she does so to positive effect.

Bloom's claim (1998:180) that, however problematic the play is, *The Merchant of Venice* is a romance seems true because both qualities of a romance are evident: heroic nature and an emphasis on love. Indeed the play is a romance: we see Portia portrayed as having heroic qualities, going on a quest to rescue a friend in dire need, whose life is fatally threatened and whose rescue seems impossible but whom she manages to save. She achieves what she sets out to achieve and even more. The last act of the play especially seems to emphasize the themes of love and faithfulness in adversity. Portia is almost like a knight in a fairy tale, a hero, a woman warrior. She rescues Antonio and also gets a husband in Bassanio. As a comedy, we expect the play to have a happy ending and this ending is brought about by Portia. It would have been awkward for Portia to be punished.

Although Shylock loses everything his life is still preserved as is Antonio's. How can French's model even begin to address such a character?

The roles played by the characters in the play are as puzzling as the title itself. The play is said to be a comedy yet Portia subjects Shylock to severe humiliation, in a court scene that reflects elements of cruelty, animosity, jeopardy, inconsideration, negative attitudes and racism. The way one examines the characters must address questions of genre, because these influence the balance of one's sympathies. If the play is a comedy, then how do we regard Portia's treatment of Shylock? If we give due recognition to Shylock's experience, then are we not forced to recognise the tragedy of loss he undergoes – loss of material possessions, loss of daughter, loss of religious and cultural identity, loss of self-worth? These questions are one of the reasons why the play is said to be a problem play.

The way one examines the characters must also of course address questions of gender. When Portia enters the court that tries Shylock, she has assumed the role of a lawyer, that is, a man. It is this cross-gendering that enables her to act outside of the character of a woman, and to enact the revenge that frees Antonio from Shylock's clutches. In doing so, she oversteps the bounds of conduct we would expect of a woman, as she indulges in cruelty and inconsideration that strips Shylock of everything he values and treasures. And yet we do not judge her for it. Why not? I think it has to do with the fact that she has taken on a masculine identity. French's model is not even-handed when it comes to judgements about male and female behaviour. Rather than looking just at the act itself, it focuses on the person who commits the act, the executor, the doer. Whereas a man may

be pardoned for an act of destruction and not be judged for it, a woman who commits the same act is not likely to be excused. And so, while we might see Portia's treatment of Shylock as excessive in its cruelty, she escapes our judgement – indeed, she gets off scot-free. This is a deviation from what French's model would predict for a woman who acts in this way. It comes about because Portia has shifted from one gender role to another.

This being the case, we might ask if French's model can cope with such gender shifting? In my opinion, it cannot – because it cannot categorise Portia into a fixed position. She is too complex a character, too multifaceted, slipping from one role into another without explicitly signalling it.

In summary, Portia is not a static type in accordance with French's gender principle, but has many sides to her nature. She is powerful in the masculine sphere, loving in the family sphere, an obedient daughter, a committed and willingly subservient wife to her husband, a fun-loving prankster, a possessor of remarkable intelligence, and a wielder of profound wisdom. Of course such a character is not particularly appreciated by the masculine gender, as delineated by French, since she poses the threat of being able to venture at will into the male dominated sphere. On the other hand she is not like other outlaw characters examined thus far such as Goneril and Regan, or Lady Macbeth who will be considered in the next chapter. Rather she integrates inlaw qualities into the outlaw aspects of her nature. Perhaps one could say, then, that the qualities that are predominant in her are inlaw rather than outlaw. Although there is cruelty in the way she manipulates the situation against Shylock, one may argue that she had to do what she did

to protect a life and to teach Shylock a lesson for showing no compassion to Antonio. In the end she is neither cruel nor evil; she just uses her wisdom to help a friend in trouble. Because of all these attributes, she is the model of the central woman in Shakespeare. This then creates a challenge to French's model: its stereotypic categories need to be modified if it is to accommodate characters such as Portia. Portia is too diverse to be put into small corners.

The last woman I want to mention is Nerissa, Portia's waiting woman. We find her at the beginning of the play soothing Portia's nerves about the suitors:

You need not fear lady having any of these lords; they have acquainted me with their determination, which is indeed to return to their home, and to trouble you with no more suit, unless you may be won by some other sort than your father's imposition, depending on the caskets (I.ii.88-92).

Nerissa is concerned about Portia who seems more of a friend than an employer to her. She knows about these suitors because she has had conversations with them. She relays to Portia what she has learned in order to console her when she is depressed and frustrated by having to be chosen as if she were just an object and not a human being. Nerissa plays a minor role – she is just a waiting woman for Portia – but she becomes her friend and advisor (III.ii). She also disguises herself as a man in order to accompany her friend to court, impersonating a clerk. Portia confides completely in her, sharing with her all her worries, fears and dreams. Nerissa is loyal and stands by her friend.

In conclusion, all the women in this play have an influence on other people's lives, no matter how small it is. Jessica is a woman of Shakespeare's times and she has no control

over society's expectations of women. In the end she is a person who supports the model under study. Loving a husband is one of the characteristics of a good woman that French's model stipulates, and so Jessica fits French's model of the gender principle. By contrast, Portia is not so easy to buttonhole. Even though at times she seems to support it, Portia is a character who calls for a modification of the model. She is a complex character who partially supports it, negates it in some instances and requires its modification in other regards. I will return to a discussion of these characters in relation to the gender principle at a later stage in this thesis.

Julius Caesar

As I said in my introduction, the two plays were chosen because they have women characters who reflect the entire spectrum of French's model of the gender principles, both inlaw and outlaw. Bloom has claimed that *Julius Caesar* was, and is, a deliberately ambiguous play (1998:114). If this is the case, can we expect the women in it to be ambiguous too and to be presented in problematic ways? The two central figures in this play are Portia and Calphurnia, who are discussed at length in this chapter. Portia, Brutus's wife is very persuasive in nature. She persists until she gets what she wants. She is a very independent and assertive woman. Calphurnia is a humble, gentle, subordinate woman who is less defiant than Portia. Looking at her first will aid in the exploration of the more complex character, Portia, who cannot simply be categorised in the either-or terms of the gender principle. I will try to explore such issues in the discussion below.

Calphurnia is a woman of few words. Her silence is puzzling, but perhaps it can help us to understand her character better. It certainly makes us think about the kind of woman she is. Since she is the wife of the powerful leader, Julius Caesar, we would expect her to be in charge of the situation, have persuasive power over her husband. But she isn't and does not.

Calphurnia is portrayed as obedient to her husband. She responds to Caesar as 'my lord' (I.i.3; II.ii.49), an address which recognises his status and position. She seems to be very unhappy due to the fact that she is infertile. This is a thorn in her heart, just as it would be for any woman who cannot please her husband by bearing children for him. If Caesar had been an African man he would have taken another wife to bear him children, especially male children to inherit his wealth and to continue the family name. Caesar registers his wife's condition and is concerned about it. He asks Antony to touch her during the race to be run, which is considered holy and should bring luck to those who are barren (I.i.4-9). So Calphurnia's silence could be signalling what she feels inside: the stress of not having children as well as the manner in which she is treated by her husband; that is, not given priority as a wife.

After her first brief appearance in Act I, Calphurnia disappears from the play until her return in Act II, where we get a better understanding of her. Although she claims that under normal circumstances she is not superstitious, she believes in supernatural powers: the bad omens she has witnessed; the dreadful events that have taken place like graves opening and the dead coming out (II.ii.13-26, 30-37, 8-25). She has a strong sixth sense

that gives her nightmares about Caesar being murdered. Thus she tries to warn Caesar not to leave his room on the day he is murdered. At II.ii.8-25 she pleads with him to reconsider his decision about going to the Capitol – yet he openly refuses to heed her warning. We see her weakness – but also her concern for him – when she emphasises her fear in the line about the omens, ‘Yet now they fright me’ (II.ii.14). Caesar sees these happenings as being general in significance, not specifically intended for him. He believes that no one can control fate except the gods. Calphurnia insists that when an ordinary person dies, none of these things happen, and there are no disturbances in nature, such as storms, bad weather and graves opening. Caesar is not persuaded. It is only when the servant returns with the tidings (in the form of a warning) from the augurers that he decides to stay at home (II.ii.38-40).

Calphurnia is a good, loving and caring wife. She is prepared to bear the blame and the shame of keeping Caesar home. She is submissive. And yet Caesar is indecisive. When she kneels in front of him he is touched and decides not to go so as to please his wife. He says he is only doing this for her sake, not because he fears death (II.ii.55-56). He promises her that he will send Mark Antony to the senate house to let them know that he is sick, but within a short period of time he changes his mind and exposes his wife to shame and ridicule. He tells the messengers that he is not sick but only decided not to go because of his wife’s terrible and ominous dream. I think this hurts Calphurnia very much in front of Decius. Instead of Caesar being true to the promise he has made her, he decides to believe the conspirators.

Calphurnia's intuition makes her husband uneasy, but he does not take her seriously. She is not very powerful. Although she does not have a major role in the play, however, we get a glimpse of who she is and what her married life is like. Judging from the above interaction, it must be painful. Her silence might be interpreted as a sign of the anxiety, stress and hopelessness she experience in dealing with the kind of man Caesar is. This silence could be communicating the intense pain she feels inside but cannot share with anyone because the one who should be her shoulder to cry on is too self-absorbed to notice what she is going through. Her misery is not felt by Caesar nor shared with him, given the kind of man he is. We, as readers, feel pity for her for having a husband who does not value her as she should be valued, who is not prepared to give credit to her as a woman and a wife. After this scene, she disappears from the play for good. Calphurnia, it seems, is used mainly as a foil to show up her husband's qualities: he is a boastful, arrogant, stubborn and overconfident man who is also very indecisive.

When Portia is introduced in Act II scene I, we meet a more complex character than Calphurnia. Like her, Portia is represented as a humble and respectful woman. She is also represented as being in a 'weak condition' who should not be out in the early morning air (II.i.234-6). But because she is a caring wife, she is concerned about the sudden change in her husband's behaviour, which makes him unable to eat, talk or sleep. We see that she is vocal when there is something bothering her emotionally or psychologically. She confronts her husband directly. She tells him it is 'ungentle' for a husband to leave his wife in bed before dawn breaks (II.i.237-38). She wants to be appreciated and valued. She is also persistent. This is evident in the words, 'I urged you further ... Yet I insisted'

(II.i.243-45). But she is also wise enough to know when not to cross the line: that is, when he ‘Gave me sign to leave you. So I did, / Fearing to strengthen that impatience’ (II.i.247-8). She knows she has to give him his space so that he can deal with his personal problems. But she also understands her role as a wife as being to share her husband’s joy and grief and provide support. And so when the problem continues, and Brutus tries to deny his unease by saying that he is not well, Portia sees through this, and confronts him with his lies. She knows him well enough not to believe his poor excuses for a second. The Brutus she knows would do something about his illness, if he were indeed ill:

Is Brutus sick? And is it physical
To walk unbraced and suck up the humours
Of the dank morning? What, is Brutus sick,
And will he steal out of his wholesome bed
To dare the vile contagion of the night
And tempt the rheumy and unpurged air
To add unto his sickness? No, my Brutus,
You have some sick offence within your mind,
Which by the right and virtue of my place
I ought to know of. And upon my knees
I charge you, by my once commended beauty,
By all your vows of love, and that great vow
Which did incorporate and make us one,
That you unfold to me, yourself, your half,
Why you are heavy and what men tonight
Have had resort to you, for here have been
Some six or seven who hid their faces
Even from darkness. (II.i.261-78)

In the above passage we see Portia expressing herself as she really is; expressing her strong will, her determination, and her sense of her own rights. Wise as she is, she is also humble, kneeling down to show her husband how desperate she is to know what is bothering him. She argues that an intelligent person would never expose himself to the cold and polluted morning air if he were sick because this would aggravate his situation.

She reminds him that, legally, it is her right as his wedded wife to know his secrets; in fact no secret should prevail between them. She reproaches him, saying she should not be begging him to disclose this information to her. She is inquisitive; she wants to know everything about her husband. This is evident in her questions about the disguised men who visited him at night. She senses that these men's motives are suspicious, since they hide their faces even in the dark, to conceal their identities. Brutus responds by showing how much he cherishes her. He compares her to the 'ruddy drops' which embrace his sorrowful heart (II.i.289-290).

As her emphasis at lines 292-293 shows, ('I grant I am a woman, but / A woman that Lord Brutus took to wife'), she is married to a noble man; but he too is married to someone from a noble family, that of Cato. From this heritage, and from the long years of her marriage to Brutus, Portia has become stronger than most of her gender. 'Think you I am no stronger than my sex, / Being so fathered and so husbanded?' (II.i.296-297). Her words reveal her pride in the nobility she has thus acquired, and her strength of mind. She promises Brutus that she will keep his secret if he shares it with her, and we see in this her trustworthiness. Her guarantee is the wound she has inflicted on herself to prove how unswerving and patient she is. This wound, to her, is more onerous even than Brutus' secret (II.i.299-302).

In Act 2 scene 4, however, we see the impact the secret has on her. She is in a restless and unbalanced state of mind; so she sends Lucius to the senate house without giving him the message he needs to take there. She is guilt-stricken and her conscience is eating her

up. She almost let slips the secret, and so has to remind herself, 'O constancy, be strong upon my side, / Set a huge mountain 'tween my heart and tongue!' In her view her difficulties are due to the fact that she is a woman: 'I have a man's mind, but a woman's might. / How hard it is for women to keep counsel! –' (II.iv.6-9). These lines show her internal struggle to keep the secret within herself. She does not deny this, rather she is honest and acknowledges how hard it is for her to keep this secret. When Brutus goes to the fateful senate meeting she is disturbed: 'Hark, boy, what noise is that', and, 'Prithee listen well: / I heard a bustling rumour, like a fray, / And the wind brings it from the Capitol' (II.iv.16,18-19). She hears noises that are perhaps not there, because her mind is preoccupied with the thought of what is going to happen to Caesar at the Capitol. It is true that her strength is fading now and panic is getting a grip on her. Her bravery and firmness vanish, and she grows 'faint': 'Ay me, how weak a thing / The heart of woman is' (II.iv.39-43). What is interesting is how Portia herself genders her experience. Although she has the intelligence of a man, and as much nobility as her husband, by virtue of being a woman, she says, she is also weak. Although noble, intelligent and strong, Portia has ordinary qualities in her just like other women in her society.

In Act IV scene ii we learn of the strange way she chooses to end her life – swallowing fire as a result of Brutus running away. She cannot cope on her own. Because the man she loves has gone, she decides to take her own life rather than be without him. This shows her bravery as well as her insecurity at being alone. This makes her a puzzling character as well, one who is not what she seems to be. She appears to be a strong person but is indeed quite weak. She tries desperately to keep control when Brutus divulges the

secret of the conspirators. But despite her pretence of being brave, she panics and starts hallucinating. Is her emotional breakdown which this signals an indication that she is a weak person who cannot cope with stress and worry? She cannot manage to keep it all within her; hence her tongue slips when talking to the servant and to the soothsayer.

Portia thus fits the pattern we have seen in Shakespeare's tragedies, where women may start out strong and unmoving but end up stressed, depressed, devastated and delusional. And yet this does not necessarily mean they are weaker than men, as French's gender principle would suggest. Rather they are composed of both strength and weakness; they are diverse, and their emotions swing like a pendulum to and fro, up and down, with no fixed point. Neither of the two Portias we have examined are objects that can be classified into categories. Rather they are women of calibre; they are diverse and divergent; they are unpredictable; they are a surprise even to themselves. How can we readers then claim to know them, to fix them into predefined categories? It seems, at the very least, that the prescriptions of the gender principle are questionable and need to be explored further.

CHAPTER THREE: *MACBETH*

Like *King Lear*, *Macbeth* is a tragedy and so we expect it to have heroic characters and to end in death. Also like *King Lear*, much of the setting of *Macbeth* is out in the open, and the ‘blasted heath’ is important for its action. In *The Merchant of Venice* we saw instances of women crossing gender lines by dressing as men. Lady Macbeth does not literally pass for a man, but she has many qualities ordinarily associated with men. *Macbeth* has none of the humour of the earlier play, and of course has no marriage or comic resolution at its end. Unlike Portia, the fate that Lady Macbeth suffers is tragic, and in this regard she has much in common with Portia in *Julius Caesar*, since they both commit suicide. The nature of the action in *Macbeth* is, as in the Roman play, political, to the extent that Lady Macbeth ventures into the public sphere by becoming a queen. Her power, too, resides squarely in her influence over her husband, and although it is more intense, like Portia’s it becomes limited in its power to shape events. In Lady Macbeth we find an archetypal example of the outlaw principle; and her role is echoed and strengthened by the presence of the witches – female creatures we have not yet seen in any of the plays discussed up to now. At the opposite extreme is the figure of Lady Macduff, who represents perhaps the best example of the inlaw principle. These two women, and the witches, will form the focus of discussion in this chapter.

In Shakespeare’s times, in England and in other countries, there was widespread belief in supernatural powers and forces prevailing in society that were beyond human understanding. The superstitious English believed in the existence of a variety of ghosts,

witches, fortune-tellers, omens and evil spirits. *Macbeth* is set in the Scotland of the distant past, and, like *King Lear*, features outdoor scenes in which nature is at its most wild. It is a dark play. Its opening scene, of thunder and lightning out on the blasted heath, prepares the reader for the horrific events that will come. Storms are terrifying to people all over the world. (Africans, especially in rural areas, associate thunder with witchcraft, and believe that they can distinguish natural thunder from thunder triggered by a witch.) This sense of horror continues throughout the play until its end. Several people are murdered before our eyes: King Duncan, Macbeth's friend Banquo, Macduff's son. Duncan and Macduff are both brutally killed against the backdrop of a banquet, normally a jolly occasion. Many more people are said to be put to death. Lady Macbeth commits suicide. The play begins and ends in a state of war. Especially horrible is the fate suffered by Macbeth at the end: beaten by Macduff in armed combat, his head is cut off and paraded before the audience mounted on Macduff's sword. So the play's opening with witches planning a meeting with the central character prepares us well for the dire events that are to follow.

The witches

Following French's model, the witches, the central supernatural creatures and key agents of the play, are the most overt embodiments of the outlaw female gender principle. Act I scene i introduces these weird and wonderful creatures having a conversation. Their existence is no surprise: members of Shakespeare's audience would have held a strong belief that such women have a shaping influence on the people they wish to manipulate. They meet, appropriately enough, in abnormal weather conditions, with thunder,

lightning and rain. Normal people stay indoors at such times; the witches gather during a storm to plot their wickedness. In the course of their conversation it becomes clear that they have supernatural power over the natural elements. At I.iii.1-25, these supernatural powers are emphasised. They can control the winds and the direction in which they blow, they can cause ships to sink, and they can cause all sorts of disasters if they want to. They can also perform inconceivable things like sailing in sieves and flying on winds. They are even able to control the sailor's sleeping patterns, destroying his sleep for weeks to make him fatigued so his ship might be wrecked. We discover later that they can command even the air to do as they wish: 'I'll charm the air to give a sound' (IV.i.129).

The fact that these witches are female explains why they have the supernatural or extrasensory powers commonly believed to be women's greatest attributes. They justify their evil deeds and intentions by implying that the difference between what is good and what is bad is meaningless (I.i.13): 'Fair is foul, and foul is fair'. Evil can never be 'fair' in inlaw terms, but, because they are outlaw angels of evil, 'foul' disaster and destruction are 'fair' to them. We see evidence of their evil when the first witch says she has with her a 'pilot's thumb' (I.iii.28). In our country we call this muti-murder, but the use of body parts by witches is widespread, and malign.

It is these witches who accost Macbeth as he returns, triumphant, from the battlefield.

These witches are directly responsible for Macbeth's downfall. Were it not for them, I think, he would have remained the loyal general and nobleman of Duncan. They bewitch his mind by making him greedy and power hungry; they infect his mind with destructive

ambition. We have already heard the sergeant's report to the king of Macbeth's valour, and witnessed his decision to recognise Macbeth with the title of the traitor Macdonald. But Macbeth has not. This first meeting sees the witches greet him with the titles that have not yet been officially given to him by the King: 'All hail, Macbeth! Hail to thee, Thane of Cawdor!' They tell him, too, that he will be 'king hereafter' (I.iii.48-50). He believes them and is quite overcome. Yet their messages are vague and confusing. Partly this is because Shakespeare gives them strange language. They use odd words ('Aroint' 'rump-fed ronyon' (I.iii.6)), they are fond of rhymes ('Here I have a pilot's thumb / Wrack'd as homeward he did come' (I.iii.28-9)), and they are fond of riddling statements (the first witch says of Banquo, 'Lesser than Macbeth, and greater' (I.iii.65)). This language and their obscure promises work to equivocate: to entice and to tempt but to blur the boundaries of good and evil.

Macbeth's companion Banquo is unimpressed. He demands to know the source of their strange knowledge (I.iii.75-7) that enables them to prophesy the generals' future. It is Banquo who sees through them; when their prophecy is confirmed at I.iii.7 he exclaims, 'What! can the devil speak true?' (I.iii.107). He points out to Macbeth that anyone who believes in witches is in danger because once these creatures have won one's trust, one is doomed:

...oftentimes, to win us to our harm,
The instruments of darkness tell us truths,
Win us with honest trifles, to betray's
In deepest consequence' (I.iii.122-6).

Despite Banquo's warning, when Macbeth learns that their first prophecy has been fulfilled his ambition is stirred. He fully believes their prophecy that he will become King. He now feels an urge to kill Duncan so as to make this second prophecy come true. Although he still has a conscience this urge is so strong and powerful inside him that the thought of what he must do makes his heart beat heavily (I.iii.36). What is mysterious about these witches is that they do not tell Macbeth *how* he will become a King. They leave him hanging. They do this deliberately so as to open him up to the temptation of murder. This is because their ulterior goal is destruction.

In Act IV Macbeth goes to consult them again to get further knowledge. He seeks them out of his own free will, and believes all they say. In this scene we learn more about their natures. The witches enjoy what is happening in Scotland at war: chaos, death, destruction. This is shown in the lines, 'Double, double toil and trouble, / Fire burn and cauldron bubble' (IV.i.10-11). Here they seem to wish that 'trouble' and evil should overwhelm not just Scotland but the whole world. Their intentions are no good; their witchcraft is monstrous and incredible. They mix strange, poisonous and inedible ingredients together to come up with a pot of powerful magic substance. They work with the apparitions they call their 'masters' (IV.i.64).

These apparitions warn Macbeth to beware Macduff (IV.i.69). Their warnings are not fair. They give a little information and leave the rest up to Macbeth. At IV.i.138-9, when he is very upset by what he has seen, Macbeth recognises that these witches are deceivers. He condemns those who trust them, including himself, as 'damned'. The

witches disappear for good, leaving Macbeth clinging to the belief that no one born of a woman will ever harm him. He acts arrogantly because of this misleading prophecy. Of course his security is shattered when Macduff tells him that he was not born naturally but by Caesarean section (V.ii.43-5). Although he tries to fight Macduff, he is then killed and beheaded (V.ii.). Had he shunned the witches, I believe he would have remained the loyal general and captain of the king, but his belief in the witches leads to the many murders he commits, and, indirectly, to his own eventual death.

The witches' outlaw feminine power over Macbeth reflects the fact that even great men can be caught up in their machinations. Powerful men, who want more power, can easily fall under their control. They seem to possess the ability to give what these men would like to have. What they actually possess, though, is outlaw feminine power to manipulate the dark world of intuition, superstition and magic. Once a man like Macbeth is caught in their web, there is no escape.

Lady Macduff

Probably the complete antithesis of these outlaw figures is the quiet gentle wife and mother, Lady Macduff. When, in Act IV, her husband leaves for the English court to appeal for help from the English king, he leaves behind him his wife and family. Although Lady Macduff features only in a single scene of the play, her appearance makes an important impact. She is portrayed as an innocent and feminine figure who seems to believe in the traditional role of a husband and father as being to protect his wife and children (IV.ii). In conversation with her young son, she teases him with this

conventional wisdom. She does not see any justification for Macduff's leaving them behind. She claims her husband has left them because he has lost affection for them. He should have stayed to protect his family instead of running away in fear of his own life (IV.ii.6-13). Even a small bird challenges an owl when it tries to feed on the young ones in the nest, she says, and so too, should Macduff protect his children. She claims her husband is a traitor for neglecting them and that he has lost affection for them. He is just like a dead man, and so she says to their son: 'Sirrah, your father's dead' (IV.ii.30).

This scene is imbued with irony. The effect of the teasing is to provoke her son into arguing with her, to prove her wrong. She knows, and her son knows, what kind of man Macduff really is. She also knows that some men possess an extreme urge to kill. That is why she is anxious about being left alone with the children. She knows that if Macbeth is after her husband, her family, too, is in danger because of Macbeth's power-mania. He will do whatever it takes to entrench himself as King. And yet, as she jokes with her son, she does not recognise the real danger they are in. Although she is insecure, she masks this with her affectionate manner. She calls her son fond endearments: 'poor bird', 'poor monkey' and 'poor prattler' (IV.ii.34, 57, 62). Although she is patronising towards him, it is her indulgence that gives him the room to present what is actually a perceptive case. The overall impression we get of her home is one of love and warmth, and vulnerability. The harshest irony, though, is that her playful take on her husband is actually right. After the warning from the messenger she philosophises about the foolishness of being innocent. We do not know if she really has the chance to escape, but her speech at this point shows her lack of urgency. And then the murderers arrive and start to kill.

It is evident that Lady Macduff is a woman who operates according to the feminine aspect of the gender principle. Her nature includes all the qualities specified by this principle: kindness, loving, caring, the ability to nurture, fear, anxiety, dependence on a husband. She would not make it in a man's world because she lacks any trace of the outlaw. She is not power-hungry nor is she ambitious. She lacks the persuasive power to convince her husband not to leave her. She is good-natured. Her wish is simply to be with her husband and family, and she is a loving, caring and nurturing mother. She believes that the family is the responsibility of both wife and husband. The title 'Lady' fits her particularly well, because she is indeed a lady, unlike Lady Macbeth, whose title describes only her position in society. She clearly falls into the in-law component of the gender principle.

Lady Macbeth

The editors of *Shakespeare's England* [reference] point out that violence was an integral part of sixteenth-century theatre (1964:19). This being the case, can it be argued that Shakespeare has expanded the role of women by making them part of the problem of creating violence and not just the victims of violence? In Lady Macbeth we see an archetypal example of the outlaw woman. Peter Levi in *The Life and Times of William Shakespeare* writes: 'Lady Macbeth is a figure of pure evil; she will suffer remorse but no contrition. Morally, psychologically and linguistically, Macbeth and his wife were conceived together, as foils to one another. She is a distillation from the history plays, but Shakespeare has not yet presented so wicked a woman as her' (1988:259).

Although the witches are very important women in this play, it is Lady Macbeth who really sets up the tragedy. Before Macbeth becomes a murderer and she his accomplice, she loves him for the qualities she afterwards blames him for having. To her, Macbeth is a man who is afraid to try to get what he wants even though he wants it very much. She is sure she understands Macbeth, and knows that this will help her defeat his weakness. When Macbeth gets cold feet about murdering Duncan, she asks him to leave everything to her because unlike him she is not troubled by the 'milk of human kindness' or the wish to avoid the 'illness' that should 'attend' 'ambition'. In her eyes Macbeth is neither mature nor manly, and has not learnt the necessary hardness of the world. These qualities give her a sense of ownership over him: so long as he possesses them he is a man she understands.

In the following quotation we see her confidence, her ambition and her willingness to act that will enable her to lead him to do what he would otherwise not do:

Glamis thou art, and Cawdor, and shalt be
What thou art promised. Yet do I fear thy nature:
It is too full o' th' milk of human kindness
To catch the nearest way. Thou would'st be great,
Art not without ambition, but without
The illness should attend it. What thou wouldst highly,
That would'st thou holily; would'st not play false,
And yet would'st wrongly win. Thou'dst have, great Glamis,
That which cries 'Thus thou must do, if thou have it';
And that which rather thou dost fear to do
Than wishest should be undone. Hie thee hither,
That I may pour my spirits in thine ear,
And chastise with the valour of my tongue
All that impedes thee from the golden round
Which fate and metaphysical aid both seem

To have thee crowned withal. (I.v.12-27)

Macbeth is not initially or inherently evil, but Lady Macbeth is. When she hears that Duncan is coming to Inverness, their castle, she invokes the ministers of darkness to assist her (I.v.39-53). She believes that evil spirits and demons can and do take possession of human beings who will then do what the spirits want. She gives herself up to the worst of her outlaw nature. She sounds as bad as, or worse, than the witches:

Come, you spirits
That tend on mortal thoughts! Unsex me here,
And fill me from the crown to the toe top-full
Of direst cruelty; make thick my blood,
Stop up the access and passage to remorse,
That no compunctious visitings of nature
Shake my fell purpose, nor keep peace between
The effect and it! Come to my woman's breasts,
And take my milk for gall, you murdering ministers,
Wherever in your sightless substances
You wait on nature's mischief! Come, thick night,
And pall thee in the dunnest smoke of hell,
That my keen knife see not the wound it makes,
Nor heaven peep through the blanket of the dark,
To cry 'Hold, hold!' (I.v.39-53)

She is conscious and deliberate in her choice of evil, and for her this choice is gendered. She calls on 'the spirits that tend on mortal thoughts' to 'unsex' her, to turn her 'milk' to 'gall' so that whatever is womanly in her will be made horrible. Interestingly, at the end of the speech she admits that she fears to see the act of murder; she also imagines 'Heaven' intervening, and calls on night to cover itself in the 'dunnest smoke of hell' so that 'Heaven' will not be able to 'peep' at what she is doing. The metaphor of the child, unable to sleep at night and drawn willy nilly into witnessing the dire deed and protesting against it, emphasises her awareness that she still has weakness in her, and her

acknowledgement that she has to fight it. She still has a conscience. Perhaps this is why she understands Macbeth's weakness and the need for him to fight it if he is to carry out the murder.

And indeed Macbeth is still dominated by conscience. That is why he wants to withdraw from committing the murder. In his soliloquy in the last scene of Act I, scene vii he registers all the reasons why he should not proceed, why he should not murder an innocent old man who is their cousin and their king and their guest:

He's here in double trust:
First, as I am his kinsman and his subject,
Strong both against the deed; then, as his host,
Who should against his murderer shut the door,
Not bear the knife myself (I.vii.12-16)

Shortly after this he tells his wife that he has resolved that neither he nor they will carry out the plot to murder Duncan (I.vii.31-4). He is trying to assert his status as the head of the family by giving her this decision. For all her brave words, she shares his conscience and fears the horror of the act. But she does not encourage him to stop; she does the opposite. She tries everything in her power to strip away his conscience so that he will not feel guilty for doing this deed. Macbeth now shows the weakness which earlier on was proclaimed by his wife, not because he does not act, but because he allows his wife to persuade him to do so. He should have listened to his conscience, as he knew that Duncan was his guest and trusted him. He has, up to now, been loyal to Duncan and honoured by him, but his wife wants him to be king, not just the holder of two titles. Up

to this point Macbeth is still a moral person, but his wife's outlaw influence pushes him to his destruction.

Her tactics are masterly, and show the power she already has over him. She deliberately evades questions of morality (Vickers 1989:102-3). She taunts him thus: if he does not commit the murder, he will show that he lacks manliness and is a weakling in her eyes. His response is, 'I dare do all that may become a man' (I.vii.45). If killing Duncan will prove to his wife that he is a man, then he will do it. Actually, there is no need for him to prove this, since she knows that he is a valiant soldier who has triumphed in many battles and has been rewarded with the titles Thane of Cawdor and Thane of Glamis. But she manages to manipulate him psychologically because he lacks self-esteem. If he believed in himself, he would not go to such lengths as killing Duncan just to prove himself to her. She convinces him that if he is not manly then he is lacking in love for her. He therefore murders Duncan almost as a horrible way of showing his love for her. Lady Macbeth is not really a loving wife; we only see her getting close to him during this time of plotting. When he experiences internal conflict about murdering Duncan, she does not lend him her shoulder; instead she utters piercing statements which will offend him and make him end up committing the crime just to prove himself.

Immediately after the murder, Macbeth expresses his revulsion and his anguish at what he has done. His horror is intensified when Lady Macbeth takes the bloody daggers back to the murder scene and Macbeth hardly recognizes his blood-stained hands as his own.

The thought of the murder overwhelms him, and he knows he will never again get peace of mind or a good night's rest. His thoughts are haunted:

Methought I heard a voice cry 'Sleep no more!
Macbeth does murder sleep,' the innocent sleep,
Sleep that knits up the ravelled sleeve of care,
The death of each day's life, sore labour's bath,
Balm of hurt minds, great nature's second course,
Chief nourisher in life's feast. (II.ii.36-40).

We feel sorry for him. We do not hold Macbeth entirely responsible for his action, but recognise the role of the witches and his wife and her impact on his self-esteem.

Duncan's murder remains a nightmare to him (II.ii.26-9), so that he later hallucinates because of the deed his hands have committed (II.ii.58-64). Lady Macbeth tries to comfort him when she says: 'Consider it not so deeply', and then, 'These deeds must not be thought of / After these ways; so, it will make us mad'. But once he has murdered Duncan, Macbeth realises that he has become a different person. He says, 'To know my deed, t'were best not know myself' (II.ii.74). At the moment of her greatest power over him, Lady Macbeth loses it: from this point on she no longer has the power over him that she has had up to now.

And so, soon after the murder is committed, Macbeth takes up the reins again; he becomes his own person and does not concern himself about her. The murder of Duncan is the source of his rise, his fall, and his ultimate death. His initial crime is followed by many more. His wife has brought out the wickedness in Macbeth that was before only a potential buried within him; now that the devil is let loose, it can't be held back. He could

have fought hard to resist, but now he chooses evil. Hence he commits one crime after another. He moves from being a hero to a villain, a murderer, a butcher.

The gender principle, as French couches it, seems to be confirmed. If everyone kept to their assigned roles, the world would be manageable. But here is a woman who has stepped out of line, who has refused to conform to her assigned role. It is Lady Macbeth as the outlaw woman who has brought about the collapse of established order by calling the shots at home. And so evil and violence are unleashed, and catastrophe follows.

What is ironical is that Lady Macbeth's ambitions were not at all for herself, but almost entirely for her husband. She launched him into murder which he was not really willing to commit, and thus into self-ruin, because she believed he wanted the crown. To add to this irony, Macbeth commits the murder against which, at the time, his whole being (mind and soul) revolts, just to satisfy his wife. He knows it is morally wrong to do so, but he carries on regardless. On the one hand he does not want to murder Duncan, who is his cousin and king, but on the other hand he itches for the power which he thinks will be achieved by murdering him, and Lady Macbeth confirms him in this purpose. This is implied in the way she pushes him towards murder. She also wants to be queen. She knows that once Macbeth is king, she will have power and be honoured. They are both corrupted by the excesses of the masculine principle, just as anyone is who takes another's life.

After the murder of Macduff's family, Macbeth becomes insensitive and morally degenerate; he does not feel any remorse and declares that he is no longer afraid of his deeds (II.iii.122). We do not expect – or get – the same effect in him as was the case after Duncan's murder (Vickers 1989:108). His present freedom from fear is also a pathological absence of feeling – he does not feel what he felt before, during and after murdering Duncan. That guilt-ridden Macbeth with a conscience is long gone and has been replaced by a monster and a villain. His conscience is now dead.

What is also ironical is that Lady Macbeth can no longer grasp the man he has become, forgetting that this monster is the work of her hands. Lady Macbeth realises that the possession of the crown has not given Macbeth happiness or peace of mind. She confesses that all is spent and nothing is achieved. She tries to comfort her husband but she is no longer the dominant partner she was, and is no longer even in his confidence; as we have seen, he does not tell her about the killings of Banquo and his son or of Lady Macduff and her children. Had she not pushed him to kill Duncan, he might have remained a good person with a conscience. The conscience she stripped from him cannot be revived, and, stricken as she is, she has to bear the consequences of her actions alone.

When Macbeth sees Banquo's ghost and is so shocked, Lady Macbeth scolds him for being a coward, for hallucinating because of his guilty conscience. She says:

This is the very painting of your fear;
This is the air-drawn dagger which, you said,
Led you to Duncan. O! These flaws and starts –
Imposters to true fear – would well become
A woman's story at a winter's fire,

Authoriz'd by her grandam. Shame itself! (III.iv.61-6).

She thinks he is still weak, but in fact he has followed his own course of killing without telling her ('Be innocent of the knowledge, dearest chuck' he says to her earlier (III.ii.39)). He is no longer under her control. Now he is under the control of the witches.

Unlike his wife, the witches have power over him in a suggestive way, rather than in a direct way. Nevertheless their power is considerable, perhaps because it depends on his collusion. According to Levi, the witches are like gods in the Iliad, nothing happens through them that might not have happened without them, but they are a dramatic way of expressing what does happen (1988:261). The weird sisters first surprise Macbeth at the time he is filled with the success of his victory, and they confuse him by making him believe that they work with what is fated to happen (IV.i.83-5). In reality his ambition can only be accomplished by his own deeds of engaging himself in the murder of those he thinks are obstacles to his becoming and remaining a king. Their prediction that he will be king does not mean that he has to be king now, or that he has to kill in order to become king. It is Macbeth himself who interprets this prophecy and makes it come true by killing Duncan. Having done so, he now totally believes in what they say. He keeps on seeking their 'wise' words, which appeal to his ear; consulting them to secure him in his position as king and to confirm him in the direction he is already following. His wife is now sidelined, lest her feminine nature should soften him from removing all the obstacles standing in his way of remaining king, such as Banquo and Macduff's family.

Without power over him, she seems to lose her own power. She admits that she too is shaken nightly by 'terrible' dreams (V.i.4-8; V.i.18-19; V.i.69-70). When she sleepwalks, she speculates, 'The Thane of Fife had a wife – where is she now?' (V.i.35). She refers to the three murders Macbeth has committed, as if the guilt is too much for her. She hopes washing her hands with water will cleanse her, but contrary to her assurance to her husband in Act II, it does not. She realises that 'all the perfumes of Arabia' cannot cleanse her hands of murder. Earlier she claimed, 'What is done is done'. Now she admits, 'What's done cannot be undone' (V.i.64-65). Before she felt they should put things behind them; now it is as if her conscience would really like to change things back to the way they were. When she loses control over Macbeth she also loses her mind and eventually dies a pathetic death.

Macbeth's response to the death of his wife is indifferent and cold: 'She should have died hereafter; / There would have been a time for such a word' (V.v.17-18). We expect him to utter words of grief and loss, but there is nothing. If he had said, 'she should not have died now', we might have felt his concern, but from what he says he seems not to care that she has died, but only that it comes at a bad time. He would have preferred her to die after the war when there would be time to mourn her properly. Now he is caught up in saving his skin. One is tempted to think that the love between them has been lost; that he no longer cares about her.

And yet after her death she continues to exert a kind of power over him, because now he believes life is meaningless:

To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow,
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,
To the last syllable of recorded time;
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
And then is heard no more; it is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing. (V.v.19-28)

Maybe this is, in fact, his real reaction to his wife's death. Now that she is gone, the pillar of his strength has been removed, and life has no meaning for him.

Even though on the battlefield Macbeth is a dominant male, he is impatient to verify the truth of what the witches say about his future, buying in to the outlaw domain of female superstition. He is also susceptible to the persuasion and encouragement of his wife, who in a way carries on the work of the witches in leading him to his destruction. She differs from them by showing human passion, which serves as a striking contrast to their heartless evil (McElroy 1973:211-13). They are almost embodiments of the outlaw, loving mischief, wickedness, cruelty, and magic. They look like women, but they have 'beards' (I.iii.46) and so are aligned with the masculine pole of the gender principle. They enjoy having power over Macbeth, not to help him, as Lady Macbeth does, but to use him as a 'plaything' and to destroy him (McDonald 2004:597).

And in the end Macbeth is destroyed, and it is women who have led him to his destruction, because of the negative power they wield. But we should never forget that he opens himself to this power. The women only suggest certain, terrible, things but it is he

who does the things, the killings, by carrying out what they suggest. Can we blame the women, the witches and Lady Macbeth? To an extent; but not altogether. We might say that it is the outlaw feminine principle in Macbeth himself that eventually destroys him. What is clear, however, is that powerful women (psychologically or intellectually powerful, like Lady Macbeth; intuitively or instinctually powerful, like the witches) can be the cause of much damage. Shakespeare is showing us, perhaps indirectly, that the world of women is a world to be reckoned with.

CHAPTER FOUR: *ANTONY AND CLEOPATRA*

Like *Julius Caesar*, *Antony and Cleopatra* takes Roman history as its context. It shares with the earlier play an interest in the relationships that exist and develop between male and female characters. This is true also of *King Lear* and of *Macbeth*. The present play is marked, however, by a title that names both members of the couple who are its subjects. In this respect it is like both *Romeo and Juliet* and *Troilus and Cressida*.

The male character, Mark Antony, was one of the major characters in *Julius Caesar*, who led the resistance to the conspirators. At the end of that play he becomes one of the triumvirs who will govern Rome. In this later play, he is a general with the reputation of being a valiant and gallant soldier. The play has a political dimension, since we see Antony and Octavius contending for political supremacy.

But the choice of title also indicates an interest in two figures, and gives equal weight to the woman. In developing the character of Cleopatra Shakespeare also draws on historical fact. We know she was involved with two Roman leaders before Antony; we know she engaged with Antony against Octavius at Actium, and lost him the battle when she withdrew her ships and he followed her; we know she died by clasping an asp to her bosom. But Shakespeare brings much more to her than this. In this play she is a fascinating creature, the embodiment of exotic beauty and attraction. Although Shakespeare usually draws his characters from Western countries, in *Antony and Cleopatra* he presents a woman character drawn from another part of the world, Egypt.

From the outset we do not expect Cleopatra to behave in the same way as Roman women because of the differing value systems, beliefs, norms and standards of their different worlds. Rather, Cleopatra is queen of Egypt, who exerts a powerful pull over the men she encounters and dies a noble death; she is also an ordinary woman, notable for her waywardness, her fragility, her determination, the strength of her commitment to the man she loves. It will be interesting to see how French's model contributes to our examination of her, and to our reading of the play.

According to McDonald (2004), Elizabethan women were regarded as creatures of weak reason and strong passion, carnal in nature and governed by lust (2004:572). A woman could be trusted only when guided by the wisdom of her natural superior, a man. Perhaps Shakespeare drew on these prejudiced expectations when he developed the character of Cleopatra, who has much in common with the sexually free women of the time, the prostitutes. This makes her unique among Shakespeare's female characters. Shakespeare makes her fascinating by giving her a character which is deliberately unpredictable. Her mood changes constantly. At I.iii.3-5 she says: 'If you find him sad, / Say I am dancing, if in mirth, report / That I am sudden sick'. She is a woman who has never learned to compromise with life, nor to reconcile the extremes of her own nature. She always gets what she wants, when she wants it, regardless of circumstances. And she uses any strategy to get it.

This play revolves around two main characters: Antony and Cleopatra. The former is a Roman soldier with a reputation for being a valiant and gallant soldier and the latter is an

Egyptian queen entrusted with the political responsibility of ruling Egypt. As she is a queen she has much greater political influence than the women in the other plays. Indeed, one is tempted to think of Cleopatra as *the* main character of the play because of her actions in it, and because she dies last (later than Antony). But she shares the title of the play with Antony. Shakespeare could have named the play after either one of them, but he decided to include them both. They are a couple, who are together in everything, enjoy life and love together, and die together. The title thus suggests the togetherness in their lives. We cannot separate them. Shakespeare also shows in this title that a woman can be as much a major character as a man. This play reminds us of *Romeo and Juliet*, in which we also find a balanced couple. Despite the politics taking place in the play, with Antony and Octavius contending for political supremacy, the title helps the reader recognise that the love between Antony and Cleopatra occupies centre stage.

Fulvia

Antony's first wife is Fulvia. George Brandes says of her: 'Women, according to Plutarch, were Antony's bane. After a youth in which many women had had a share, he married Fulvia, the widow of the notorious tribune, Clodius. She acquired the mastery over him, and bent to all her wishes, so that from her hand he passed into Cleopatra's, ready broken-in to feminine dominion' (1926:465). Perhaps Antony left her behind when he went to Egypt because he did not have control over her – perhaps it is a relief to him to be away!

Although Fulvia does not feature much in the play, she is a powerful woman who is very daring, just like Antony (II.ii.41-44). She shares her husband's sentiments, political views and ambitions. She knows she has the potential to venture into the dangerous masculine arena. This is evident in the fact that she wages war against Caesar on Antony's behalf. Perhaps she wishes to see Antony sole ruler of Rome. Waging war is masculine business that results in people being killed or injured. She thus operates on the extreme end of the gender continuum where the outlaw component is situated. In fact the outlaw principle is strong in her.

Her power as a leader is also manifested in her behaviour when Antony leaves her for Egypt. She is portrayed as an independent woman who can survive without her husband, and who does not complain when he leaves her, as does Cleopatra. These things suggest that Fulvia is strong, powerful and full of determination. Antony wishes Caesar had a wife like her: 'As for my wife, / I would you had her spirit in such another' (II.ii.61-62). Perhaps this is why Antony does not feel guilty staying without her in Egypt, because he knows she is emotionally, physically and mentally self-sufficient. She can take care of herself. She does not need her husband's permission to involve herself in political activities, for even Caesar could not control her that easily. Clearly Antony recognises Fulvia's political shrewdness. 'The third o' the world is yours,' he says to Caesar, 'which with a snaffle / You may pace easy, but not such a wife' (II.ii.68-9).

Octavia

We do not see much of Octavia, Antony's second wife, either. Sister to Octavius Caesar she has high status in Rome. That is why Octavius expects her homecoming to be a spectacular event, decorated with garlands and accompanied by her husband, the valiant soldier, Antony (III.xi.42-54). Cleopatra envies her beauty, and even goes to the extent of beating the messenger who reports it. We see Octavia's respectful manner towards her brother and her husband. Unlike Cleopatra, and unlike Fulvia, she does not have a voice of her own. She does not choose Antony as her husband but has him chosen for her. She is used as a business transaction to secure the deal between Antony and Octavius. Octavia is too humble a person to raise her voice against her brother. She has some power, however, since she exerts influence over both Octavius and Antony. We see this when she seeks to mediate between them. She is peace loving and kind. She is a woman operating according to the inlaw principle, one who wants to see peace and good social relations prosper (III.vi.39; III.iv.10-19; and III.iv.29-32). She displays some independence in not trying to follow Antony to the East, nor pestering him about it. Although she knows of his affair with Cleopatra, she chooses not to fight for him. She represents the ideal Elizabethan woman, whom Freed describes as 'chaste, silent and obedient' (2006:5). She is thus unlike both Fulvia and Cleopatra.

Cleopatra's ladies

Cleopatra's ladies are very close to their queen. They act like personal advisors whenever Cleopatra is in a crisis. She shares with them even confidential and private matters. They have a good relationship with her, more like sisters than maids. They respect and honour

her highly, as we see in Alexas's salute to her 'Sovereign of Egypt, hail!' (IV.xvi.73-4). They obey her and support her through thick and thin. They are willing to lie to protect her, for example sending a message to Antony that she is dead, and helping her when she feigns illness (I.iii.15-17 and IV.xiii.4-10). They are always there for her, which shows how caring and loving they are. We do not see anything malevolent in their natures. Maybe this is because they are not as powerful as their queen, and so they behave according to inlaw gender principles. They are a bunch of chaotic young ladies who enjoy being with their boss. They advise her, even though at times their advice is not accepted by her, and they understand this (IV.xiii.4-10; IV.xiii.1; II.v.75-76). They remonstrate with her on occasion, for example when she acts cruelly towards her subjects. Charmian tells her quite explicitly that it is wrong for her to beat a messenger for telling the truth about Octavia and Antony.

Cleopatra's beauty

Brandes describes the picture Shakespeare has of Cleopatra:

He passed in succession before his eyes the most feminine, and therefore the most dangerous, women he had known since he gained a footing in London, and he gave her the grace of the one, the caprices of the other, the teasing humour of a third, a fourth's instability; but deep in his heart he was thinking of one only, who had been to him all women in one, a mistress in the art of love and of awakening love, inciting to it as no other incited, and faithlessly betraying as no other betrayed – true and false, daring and frail, actress and lover without peer! (1926:463-4).

Shakespeare endows both Antony and Cleopatra with great personal beauty, though neither of them is young. In V.ii Cleopatra says, 'I dream'd there was an Emperor Antony ... His face was as the heavens...' (IV.ii. 76-80). Cleopatra in particular is stunningly

beautiful. When Enobarbus sees her for the first time, he says, she ‘o’erpictured that Venus where we see the fancy outwork nature’ (II.ii.196). Later, he adds:

Age cannot wither her, nor custom stale
Her infinite variety. Other women cloy
The appetites they feed, but she makes hungry
Where most she satisfies; for vilest things
Become themselves in her (II.ii.231-235).

Her beauty exceeds all imagination. Even time has no power to sear or wither it. This sets her aloof from the ordinary lot of humanity, especially women in the West. One wonders why Shakespeare imbues her with such beauty? Perhaps she fascinates him because she is not from the West. She is the enchantress whom, according to Antony, ‘everything becomes’ – chiding, laughing, weeping, as well as repose. She is ‘a wonderful piece of work’ (Brandes 1926:466). Her beauty ensures that Antony can never leave her. She seems to know that she is beautiful, and she uses her beauty to charm people, to twist men’s minds and hearts, like Dolabella, who betrayed his master’s plans to her. It is the same beauty which enchants and bewitches the men she falls in love with.

Cleopatra’s sexual power

When Maecenas wonders if Antony has left Cleopatra for good after marrying Octavia, Enobarbus replies: ‘Never. He will not’ (II.ii.230-36). This is because, associated with her beauty, Cleopatra has tremendous sexual power. She draws men to her. She seems not to care how people judge her so long as she can do as she pleases. She is sexually experienced, and expresses her sexuality outright: ‘I take no pleasure in aught an eunuch has’ (I.v.9-10). She has had relationships with previous Roman leaders, and she refers explicitly to them: ‘Broad-fronted Caesar, / When thou wast here above the ground I was

/ A morsel for a monarch, and great Pompey / Would stand and make his eyes grow in my brow' (I.v.29-32). Not only has she had relationships with these men, she has had children by them too. Agrippa remarks, later: 'Royal wench! / She made great Caesar lay his sword to bed: / He ploughed her, and she cropped' (II.ii.223-224). She is clearly promiscuous, and as the Egyptian leader does not provide a moral example to her people.

Her frank sexuality is what damns her in the eyes of the Romans. Whereas her Egyptian ladies seems quite accepting of her conduct, and are happy for her relationship with Antony, soldiers like Enobarbus disapprove, feeling it is without moral dignity. In McDonald's view, Enobarbus even feels there is a kind of criminality in her passion (2004:575). Maecenas calls her a 'trull' (III.vi.95). Octavius Caesar also condemns her. When he meets Octavia, who is unaccompanied by her new husband, she tells him Antony is in Athens. Octavius disabuses her:

No, my most wrongèd sister. Cleopatra
Hath nodded him to her. He hath given his empire
Up to a whore; who now are levying
The kings o'th' earth for war' (III.vi.65-8).

Even Antony, when he has been betrayed by her, refers disparagingly to her past promiscuous life, calling her 'this foul Egyptian', and 'this triple-turned whore' (IV.xii.10,14).

The relationships she had with the two Roman leaders in the past did not last. It is not clear why she did not pursue these two great men, or keep them near her. Perhaps they were patriotic and put their country first, or perhaps they were just using her sexually

while they were in the East, and, when the need arose for them to return, they did so. Both Pompey and Caesar were power hungry so what mattered to them most was obtaining political supremacy.

This is not the case with Antony. Unlike Pompey and Caesar before him, Antony remains captivated by Cleopatra. Although he makes attempts to leave her, he does not succeed in doing so. Antony seems to be more in love than patriotic. Early in the play he rejects the state he rules: 'Let Rome in Tiber melt, and the wide arch / Of the empire fall' (I.i.35-6). Antony recognises that he is ensnared by Cleopatra. In I.ii. he says, 'These strong Egyptian fetters I must break / Or lose myself in dotage' (104-105). He tries to break free but his ties to Cleopatra prove too strong. He has an opportunity to escape when he returns to Rome to bury his first wife but he does not use it. Although he takes Octavius's sister as his new wife, he does not remain in Rome with her. He refers to this marriage as 'the business', an alliance he has undertaken for the sake of peace, merely to secure his political position with Octavius. As he confesses to Enobarbus, he is obsessed with Cleopatra: 'i'th' East my pleasure lies' (II.iii.40). He may feel like her prisoner, tied by strings that bind, but this is the effect of the love she excites in him. It is as if he wants to be in her power, however fatal this may be to him.

On his death-bed Antony finds out that Cleopatra is still alive. We expect him to be furious at her for lying to him about her death, for having sent the message that led him to end his life. But he does not resist her. His anger at thinking she betrayed him melts, and he pleads to be taken to her to say goodbye: 'Bear me, good friends, where Cleopatra

bides; / 'Tis the last service that I shall command you' (IV.xiv.131-2). If only he can get one kiss from her he will die a happy man, united with her. He is eager to join her and be reconciled with her: 'I will o'ertake thee, Cleopatra and / Weep for my pardon' (IV.xv.44-5). He is happy to think that the last word Cleopatra uttered was his name. Yet her 'death' leaves him so desperate and lonely that he thinks he must end his own life to be with her. He imagines both of them enjoying life after death together. He thinks he is following her, as he always has done, but because Cleopatra is in fact not dead, ironically enough, he is taking the lead which she must subsequently follow. Even in death, he loves her very much. She has not lost her enigmatic power to charm and attract him. At the critical moment of death, she refuses to descend from her monument to bid him goodbye. Instead she has Antony drawn up to her, and he obeys willingly. After her death Caesar remarks of her, 'She looks like sleep, / As she would catch another Antony in her strong toil of grace' (V.ii.336-38).

Her sexual power over Antony has a significant impact on his public life. He neglects his Roman duties as a general and a ruler. His love for Cleopatra erodes his ambition, his sense of vocation and his duty as a great man which he has always upheld. His passion for her is what makes him become weak and fail to make proper judgements or to take advice from his soldiers. The Roman soldiers blame Cleopatra for what they see as her evil and magical influence on Antony. When war breaks out between him and Octavius, Antony knows he is best equipped to fight on land. Despite Enobarbus's warning, however, Cleopatra persuades him to fight a naval battle. At the crucial moment she withdraws her ship, and he follows, leads to his complete destruction (III.vii.27-67).

Antony knows full well that her influence over him is strong and destructive. Early on, he refers to her as ‘my serpent of old Nile’ (I.v.25). It is a humorous endearment, but it recognises her cunning. In the middle of the play Antony is aware that his passion for her has ruined him: ‘My sword, made weak by my affection, would / Obey it on all cause’ (III.xi.67-8). He blames her for his downfall. He has lost his head, and his skills as a soldier. Later, he complains to Mardian: ‘O, thy vile lady! She has robbed me of my sword’ (IV.xiii.23) – the sword that represents his Roman responsibilities and honour. He has flung away honour and power for her sake, never weighing their worth. In his monologue in he recognises he has been betrayed, and raves against ‘this false soul of Egypt! this grave charm’ (IV.xii.10-29). He is regretting succumbing to Cleopatra’s charm and captivating beauty. At the last he feels so betrayed by Cleopatra that he opts for suicide:

All is lost!
This foul Egyptian hath betrayed me.
My fleet hath yielded to the foe, and yonder
They cast their caps up and carouse together
Like friends long lost. Triple-turned whore! ’tis thou
Hast sold me to this novice, and my heart
Makes only wars on thee. Bid them all fly;
For when I am revenged upon my charm,
I have done all ... (IV.xii.10-29)

It is not just Antony who is ruined by Cleopatra. His death because of her has symbolic force. He is the most valiant of Roman soldiers and dying like this will take away the honour and respect that Rome has for him. In addition, as an Egyptian she has made

Antony a prey to the voluptuousness of the East, and by corrupting him, she has threatened the (masculine) value system of Rome.

Cleopatra the ordinary woman

Yet the power she exerts over Antony is not only sexual. She is also an ordinary woman, with considerable charm as a person, as a human being. This is evident in her relationship with her waiting women, her ladies. She jokes with them, and shares her personal desires, fears and romantic emotions which some might consider private.

It is also, of course, evident in her relationship with Antony. She is explicit about her sexual attraction to Antony, and expresses this in quite innocent terms: ‘O happy horse, to bear the weight of Antony! / Do bravely, horse, for wot’st thou whom thou mov’st?’ (I.v.21-22). She too, it seems, would like to ‘bear the weight of Antony’.

Cleopatra is a loving woman: she gives herself completely to the man she loves. This made her vulnerable to Julius Caesar and to Pompey who each in turn left her, even after fathering children with her. She loves Antony so much that when he has to leave her to return to Rome, she is devastated. She feigns sickness to try to persuade him not to return to his wife (I.i.19-23). She is disturbed by his reaction to Fulvia’s death, because it reminds her that she too may one day die, and Antony’s reaction to her death then may be just as cold as it is now to Fulvia’s (I.iii.63-5). When he does go, she reflects plaintively, ‘And I am all forgotten’ (I.iii.91). Here she seems fragile and even despairing. She knows Antony is romantically susceptible to women, and thinks he will soon forget her when he

is away from her. Despite the support of her attendants, she despairs of ever getting him back. By contrast, Antony is her 'man of men' (I.iv.71), and we see how connected she feels to him, and how dependent on him. Without him, she feels empty and lonely – so lonely that she is prepared to drink a potion, 'That I might sleep out this great gap of time / My Antony is away' (I.v.5-6). She vows to write letters to him on a daily basis even if it calls for her to send all her messengers to deliver her letters to him (I.v.77-8). Clearly she possesses the power to love; to love sincerely, truthfully and genuinely.

As well as adoring Antony, and being made weak by him, she is teasing and provocative. She is capable of making him angry, and enjoys doing so. The angrier he gets the merrier this makes her: 'You'll heat my blood', he says at I.iii.80. She seems not to take his anger seriously because to her he is just the man she loves, not the super-hero Romans think him to be. Later in the play, however, her sarcasm gives way to respect for him, as we see when she addresses him as 'Lord' (IV.viii.17) and 'Emperor' (V.ii.76). She also has the power to be persuasive. For instance, when Antony invites her to supper, she returns the invitation and insists that he be her guest (II.ii.14-17).

She is also intelligent. Her personality shows some of the outlaw components of the feminine gender principle, which make her powerful, cunning, mentally independent, courageous, and proprietorial. That is why she refers to Egypt as 'my Egypt', at II.v.94. Antony appreciates her intellectual power; he is quite aware she is more intelligent than most men. To him she is 'cunning past man's thought' (I.i.132). Although she accommodates her ladies' opinions a lot of the time, and they have no reservations when

talking to her (I.iii.6-8), she is also astute enough, and independent enough, to reject their opinions when she sees fit.

Her emotions and desires are sincere. She is not a fake and does not pretend to be a moral person. At times her emotions overrun her intelligence, and she indulges in wild and unrestrained actions. As well as being loving and provocative, she can also be cruel. This is evident in her brutal treatment of the messenger who brings the news that Antony is now married to Octavia. In fact she is vicious. Before she has him whipped with wire dipped in salt (to inflict excruciating pain), she insults and threatens him: 'Hence, / Horrible villain! Or I'll spurn thine eyes / Like balls before me...' (II.v.63-64). She even goes to the extent of drawing a knife. Perhaps she is so abusive because she can't deal with rejection. It is only Charmian's intervention that stops her: 'Good madam, keep yourself within yourself' (II.v.75). Her words show that Cleopatra has completely lost control. The irony of the address 'good madam' highlights the harshness and violence of the actions we have just witnessed. When she thinks of losing Antony she utters the words, 'Melt Egypt into Nile, and kindly creatures / Turn all to serpents' (II.v.78-9). She would rather see this disaster happening to her country than lose her lover. Her jealousy and insecurity are also evident when she demands to know all about Antony's new wife, Octavia, to see whether she is her match, and to weigh up the chances that he will return to her (II.v.110-114).

Although she is daring enough to go to war, and to persuade Antony to accept the naval battle proposed by Caesar, in the event her self-confidence deserts her and she flees. Her

human weakness and an adrenalin rush get hold of her to show that no matter how powerful she is, she is prone to fear like everyone else (I.iii.18-24). She is capable of recognising her error, and humble enough to offer apologies for her blunders (III.xi.61,68). Of course her apology is to her lover, who is a man of her own status, and not to commoners like the messenger she has beaten, or her ladies after she abuses them. And yet her capacity to admit that she is wrong is an important, and attractive, part of her nature. Her first apology is rendered shortly after a heated argument with Antony over Fulvia's death. The second comes after she has fled from the naval battle, causing Antony to follow her and hence lose the battle. Her excuse is that she was driven by fear: 'Forgive my fearful sails' (III.xi.55). She offers an excuse that she acted in ignorance, but apologises profusely: 'Pardon, pardon!' (III.xi.61-8).

She undergoes a whole process of emotions in dealing with the death of Antony. When she first sees him on the verge of death, she is terrified and panic-stricken. She summons the help of others. She faints when Antony dies in her arms. She laments his death, although she does not find relief in grieving like others do. Her shock renders her senseless. She sheds none of the tears we might expect from her since they love each other so much. Yet without Antony she feels hopeless and the world is dull to her (IV.xv.67). She is also afraid of being captured by Caesar, and so she shuts herself in her monument. And yet her bravery returns to her and she decides to take her own life rather than be taken captive to Rome: 'My resolution and my hands I'll trust', she says (IV.xv.19). Although separated from Antony by death now, they will be reunited in the

‘other world’ beyond the grave when she kills herself. They will be together in death as they have been in life.

Her spirit is not quelled. Even at her own death she still practices mockery. She mocks death itself by ordering her ladies to give her royal garments, so that she can die like a queen, whereas up to now she has not cared about her status – she has been a carefree, ordinary woman in love.

Cleopatra the queen

As a queen Cleopatra is a very powerful woman. We see this in the opening lines of the play when she says, ‘I will set a bourn how far to be loved’ (I.i.16). From this assertion we get a clear picture of her as a woman of power who is likely to control the relationship between Antony and herself. She is respected and adored by her attendants as well as by Antony. This is evident in their salutations to her: ‘queen’ (I.i.49), ‘lady’ (I.ii.69), ‘madam’ (I.ii.7), ‘highness’ (I.v.9), ‘sovereign’ (I.iii.61), ‘empress’ (III.xi.33), and ‘majesty’ (III.iii.7). Although these are conventional forms of address, they seem to be overused for Cleopatra.

As a queen, Cleopatra can be exploitative and abusive. Even though she is intimate with her waiting women, she pushes them around, and shows little respect to them. She whips the messenger cruelly, and her ladies can’t stop her. She makes Charmian lie on her behalf (IV.xiii.3-6). Her ladies are emotionally abused by her, just like Antony, who is

both emotionally and psychologically abused, hence can neither part from her nor make serious decisions.

Every now and again she emphasises her sense of power and status. At III.vii.17 she refers to herself thus: 'as the president of [her] Kingdom, [she] will / Appear there for a man'. We see she is duty-bound to protect her land and people, as a ruler of her country. Cleopatra is eager to play an active role in great public enterprises because as 'president' she is politically involved. Just like Fulvia, she is daring too. She goes to war with Antony, and insists on a naval battle. However, her departure from the battle of Actium prompts Antony to follow her and results in the loss of the battle.

She is unlike Octavia who is chaste and submissive, and who behaves according to the norms of Roman society. In fact she would probably see Octavia and other Roman women as boring and stereotyped. As an Egyptian she is not constrained by social norms and expectations, and can express her personality freely. Because of her position as queen, she overturns normal expectations that a woman should show love to her man and love should be everything for her. Rather it is Antony who ends up following his heart; choosing love for her over public responsibility, and in consequence losing his honour and reputation as a valiant soldier, a general and an honourable citizen.

It is particularly in the manner of her death that we see most clearly Cleopatra the queen. We have seen her child-like fears, when Antony leaves her because of Fulvia's death, or when he is furious with her and she takes refuge in her monument, or when she is afraid

to be taken captive by Octavius. At the last she becomes brave, however, and faces death with boldness. She is so intelligent that she manages to outwit Octavius himself, by recognising his plan to take her prisoner and make a show of her. She kills herself before this degrading event can happen, a move Octavius does not see coming. She sees through Octavius's smooth promises and challenges Dolabella to tell her honestly what Octavius intends (V.ii.105-109). She dupes Octavius into believing he has lured her away from thoughts of suicide. Finally she is able to achieve the nobility inspired in her by her dead lover, Antony. At the moment of her death she leaves behind her fear, bitterness and regret. She embraces death with open arms because it will reunite her with her lover.

Noble; cunning; a whore: we see her as a character who changes frequently. But perhaps her death is the most revealing of her real nature, since it elevates her from the ordinary woman she is in relation to Antony to the supreme figure, the queen who dies in her royal robes. She dies with dignity, welcoming and embracing death without showing any signs of fear, because she wants to be with him. She defies death. Because she has no will to live anymore, she feels the only noble act is to kill herself.

Give me my robe, put on my crown; 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! (V.ii.272-80)

Cleopatra longs for Antony so desperately that he seems to her to be there, calling her and approving the act of committing suicide. This gives her courage to commit the deed

that will render her brave and noble. She is no longer in doubt. She admits her past inconsistencies, and her less than admirable past actions:

I cannot project mine own cause so well
To make it clear, but do confess I have
Been laden with like frailties which before
Have often shamed our sex' (V.ii.120-3).

Now she is sure of what she wants to do, what she must do.

What poor an instrument
May do a noble deed! He brings me liberty.
My resolution's placed, and I have nothing
Of woman in me; now from head to foot
I am marble-constant, now the fleeting moon
No planet is of mine' (V.ii.235-9).

From her past character of wantonness, trickery and folly, she is lifted to a noble end and dies a heroine (McDonald 2004:577).

Even Octavius accepts his defeat like a gentleman. He seems to acknowledge her nobility as well as the close bond between her and her lover when he directs the funeral arrangements. 'She shall be buried by her Antony, no grave upon earth shall clip in it a pair so famous' (V.ii.51-53). He seems to envy the dead couple and is aware how much they loved each other, hence; he orders her to be buried next to her Antony.

Does French's model suffice with regard to Cleopatra?

Signs of the inlaw in Cleopatra appear when she is terrified and panic-stricken on seeing her lover near death, and when she faints when he dies in her arms. She is also afraid of being captured by Caesar, and so hides herself away. These are evidence of the feminine gender qualities in her but the outlaw seems to be more predominant.

Her full nature is observable when she takes her own life. She cements the striking balance between the two gender principles in her, that is, feeling weak and despairing (associated with the inlaw component) and taking her own life (associated with the masculine). Shakespeare thus produces a balanced character in her, capable of operating on both extremes of the continuum where the two principles are located.

As mentioned above, the ideal of contemporary womanhood during this period was chaste, silent and obedient (Freed, 2006:5). It was believed that a woman should keep her mouth shut and not answer back; any woman, educated or not, was firmly discouraged from expressing her viewpoint on almost any subject (ibid., 6). Cleopatra, by contrast, is a woman who puts forward her point of view.

To conclude, Cleopatra is inclined towards the outlaw component of the female principle, but this is cleverly managed by Shakespeare so as not to be excessive. He incorporates in her the sweet aspects of the inlaw component, so as to strike a balance in her character. Though powerful, intelligent and independent, she also becomes what nature expects of her that is, being weak and fearful. Yet her death may be looked at as masculine because she commits suicide. She dies an extraordinary death by holding a serpent to her body for it to bite and inject poison into her. She is mortal. But she dies not because she is female but because she is mortal like any other human being.

Cleopatra's character threatens the members of the masculine gender by what she represents. Just as the Queen of Shakespeare's England, Elizabeth I (who ruled for 44 years), was remarkable, so too, is Cleopatra remarkable. Despite their femininity, personal vanity and love of gallant compliments, despite the enjoyment they both undoubtedly received from being flattered by handsome men, in their role as heads of state they never forgot that they held the supreme position in their countries and represented a male establishment (Freed 2006:2). Elizabeth frequently referred to herself as 'Prince', just as Cleopatra refers to herself as 'President' (III.xiii.17). Shakespeare may have created Cleopatra as queen of Egypt for a purpose. He probably wanted to show that ruling a country was possible by a woman of intelligence like her. We should therefore not criticise her for behaving differently from the rest of Shakespeare's women, even the powerful ones who voice their own opinions. One of the reasons we should not do this is because she is different. She is an Egyptian. She is an Egyptian who can be compared favourably with the English queen, who is almost as different from her male counterparts as Cleopatra is from Western rulers.

In conclusion, we might sum up the character of Cleopatra in this way: she is infinitely various, changing from one mood to another; she is mercurial and bewitching, ready to rage and storm at her attendants, and even at Antony. She is brave and fearless in the face of death. She is an enchantress, a sexual sorceress, full of the outlaw charm and passion of the East. She is spontaneous and does not have to care about dignity or what other people have to say about her, as long as she pleases herself; hence her private self and self-fulfilment are most important to her. On the other hand, she is a passionate woman,

loving and sweet. The passionate love she possesses sweeps away reason, and so she is controlled by her heart instead of her mind, sharp as it is. She is endowed with many qualities, like wit, coquetry, perception, subtlety, imagination and carefreeness. Although she is a queen, she sometimes acts like other women, who are jealous, imperious, mischievous, malicious, flagrant, but delicate too. Having explored her nature I have come to the conclusion that there are instances where she is partially aligned with French's model, but there are also instances where she just cannot fit within its prescriptions. She is beyond its limits. It is on the basis of this discovery that I conclude that Shakespeare's Cleopatra is too complex a character to be explained by any one model. She may need a collection of models to do so.

CHAPTER FIVE: SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

This study has considered some fifteen characters (and groups of characters) in Shakespeare's plays. In order of discussion, these have been:

Goneril
Regan
Cordelia
Jessica
Portia
Nerissa
Calphurnia
Portia
The witches
Lady Macduff
Lady Macbeth
Fulvia
Octavia
Cleopatra's ladies
Cleopatra

I explored these characters in relation to a range of interrelated traits that they exhibit to varying degrees, including love, respect and caring; power, strength and control; influence (domestic and public) and persuasiveness; evil, cruelty, thirst for murder and calculating natures; private and public selves; courage and adventurousness; decision-making and judgement; emotional instability and balance; wisdom, intelligence and cunning; independence (mental and social); weakness and desperation; fear; ambition; nobility and honour; trustworthiness; and, finally, jealousy. These traits were not discussed individually, as separate entities, but were integrated into the discussion, with the more crucial receiving greater attention than the others.

In this study I also considered the perception that women are inferior to men with regard to wisdom, strength, knowledge and power. In Shakespeare's plays I found it to be untrue. Rather the behaviour of men and women tends to be similar in similar situations, reflecting the equality of the genders on various occasions. Both men and women feel the same passions and temptations and respond to them in like manner. The key dimensions that I used to consider the relations between women and men were: domination versus subordination; malice versus gentleness and compassion; subtlety, shrewdness and cunning versus wisdom; strength versus delicacy; defiance versus respect and love; commitment and support versus fickleness and vacillation.

Perhaps a brief overview of what I have discovered in this regard will give a sense of the range of women's experience in the plays. Shakespeare seems to deliberately choose women characters of high status. Although it is not clear who Lady Macbeth's father is, it is likely that she is a member of the nobility, and she later becomes the queen of Scotland, the highest rank. Portia, in *The Merchant of Venice*, has a noble father who has all the wealth in the world. Portia, Brutus' wife, belongs to a prestigious family, having an honoured father, 'A woman so well reputed, Cato's daughter (II.i.295). Cleopatra, the daughter of Pharaoh, is a princess who then becomes queen and ruler of Egypt. Either these women are of noble descent or they acquire nobility through marriage.

Some of them, though, are more dominant than others. Lady Macbeth is dominant both in private and in public. Initially she is able to control her husband, but the impact of the actions she initiates bring her to a state of misery and madness. Portia in the *Merchant of*

Venice dominates the male world both domestically and in the legal arena, but shows submission to her father's will and, subsequently, defers to Bassanio. Calphurnia is an obedient wife to her husband, Julius Caesar, even though her position commands respect from the entire state of Rome. Brutus's wife, Portia, knows her place – and her rights – as a wife and as a woman and so her husband succumbs to her insistence that he inform her about the assassination plot in which he is involved. Cleopatra, queen of Egypt, proves that female domination is inevitable, both politically and domestically. And yet she shows respect in her love of Antony, and distress when she is defeated in war, and faces capture by Octavius.

The more dominant of the women exercise their will in ways that range from hardness to extreme malice. The witches indulge their quest for damage and destruction. Instead of showing gratitude and compassion to King Duncan, Lady Macbeth becomes a monster who pleads with the spirits to strip her of all humanity, and then exhorts her husband to murder. Cleopatra has a slave beaten without compunction. She lacks compassion for her subjects, unless she stands to gain some favour from it ('there's gold for thee ... I will employ thee back again. I find thee / Most fit for businesses, she says to the messenger (III.iii.34-38).

Women who venture into the masculine domain have to have qualities of subtlety, shrewdness or wisdom. Lady Macbeth worms her way into her husband's sense of self, and subtly manipulates him so as to achieve the ends she has set her mind to. Similar tactics draw Antony to Cleopatra so that he turns his back on his wife and his social

duties. Wisdom and acuteness lead Portia to become the most honoured lawyer in Venice. These female characters are so subtle that their intentions are not detected by those upon whom they exercise their minds. Female characters who are dominant tend to be defiant too, of all the elements or obstacles standing in the way of their success. In the process they may become malicious, abusive, subtle, and manipulative and lack compassion.

And yet almost all of the female characters also show gentleness and compassion. Sometimes it is insincere, used by the character as a way of achieving her goals. Mostly it is genuine. Portia, in the *Merchant of Venice*, is a very compassionate lady with a soft spot for those close to her lover, Bassanio. She welcomes all of them into her home, and goes to some lengths to save Antonio, her man's friend. Brutus's wife, too, is sweet but stubborn, demanding to share her husband's emotional trauma over the plot to assassinate Caesar.

Shakespeare's female characters are often strong but delicate. Their strength and delicacy can be explained in terms of character, emotional constitution or the public roles they execute. Portia in the *Merchant of Venice* is a strong person who can play a masculine role but feels empty inside until she finds her soul mate. Jessica stands up for herself against her manipulative father. Portia, in *Julius Caesar*, is so gentle and delicate as a woman that Brutus does not want to confide in her at first. But she is so strong that she does not break down on hearing shattering news. Fulvia is daring enough to challenge Octavius Caesar to war. Calphurnia cannot bear children; nonetheless her strength keeps

her going. Cleopatra executes tough masculine responsibilities and social duties but at the same time she is fragile and delicate when faced with defeat. 'Where art thou, death? / Come hither, come! Come, come, come, and take a queen / Worth many babes and beggars!' (V.ii.47-9).

Most of the women characters love their men. Lady Macbeth's love may be described as strong but very dangerous. She loves to extremes, pushing her husband into murder so as to acquire the title of King (which incidentally will make her Queen). She plays on his insecurities and questions his manhood, and turns him into an immoral being. She does not welcome him back from the battlefield, nor does she congratulate him on his victory. Instead it is her husband who shows affection 'My dearest love, Duncan comes here to-night' (I.v.57). Portia in *The Merchant of Venice* seems to truly love Bassanio. She is committed to him and supports him financially, romantically and emotionally to such an extent that she goes to court in defence of his best friend, Antonio. Jessica also shows love and commitment to her lover, Lorenzo, such that she leaves her father, Shylock, to be with him, forfeiting her inheritance and her identity as a Jew. Portia, Brutus' wife, loves her husband dearly; this is reflected in her willingness to share his emotional burden. It is this love and commitment she has for him which makes Brutus confide in her. He does not doubt her for a moment and she, in turn, does not condemn him. Calphurnia also loves and cares for her husband. She is concerned about him and his welfare, and so she warns him not to go to the Capitol because of dangers he might encounter. Her love is so strong that she is prepared to bear the shame of being thought afraid if this will keep her husband home. She feels it is her duty to warn him and support

him. In the case of Cleopatra, the concept 'love' knows no bounds. She is so full of love that she falls in love, successively, with the three most powerful men of Rome. Of them she is truly in love only with Antony. Her love is also a weapon of decoy for the Roman rulers that ensures she retains her title as queen of Egypt. It is also sexual – so sexual that no man can resist her caring, appealing and loving personality. She may be regarded as a symbol of true love.

These women characters were also discussed in terms of French's model of the gender principle, which divides human experience into masculine and feminine, and divides feminine experience into inlaw and outlaw. What I found from this detailed reading of women characters was that some – but not many – of them fit quite neatly into the types set up by French's gender model. The inlaw figures include Cordelia, Nerissa, Calphurnia, Lady Macduff, Octavia and Cleopatra's ladies. The outlaw figures include Goneril and Regan and the witches. The model is too rigid to accommodate most of the others, however. Those who appear most fleetingly – Calphurnia, Lady Macduff – do not get the chance to grow or develop or change. But most of the others do, and this makes it difficult to apply to them a model based on types or categories. The fact is that most of Shakespeare's women are dynamic and varied and human. Perhaps we see this most intensely in relation to Cleopatra. But even Lady Macbeth, the most challenging of Shakespeare's women, invites our sympathy when we witness her breakdown. French's model is illuminating when it comes to the 'default' position expected of women, that is, as inlaw figures. But her gender continuum is too one-dimensional to explain the range of

variation from the norm. And her premise that only men act out the human role is quite clearly wrong when it comes to Shakespeare's women.

In my reading, it is obviously Shakespeare's intention to balance the character traits in his female characters to show how significant their role is in his plays specifically and in the community in general. In a country where women were regarded as inferior, Shakespeare seems to have been motivated to prove that the issue of gender is not the only thing that shapes the qualities of a person. Perhaps this was due to the example of the great queen of England, Queen Elizabeth I, who reigned for 44 years, displaying such qualities that made Shakespeare realise how important women were in society in general and in the lives of their husbands, homes and families in particular. Perhaps he was inspired by Elizabeth to create in his plays female characters who would change the perception of women by men.

In concluding this thesis, I must say I feel that Shakespeare did a great deal to put women on the map, by making them known, appreciated, acknowledged and valued in his plays. They are contributors to the world at large and to other women in particular, showing that women can aspire to be what they want to be. Shakespeare had a wide-ranging and human perception of women, and showed them to be good, intelligent, wise, loving, subtle and daring, but also calculating, scheming, weak, vulnerable and prone to temptation – just as men are. I believe that Shakespeare championed the entry of women as characters into the world of theatre and of entertainment. He was no sexist. He treated female characters equally with males by giving them fair opportunities in their roles to

prove that they can transcend the barriers of the male-centred and male-dominated world. They do this by being strong, wise, guileful, powerful, dominating, rebellious, assertive, intuitive, manipulative, subtle, shrewd, loving, gentle, selfish or selfless and persuasive. It could well be that through Shakespeare's female characters the idea of women's emancipation gathered momentum.

I hope that, by the end of this study, I have demonstrated the balance he strikes for his female characters, and the value he places on women in general. I hope I have encouraged readers to view Shakespeare with different eyes. Although he lived in a male-dominated England, where the head of the family was in most cases the man, and all power and authority rested on him, he managed to make his female characters rise above their station as housewives. His women transcended the social barriers set by the customs and beliefs of the time. I feel he was strongly against these barriers, and to show it he made sure that his female characters were educated and were from high social ranks of life, defying the view that they had to be restricted in social, economic and legal spheres (Greenblatt et al. 1997:9). While women were denied any rightful claim to institutional authority or personal autonomy, except for very few aristocrats (the Queen, for example), Shakespeare made the world aware that women had great value and were significantly influential. This is why I conclude by saying that Shakespeare, the greatest writer of his time, could never have been a sexist; to him women were equal to men, and had the same potential as them.

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