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Shakespeare’s Tragic Heroines

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Shakespeare’s attitudes towards and portrayals of women have long been discussed and analyzed in many contexts, and often it seems as though sweeping generalizations are made about how he felt towards women. Based on such plays as *Macbeth*, *Hamlet*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, and some characters in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, one might be able to conclude that Shakespeare generally did not view women as moral equals to men, and only that he viewed them as weak, manipulative, deceptive, submissive, or downright cruel. Also, in recent years, the women’s movement has badmouthed his plays, claiming that even if the women he portrays are good and virtuous, they are always weak and under the control of men (such as *Hamlet’s* Ophelia). However, statements like that become dangerous when his plays are looked at in a broader scope and when one is reminded of the time period that he wrote in. In fact, some plays actually (though somewhat subtly) end up having women as the most heroic persons in the play. And although these women do not rebel against wrongdoings in a militant and warlike fashion (as perhaps their male counterparts would), they successfully maintain their beliefs, convictions, and strengths in a quieter, but no less effectual, way.

Two women in particular who hold to this model are *King Lear’s* Cordelia and *Othello’s* Desdemona, not only because they remain strong, true, and righteous throughout, but also because of their similarity in the fact that their tragic downfalls (and subsequent deaths) only resulted as a consequence of their relationships to the tragic heros of the stories (King Lear is Cordelia’s father and Othello is Desdemona’s husband)—but not because of any flaws of their own. In contrast, the heros of both of those plays fall because of some “tragic flaw” that he has. Unfortunately, they bring these women down with them, but not without cause—in the end, the strong and virtuous characters of Cordelia and Desdemona eventually force Lear and Othello to realize where they had gone wrong. Of course, at that point in the play it is too late to save any lives, but their deaths come with a recognition of long-denied truths, truths brought about only because of the power, strength, and purity of the tragic heroines.

Cordelia’s significance in the play is literally beyond words, as much of
Desdemona’s significance is—they are given very little dialogue. The reader or viewer recognizes strength of character when he/she sees it, and that of course makes all the difference. Their softness and inability to express themselves properly (or to express themselves convincingly in the eyes of the men who love them) is their only flaw, which brings both them and the men who love them down to a tragic ending. The character of Cordelia is a particularly interesting one because her physical role in the play is quite brief, with parts only at the very beginning and at the very end. She is absent for the meat of the play, and it is interesting to see what a great impact she has had on every action that takes place in the play. For one thing, she is virtually the cause of the mayhem that breaks out after Lear divides his land between his other daughters—it is because she refused to play in his live competition between sisters, and because Lear loved her so dearly, that the play advanced the way it did. Desdemona has much the same effect on the events in Othello—it is Othello’s great love for her that brings him (and her) down in the end. In Cordelia’s early answers to Lear’s question regarding her love for him, she responds:

Cordelia: Nothing, my lord.
Lear: Nothing?
Cordelia: Nothing.
Lear: Nothing will come of nothing; speak again.

(Lear, 1.1.87–90)

Lear was well pleased with the speeches of Cordelia’s sisters, Goneril and Regan, whose ridiculous exaggerations make it clear that their words are false, stemming only from greed and not love. When it comes to her turn, Cordelia can say nothing. Lear is enraged and humiliated. It is clear that he expects her protestation of love to exceed that of her sisters, partly because he must sense that it is genuinely so, but also because she is his favorite. His terrible wrath when she fails him is so violent because her reticence is totally unexpected and has made him look like a fool. From Lear’s point of view, Cordelia’s silence is mere disobedience. What he has devised is, after all, only a prearranged formality, with Cordelia to receive the richest third of England. Cannot such a ceremony be answered with the conventional hyperbole of courtly language? Don’t parents have a right to be verbally reassured of their children’s love? For her part, however, Cordelia senses that Lear is demanding love as payment for his parental kindliness, quid pro quo. Genuine love ought rather be selfless, as the King of France tells Burgundy. Is Cordelia being asked to prefer Lear before her own husband-to-be? Is this the price she must pay for her upbringing? Lear’s ego seems fully capable of demanding the sacrifice from his daughters, especially from his favorite, Cordelia. Goneril and Regan are content to flatter and promise obedience, knowing that they will turn him out once he has relinquished his authority. Cordelia
Shakespeare's Tragic Heroines

refuses to lie in this fashion, but she also will not yield to Lear's implicit request for her undivided affection. Part of her must also be loyal to her own husband and her children, in the natural cycle of the generations.

Why didn't Cordelia speak? It is obvious that her love for him is great and true, but she feels that invoicing these feelings, it will only lessen their meaning:

My love's
More ponderous than my tongue,

(1.1.77–78)
she says, and again:

Unhappy that I am, I cannot heave
My heart into my mouth.

(1.1.91–92)

Her father tries to force her, but she can state in simple, unemotional language, only that she obeys, loves and honors him as duty requires. Her very silence is proof enough to the audience of her love, and contrasts with the outpourings of her sisters. She recognizes her lack of "that glib and oily art To speak and purpose not" (1.1.228–229), and is glad not to have it even though it has cost her her father's favor. But Lear is not as insightful as characters such as the King of France, Kent, or even the Fool. This failure to comprehend her true meaning because personal vanity has so distorted his vision, is at the heart of Lear's tragedy. Cordelia's own is that he has asked her for the one thing she cannot give, and the whole plot of the play springs from her failure to live up to his expectations.

Cordelia's lines in the play are few and far between when they are compared to the other significant characters. Why, then, is her role so significant in the play? Cordelia's answers are the first real signs of human emotional operating on a level potential of tragedy. Her references to her 'heart', to her 'love' for Lear, and then to her 'bond' reveal the conflict between conscience and duty which makes her 'unhappy'. When she insists that she will indeed say nothing to improve her position, the King significantly reprimands her. This reference to Cordelia's need to mend her speech suggests that her tragic flaw involves a lack of good rhetoric. Cordelia's answers fall short of speech. There is a beauty of Cordelia's character that often seems too sacred for words, which is perhaps why Shakespeare felt it unnecessary to give her much physical time in the play. Within her heart is a pure, unfailing, full affection that her father is blind to because her affection is silent and obscure. Everything in her seems to lie beyond our view, and affects us in a manner which we feel rather than perceive. There is little external development of her intellect, less of passion, and still less of imagi-
nation. It is completely made out in the course of a few scenes, and we are surprised to find that in those few scenes there is matter for a life of reflection, and materials enough for twenty heroines. If Lear is the greatest of Shakespeare's tragedies, Cordelia, as a person governed by the purest and holiest impulses and motives and as a tragic heroine, also approaches near to perfection. Cordelia's sensitivity, high minded resolution, and lack of greed, make an incredibly powerful impression on the reader. Giving us such little sight of her on stage helps both to sustain her credibility and add to her mystery. Other characters mention her, and the picture they give is consistent with what we see of her. When Kent asks how she received the letter which brought news of Lear's treatment at the hands of Goneril and Regan, we learn that she wept and:

once or twice she heav'd the name of 'father'
Pantingly forth, as if it press'd her heart;
Cried 'Sisters! Sisters! Shame of ladies! Sisters!
Kent! Father! Sisters! What i' th' storm? i' th' night?
Let pity not be believed!' There she shook
The holy water from her heavenly eyes.

(Lear, 4.3.26-31)

Strong feelings make her inarticulate; the thought of her father's suffering causes her such sympathetic agony that she can hardly utter his name.

Desdemona, Othello's loyal and trusting wife, also displays a transient energy, arising from the power of affection, but gentleness gives the prevailing tone to the character—gentleness in its excess, gentleness verging on passiveness—gentleness, which not only cannot resent—but cannot resist.

Othello: Then of so gentle a condition!
Iago: Ay! Too gentle.
Othello: Nay, that's certain.

Here the exceeding softness of Desdemona's temper is turned against her by the villainous Iago, so that it suddenly strikes Othello in a new point of view, as the inability to resist temptation and as not being true love for him; but to us who perceive the character as a whole, this extreme gentleness of nature is yet delineated with such exceeding refinement, that the effect never approaches to feebleness. It is true that once her extreme timidity leads her in a moment of confusion and terror to lie about the fatal handkerchief, but that doesn't mean that she is as flawed as Othello. Desdemona is a source of grace for Othello, just as Cordelia is a source of grace for King Lear. "Othello is noble enough to win Desdemona, but, in our sympathy for the plight of a man plagued with an aide like Iago, we forget that Othello no more deserves
Shakespeare’s Tragic Heroines

Desdemona than he does Iago . . . When Othello does not understand the true value of Desdemona and the real spiritual profit that he might realize, then we are not surprised when he finally casts her away.” (Seaman, page 84). This is true for both of the tragic heroines: their only problem is that the men in their lives don’t realize the worth of these women, until it is too late.

If Cordelia and Desdemona had really been guilty of the crimes that they were accused of, of course their greatness would have been destroyed, because the love of their men would have been unworthy, false. But they are good, and the love they receive is most perfect, just, and good. Unfortunately, Lear and Othello are incapable of realizing this. Kent tries to convince Lear of his daughter’s virtue, and Emilia’s defense of Desdemona’s faith to Othello does the same, but both pleas are to no avail. Lear’s appeals only get him banished from the kingdom:

Kent: . . . To plainness honor’s bound
When majesty falls to folly. Reserve thy state,
And in thy best consideration check
This hideous rashness. Answer my life my judgement,
Thy youngest daughter does not love thee least,
Nor are those emptyhearted whose low sounds
Reverb no hollowness.
Lear: Out of my sight!

(Lear, 1.1.149–154 & 158)

That a man should place his perfect love on a wretched thing is miserably debasing to both Lear and Othello; but that loving perfectly and well, he should be brought to distrust and dread, and abjure his own perfect love, is even worse—it is good nature wrestling with the powers of evil. His happy love was heroic tenderness; his injured love is terrible passion and disordered power. The love for these women is his destruction and hers, and that is why these plays are thought to be the height of tragedy in Western literature.

Cordelia and Desdemona are both beautiful but also humble. They are wise, true, and caring. They stand for only what they believe in, and do nothing that people demand or expect if it should go beyond what they believe to be right. While watching her sisters proverbially kiss her father’s feet, Cordelia worries in asides to the audience: “What shall Cordelia speak? Love and be silent.” . . . “Then poor Cordelia! And yet not so, since I am sure my love’s More ponderous than my tongue.” (Lear, 1.1.62 & 76–78) Desdemona behaves the same way, making the first move to Othello, disobeying her father for her love. They have far too much self-possession and strong will for a traditional woman of Shakespeare’s time, but this is what makes their characters so valuable.
Sloping Halls Review—1995

They suffer every insult and accusation without protest, beyond the constant reiteration of their innocence. They remain steadfastly humble and holy throughout.

Cordelia: Unhappy that I am, I cannot heave
my heart into my mouth. I love Your Majesty
according to my bond, no more nor less.
. . . Why have my sisters husbands if they say
They love you all? Haply, when I shall wed,
That lord whose hand must take my plight shall carry
Half my love with him, half my care and duty.
Sure I shall never marry like my sisters,
To love my father all.

(Lear, 1.1.91–93 & 99–104)

She makes this plea even as Lear is about to destroy her fortune, like the pleas Desdemona makes to Othello even as he prepares to destroy her life. But both Lear and Othello, in their passionate haste, refuse to listen to the women, which makes their words all the more poignant.

Cordelia and Desdemona’s ability to forgive the men who have wronged them so terribly is one more element to their character that makes them all the more appealing to the reader or audience. Cordelia knows how her father has wronged her, and yet her love for him remains unchanged at the end of the play.

Lear: If you have poison for me, I will drink it.
I know you do not love me, for your sisters
Have, as I do remember, done me wrong.
You have some cause, they have not.
Cordelia (weeping):
No cause, no cause.

(Lear, 4.7.74–78)

That is all that Cordelia says. And yet, it is more than enough to make it perfectly clear that she has no malice towards her father, and loves him as much as she ever did. She has forgiven him completely, because of her love and devotion to him. Desdemona does the same thing for Othello after he has wronged her (by smothering her). Emilia rushes in to the bedchamber before her mistress is dead; on hearing her voice she asks:

Emilia: O who has done this deed?
Desdemona:
Nobody. I myself. Farewell.
Commend me to my kind lord. O farewell!

(Othello, 5.2.148–150)
Shakespeare’s Tragic Heroines

Even as she lay dying at the hand of her husband, she forgave him completely and even tried to protect him.

The characters of Cordelia and Desdemona rest upon two principles of human action—the love of truth and the sense of duty. The first part of *King Lear* shows us how Cordelia is loved, the second part how she can love. To her father she is the object of preference; his agony at her supposed unkindness draws from him the confession that he had loved her most, and “thought to set his rest on her kind nursery.” Till then she had been “his best object, the argument of his praise, balm of his age, most best, most dearest!”

In terms of function, both Cordelia’s relationship with Lear and Desdemona’s relationship to Othello are central to the progress of the play, and their positions are both structurally and thematically crucial. Without these women, these great men would have never fallen as they did. The women also act somewhat as sounding-boards by which the audience can assess the honesty or dishonesty of the other characters. The plain-spoken few (Kent, Edgar, the King of France) are allied with Cordelia while the sly (Goneril, Regan, Edmund) are revealed by their hypocrisy and contrasted with her straightforwardness. It is possible to view these women, especially Cordelia, purely in symbolic terms, dramatizing the notion that plainness is more honest and valuable than flattery or even eloquence.

Cordelia’s and Desdemona’s respective visions of genuine love is of an exalted spiritual order probably influenced by Christian teachings. Cordelia is, as the King of France extols her, “Most rich being poor; Most choice, forsaken, and most loved, despised” (*Lear*, 1.1.254–255). This is the sense in which Lear has bestowed on her an unintended blessing, by exiling her from a worldly prosperity that is inherently pernicious. Now, with poetic fitness, Lear must learn the same lesson himself. By the end of both *King Lear* and *Othello*, these tragic heros have been taught some valuable life lessons about love and faith by these tragic heroines that they have ruined. And although both women die, there is a sense that not all is lost, and that these women have left their spirits behind to aid in the tardy wiseness that Lear and Othello eventually come upon. The tragedies move toward a final reconciliation and reunion of lovers beyond this world where character so absolute (that of Cordelia and Desdemona) meets only persecution and frustration; and that is why, although the reader/viewer is probably lamenting the deaths of the tragic heroines, he/she feels some resolution, some relief that their pure souls have been removed from this world where they could never be fully recognized.