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The Role of Women in Shakespeare's Roman Tragedies

DIPLOMOVÁ PRÁCE

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Key Words: Shakespeare, Antony and Cleopatra, Julius Caesar, Coriolanus, Titus Andronicus, Rome, heroines

Klíčová slova: Shakespeare, Antonius a Kleopatra, Julius Caesar, Coriolanus, Titus Andronicus, Řím, hrdinky

THESIS ABSTRACT

The thesis critically examines the historical and cultural circumstances of women in early modern England and the role of women in Shakespeare's Roman tragedies. In early modern England, men are said to have been participating in the public sphere of the political discourse and women were relegated to the domestic sphere; henceforth, the role of women in Shakespeare's Roman plays tends to be interpreted as supportive because of the plays' dominant political focus. To challenge the prevailing discourse, I consider female characters in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar, Coriolanus, Titus Andronicus* and *Antony and Cleopatra*. My thesis argues that even though the Roman plays focus on the political, public sphere which tends to be the domain of men, women mostly actively participate, or express desire to actively participate, in the Roman plays' plots, philosophical contemplations, and political scheming. Cleopatra, Volumnia, Portia, Calpurnia, and Tamora are such characters. Only the less central female characters may embody the passive ideal of a woman confined in the domestic sphere, as exemplified by Lavinia, Virgilia, and Octavia.

The findings show that women were recommended to stay in the domestic sphere, but many of them, especially upper-class ladies, participated actively in the political discourse of their times either directly or indirectly via their male relatives. The feminist scholarship, which has been examining Shakespeare's heroines, underscores the importance of interpreting female characters in their historical and cultural context and emphasises the need not to assume that Shakespeare's heroines are mere representations of victimhood in a misogynistic society, and therefore are to be analysed critically. The Roman plays, unified in their setting, are a unique amalgam of Roman and Elizabethan values, in which female characters realise themselves on the background of two patriarchal societies.

ABSTRAKT

Tato diplomová práce se věnuje kritickému hodnocení historických a kulturních okolností postavení žen v raně novověké Anglii a rolím žen v Shakespearových hrách. V raně novověké Anglii činili většinou politická rozhodnutí muži a ženy se staraly o domácnost. Shakespearovy tragédie, které se odehrávají v době starověkého Říma, se zaměřují především na problematiku politiky, a proto jsou ženy v těchto hrách převážně chápány jako pouhé vedlejší postavy. Tato práce tuto záležitost vyvrací zevrubnou analýzou Shakespearových her *Julius Caesar, Coriolanus, Titus Andronicus* a *Antonius a Kleopatra*. I když se tzv. římské hry zaobírají tradičně mužskou tématikou, ženy v nich aktivně ovlivňují nebo se pokouší ovlivnit děj, myšlenkové vyznění díla i politické machinace. Toto souhlasí s pojetím postav Kleopatry, Volumnie, Porcie, Calpurnie a Tamory. Do domácnosti, to znamená mimo hlavní děj, jsou odsunuty pouze ty méně významné hrdinky. Mezi tyto postavy patří Lavinie, Virgilie, a Octavie, které ztělesňují ideál ženy, kterou je žena pasivní.

V Shakespearově době bylo ženám doporučováno zůstat doma a nezajímat se o veřejné dění. Mnoho z nich, převážně pak dámy z vyšší společnosti, se ale veřejného dění aktivně účastnilo přímo anebo nepřímo působením na svoje mužské příbuzné, a to se odráží ve zmíněných hrách. Feministická kritika věnující se Shakespearovým hrdinkám zdůrazňuje nezbytnost znalosti historicko-kulturního prostředí, ze kterého postavy vycházejí. Zároveň však varuje před zjednodušenou interpretací ženských postav jako pouhých zrcadel patriarchální společnosti a doporučuje k jejich rozboru raději přistupovat kriticky. Shakespearovy hry z období starého Říma jsou unikátní směsicí římských a alžbětinských hodnot, ve kterých se ženy seberealizují na pozadí dvou patriarchálních společností.

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Introduction

"I have a man's mind, but a woman's might,"[1] Portia remarks in *Julius Caesar*, one of the four Roman plays which are the focus of this thesis. The Roman plays are well-known for their piercing political discourse, and they are firmly situated in the public sphere. Considering that all Shakespeare's tragedies contain significantly fewer influential female characters than his comedies, then the Roman tragedies, with their political commentary, seem to reduce women to mere supportive characters. Indeed, if one mentions Shakespeare's Portia, no one imagines Brutus' wife but everyone expects the bright protagonist of *The Merchant of Venice*. Portia, Brutus' wife, occupies a very limited time on stage and it might seem that her role is not essential for the plot of the tragedy. However, as the abovementioned quote demonstrates, Portia puts forward many noteworthy ideas and one might argue that she was one of the main reasons why Brutus decided to betray Caesar. Even though the public, political discourse of the Roman plays may seem to render female characters superfluous, a careful consideration of their roles reveals that they are essential to the plays.

I consider four Roman plays: *Julius Caesar, Titus Andronicus, Coriolanus,* and *Antony and Cleopatra.* I begin with *Julius Caesar*, a play which marginalises female characters and I conclude my investigation by *Anthony and Cleopatra*, a play that has a female protagonist who constitutes one of the most intriguing Shakespeare's female characters. Not only does Cleopatra speak the most lines in *Antony and Cleopatra,* but considering all Shakespeare's plays, only Rosalind in *As You Like It* gets to speak more lines than her. However, as Rosalind is a protagonist in a comedy poking fun at different relationships and ending by multiple marriages, Rosalind's role, though intriguing, is more

[1] William Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar* in *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare* (Glasgow: Geddes & Grosset, 2016), 2.4.7. References are to act, scene, and line.

to be expected than that of Cleopatra's. Cleopatra defies the conclusion, that one might reach after reading *Julius Caesar,* that in the Roman tragedies, women play the second fiddle. In fact, each of the four Roman tragedies contains female characters worth exploring, and therefore I argue that even though the Roman plays focus on the political, public sphere which tends to be the domain of men, women mostly actively participate, or express desire to actively participate, in the Roman plays' plots, philosophical contemplations, and political scheming. Cleopatra, Volumnia, Portia, Calpurnia, and Tamora are such characters. Only the less central female characters may embody the passive ideal of a woman confined in the domestic sphere, as exemplified by Lavinia, Virgilia, and Octavia.

Considering that my analysis is formed on the concepts of feminist criticism, which emphasises the necessity to consider works in their cultural-historical context - as will be further discussed in chapter one - the first chapter mostly focuses on the contextualisation of the heroines of the Roman plays within a wider category of Shakespeare's women characters and historical and cultural circumstances. The first chapter is divided into three parts. The first part discusses the historical circumstances of women in early modern England – mainly focusing on the upper-class women (as the heroines of the Roman plays are all from the upper-classes) and their limited involvement in the politics and the public sphere. The cultural circumstances debate the representation of women in religious and secular writings during Shakespeare's time. The second part of the first chapter provides an outline of the criticism of Shakespeare's female characters, which is inseparably connected to feminist approaches. As feminist approaches tend to underscore the need to consider female characters within their cultural and historical context, the first and the second part of the first chapter complement each other. The third part is dedicated to a short introduction of the Roman plays to situate them within the broader Shakespearean production, to discuss how their overtly political nature affects the role of women.

Having established the theoretical framework, each of the subsequent chapters analyses female characters from the chosen four plays. Opening with *Julius Caesar,* the thesis focuses on Calpurnia and Portia. Both roles are small, and these women are fully confined into the domestic sphere. However, Calpurnia serves as a foreshadowing device: would the play change if this foreshadowing was missing? As far as Calpurnia goes as an independent character, she can be seen as an example of what a woman's role would have been in a typical patriarchal society which is how most historians would see the Elizabethan Era. Is Shakespeare making a social commentary on any of these issues via Calpurnia? Meanwhile, Portia's role in the play is slightly bigger. Portia keeps insisting, as in the opening phrase of the introduction, that she should not be forbidden from the public sphere and the decision-making process based on her gender. Portia tries to, albeit unsuccessfully, free herself from the domestic sphere and enter the public sphere. Her argumentation of what makes a woman is of a particular interest in this chapter, as well as her influence on Brutus. Brutus suggests that Portia is pregnant – and this suggestion affects the way Brutus talks to Caesar and potentially influences his political decisions. This pregnancy must be also seen in contrast with Calpurnia's infertility and the way it affects Caesar for whom it is the very first concern of the play.

Volumnia and Virgilia in *Coriolanus* have the difficult job of trying to tame Caius Martius, a man of strong principles who listens to no other men; he only listens to women. Volumnia is an uncommon female character as usually, Shakespeare's female characters tend to be wives or love interests, especially in the chosen plays in which all the other seven main characters are relatively young women who are about to get married or who were married recently and now have small children. An exception to this would be Tamora, whose children are adults and who can be compared to Volumnia in terms of manipulation of her children. However, Tamora also gets married in the play and her role is not exclusively a

mother, such as Volumnia. Volumnia is an older, nationalistic woman who seems to be determined to influence the public sphere. When she is denied the opportunity to do so, she pressures her son into becoming a soldier and afterwards a politician. Volumnia is the brain of the play: she influences almost all the key scenes, and she is the crucial force behind Coriolanus' decisions. Her reasoning seems questionable and her motherhood appears to be destructive. Volumnia wants power and fame for her son; she wants him to succeed publicly. In that, she is the very opposite of Coriolanus' wife, Virgilia, who is a passive, empathetic, domestic woman whose main interest is her husband's safety. Virgilia does not care about the public sphere at all – she puts her family above everything, and she loves Caius Martius as a man rather than a public persona. Volumnia and Virgilia provide an intriguing contrast – Volumnia is one of the most scheming characters whilst Virgilia is a very simple woman.

Titus Andronicus, an early, experimental play of Shakespeare's, gives us two contrasting heroines: Lavinia and Tamora. These two seem to easily fall into the two categories that women would tend to be represented as: Tamora is the devious, unfaithful woman and Lavinia is the chaste, obedient maid. It is interesting to ask if Tamora would work as a character if she was a man – she has her own agenda, she used to be a ruler in her own right, and her main motivation is vengeance. However, there seems to be a huge contrast in the way she values her children versus the way that Titus, a man, is willing to dispose of them casually. Tamora is without doubts the villain of the piece, and therefore she presents a wonderful opportunity of a case study of a Shakespeare's female villain other than Lady Macbeth. Is Tamora particularly dangerous because she is a woman and do her heinous actions have a different effect on the reader because of her gender? On the contrary, Lavinia, is perfectly passive. Similarly to Octavia in *Antony and Cleopatra*, she starts off as a bargaining tool supposed to ensure cooperation between powerful families. After Lavinia's mutilation, she becomes an embodiment of the obsession with virginity for no one seems to

mind the fact that Lavinia's hands and tongue were cut out not nearly as much as the fact that she was also raped. Even Lavinia herself seems to mind the rape the most. Her murder, the way it is justified and the final lines of the play which bury Lavinia in the same tomb as her father, her murderer, are shocking and discussed in this chapter.

Finally, we have *Antony and Cleopatra.* Perhaps the play should rather have been called *Cleopatra and Antony* as Cleopatra seems to be the main character of the play - I argue that it is, in fact, her tragedy. Cleopatra is the only female protagonist and an eponymous heroine in the Roman plays. Cleopatra, as the main character, has enough space to reveal her personality, goals, and opinions. My analyses considers primarily the seemingly irreconcilable roles of Cleopatra of a ruler and a lover. Nevertheless, Cleopatra is not the only female character of the play. Octavia, an obedient Roman sister and wife, represents a woman whose only purpose is to serve as a bargaining tool between powerful men. Octavia is not dissimilar to Lavinia, but her role is even more limited to a character who is treated more as a thing than a person. Perhaps Cleopatra is not wrong when she sees such a big difference between herself and Octavia as indeed, one of the few of Octavia's roles in the play is to provide the contrast between a woman such as herself and a woman such as Cleopatra.

Cleopatra is a fascinatingly complex female character, arguably one of the most captivating female characters of Shakespeare's plays whatsoever. Cleopatra is a ruler, a lover, a seductress, a mother, a negotiator, and much more. Cleopatra has her own agency, makes her own decisions, and is fully in control of her destiny. Perhaps it is the complexity of the character combined with the fact that she is a woman that has fascinated critics over the centuries. It has been difficult to pin Cleopatra down. Some see her as a mere seductress. Some view her as an apt ruler. There were productions which tried to simplify her role – to present her as more feminine; some of these even went as far as to change some of her lines.

All these are examined in the final chapter of the thesis which discusses the developments of the criticism of Cleopatra, which is followed by an analysis of Cleopatra's actions, with a particular focus on the way Cleopatra encompasses all her diverse roles. In addition, I also discuss how class plays a role in enabling Cleopatra to become a fully-fledged character and how necessary it is to consider class when discussing the role of women.

Chapter 1: Shakespeare, Women and Rome

Women in Shakespeare's plays portray various personalities and they have been a focus of academic studies in recent years, especially since the arrival of feminist criticism. When Shakespeare's heroines are discussed, the conversation tends to centre around the issues of the position of women in early modern England and its relevance to how Shakespeare moulded his female characters. There is presumed to be a direct corelation of how women in the late 16th and early 17th centuries behaved and were treated to how Shakespearian female characters react, speak, and are regarded by the male cast. Moreover, an interpretation of the significance of a female character is often conjectured based on how we expect that an early modern audience would acknowledge her. This chapter discusses the cultural and historical context, outlines the feminist criticism of Shakespeare's heroines, and debates the specific conditions of female characters in the Roman plays.

1.1. Cultural and Historical Context

The position of women in early modern England constitutes an issue far more complex than it might initially seem. It would be well beyond the scope of this thesis to try to comprehensively summarise and analyse it, and therefore the point of this chapter is to challenge the predominant (mis)conceptions and based on them draw conclusions on how Shakespeare's heroines would be received, understood, and interpreted in early modern England.

The basic role of a woman in early modern England implied staying inside the house and taking care of one's husband and family. Women were not regarded as equal to men and

all their differences from men were interpreted as weaknesses and imperfections used to justify various forms of discrimination. In her book *Women in Early Modern England, 1500 – 1700*, Jacqueline Eales says:

> [they] were barred as women from studying at the two English universities of Oxford or Cambridge, they could not take high public office and, although they could expect to receive dowries, by virtue of primogeniture only a relatively small proportion of their father's wealth would be transferred to them. By custom, rather than law, they would not vote for their brother in parliamentary elections and, if they married, their legal identities would be absorbed by that of their husbands. Under common law a married woman—a feme covert— could not contract or sue independently of her husband.[1]

According to Eales, women were denied education, public life, inheritance, political independence and in case of married women, any legal status whatsoever. However, it is important to note that Eales discusses women of the upper classes in comparison with men of similar birth. Men from the lower classes could not enjoy these privileges either. As Eales points out, "Only a minority of men received the academic education offered by the grammar schools and the universities, and most men could not aspire to the highest political and legal posts."[2] It is therefore clear that any discussion of the position of either early modern women or Shakespeare's heroines must take into consideration not only gender but also class and potentially race. The Roman plays are almost exclusively focused on the upper classes and all of their main heroines are from the elite. Only Tamora and Cleopatra are not Roman, and therefore face racial disadvantage. However, Cleopatra is even a step higher as a queen and this difference in standing cannot be overlooked as it enables her to act and speak in a way that might be impossible for women who were merely born or married to important families. Nevertheless, class has always played an important role in English society and early modern

[1] Jacqueline Eales, *Women in Early Modern England, 1500 – 1700* (London: Taylor Francis, 1998), ProQuest Ebook Central, https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/cuni/detail.action?docID=235439, accessed 5 Feb 2022, 1

[2] Eales, 1-2

England was no exception: therefore, even if women were considered inferior to men, it would not mean that a high-born lady could be compared with a labouring man.

If we return to the question of women, Phyllis Rackin in her *Shakespeare and Women* supports these assertions when she simply states: "In Shakespeare's world, inequalities between men and women were taken for granted."[3] These inequities always meant that women were somehow insufficient:

> It was conventional, as we have seen, to assume men and women had clearly defined gender roles indoors and out of doors [...] Femininity [...] was presented as no more than a set of negatives. The requirement of chastity was [...] the overriding measure of female gender. Woman not only had to be chaste but had to be seen to be chaste: silence, humility and modesty were the signifiers that she was so.[4]

To be seen as chaste as a more important aspect than actually being chaste is a concept highly relevant to Shakespeare's heroines. We might think about Lavinia, whose reputation was ruined not necessarily because she was unchaste but because she was visibly marked as such, or Cleopatra whose open defiance of chastity by engaging in an extramarital relationship and flirting with various men led to her being called a "whore." It becomes increasingly clear that a woman's genuine chastity did not matter as much as her reputation. Additionally, if being a woman meant a set of negatives that she intrinsically inhabited, chastity and obedience were a necessity as a woman had to be controlled by a man who clearly had to personify a set of positives. As Boose suggests:

> For Tudor-Stuart England, in village and town, an obsessive energy was invested in exerting control over the unruly woman - the woman who was exercising either her sexuality or her tongue under her own control rather than under the rule of a man. As illogical as it may initially seem, the two crimes - being a scold and being a so-called whore - were frequently conflated.[5]

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[3] Phyllis Rackin, *Shakespeare and Women* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), ProQuest Ebook Central, https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/cuni/detail.action?docID=422714, accessed 20 Jan 2022, 27

[4] Anthony Fletcher, *Gender, Sex, and Subordination in England, 1500 – 1800* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 120-122

[5] Lynda E. Boose, "Scolding Brides and Bridling Scolds: Taming the Woman's Unruly Member," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 42, no. 2 (1991): 179–213, https://doi.org/10.2307/2870547, accessed 5 Feb 2022, 195

In many Shakespeare's plays, we can see a great deal of effort spent on trying to control a wild woman; the most obvious and discussed one is clearly *The Taming of the Shrew.* The logic is simple: if a woman is considered intinsically weaker, she needs a man to control her.

Additionally, Boose raises another point significant not only to the discussion of the position of women in the early modern England, but also in Shakespeare's plays – the use of the word "a whore." This issue is particularly relevant to *Antony and Cleopatra* as Cleopatra is called "a whore" many times. Boose mentions that it was substantial when a woman was called a "whore" in early modern times. Dympna Callaghan explains why:

> "Whore" is probably the worst name you can call a woman in Shakespeare's England and its capacity to "wound" means not only the power to hurt someone's feelings but potentially also to deprive women (who might be disowned by their kin as the result of allegations of unchastity) of all means of social and economic support. This word has accrued patriarchal power and its attendant material effects by means of its insistent reiteration in the culture.[6]

Callaghan returns to the essential idea of chastity – as the implications of being called "a whore" suggests promiscuity. The woman's reputation was seriously damaged by such allegations. Moreover, reputation meant financial safety for women, and therefore the word was a powerful tool to use against them. Octavianus Caesar and others tried to use this weapon against Cleopatra when they seemed to be at wit's ends. However, it was not only men who would use the word. Rather, it was an instrument of patriarchy: "women regularly slandered and defamed one another in early modern England – because women, no less than men, inhabit and implement the social and conceptual structures of the patriarchal order."[7] Two important conclusions are to be taken from this concept. Firstly, not all Shakespeare's heroines must somehow desire to be active participants in a play and "defy the patriarchy."

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[6] Dympna Callaghan, "Introduction" in *A Feminist Companion to Shakespeare,* ed. Dympna Callaghan (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2016), ProQuest Ebook Central, https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/cuni/detail.action?docID=4457771, accessed 20 Jan 2022, 3

[7] Callaghan, 3

Some might very well be complacent or outright supportive of the society which in theory suppresses them. Secondly, women are not only "tamed" by men in Shakespeare's plays, such as the example of *The Taming of The Shrew.* Oftentimes, women try to force patriarchal ideas onto each other, such as when Lavinia meets Tamora. Nevertheless, it is certain that there was a strict gender hierarchy in early modern England. The question is: how was it enforced and maintained?

The answer is simple: mainly by the Church and religion and surprisingly also the newly emerging press. The Church's influence and motivation were relatively straight-forward: to justify and explain religious dogma and to strengthen the positions of the members of the Church. Eales explains:

> Before 1700 the belief that women had to be kept in check by male authority was almost universally accepted and was reinforced by the teachings of the Church both before and after the Reformation. The Protestant marriage service in *The book of common prayer* of 1559 exhorted women to heed the teachings of St Paul and 'submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord, for the husband is the wives head, even as Christ is the head of the Church'.[8]

Women were taught religious metaphors as examples to submit to men in all spheres of life. The religious theory often intertwined with and supplemented the political theory: "in early modern England male dominance was reinforced through a fully articulated political theory of patriarchy in which the function of men as heads of households and as fathers was believed to be analogous to the role of the monarch."[9] In Elizabethan England, analogies were overused: Christ is to Church what the monarch is to the state and what a man is to a woman. These analogies served a simple purpose: to justify and maintain the traditional way of life and deter anyone from questioning it. The message was clear: there was "the belief that

[8] Eales, 23
[9] Eales, 4

women's bodies and minds were designed by God for a domestic life."[10] Ultimately, the point of a dogma or a belief is that it is not questioned:

> In the early modern period women were described by male authors as morally, intellectually and physically weaker than men. This analysis was based primarily on biblical teaching and on contemporary medical understanding. The story of Adam and Eve and the New Testament writings of St Paul were influential sources of religious arguments for the subordination of women.[11]

Once again, an analogy serves to further the patriarchal propaganda. Eve tempted Adam and caused havoc: unless men want this to happen, they ought to control their wives.

The newly emerging press also played a significant role in spreading the patriarchal propaganda. In the first half of the 17th century, around 30% of men were literate.[12] Considering the fact that in London, where Shakespeare wrote his plays, the literacy rates were even higher, pamphlets and other little books created a significant space which could influence the public's opinion. "Many of the most influential authors of the time were clerics and, because women could not share in their ministerial functions, they drew very rigid lines between the public duties of men and the household responsibilities of women."[13] However, it was not only the Church who decided to use the new medium. Many "intellectuals" wrote and were able to find a publisher for their opinions. The majority of these pamphlets "demonstrates that traditional views about the inferiority of women continued to dominate the market, and works calling for change were in the minority."[14] A typical example of such a pamphlet is the infamous pamphlet by Joseph Swetnam *The Arraignment of Lewd, Idle, Froward, and Unconstant Women*. In the pamphlet of 1615, Swetnam brutally attacks

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[10] Edith Snook, "Reading Women" in *The Cambridge Companion to Early Modern Women's Writing,* ed. Laura L. Knoppers (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), ProQuest Ebook Central, https://www.proquest.com/publication/2050461/citation?accountid=15618#, accessed 14 Feb 2022, 40

[11] Eales, 3

[12] James V. H. Melton, *The Rise of the Public in Enlightenment Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), Cambridge Books Online: https://doi-org.ezproxy.is.cuni.cz/10.1017/CBO9780511819421, accessed 14 Feb 2022, 82

[13] Eales, 5

[14] Eales, 2

women, using personal and Biblical examples of why women are bad.[15] There certainly was not only misogynistic literature published in early modern England; the very pamphlet by Joseph Swetnam was disputed by Rachel Speght in her famous text *A Mouzell for Melastomus* in which she counters Swetnam's arguments by using the same Biblical stories as he does in a more intellectual way. Even though she concedes that women do not equal men, she asks for some benevolence to be shown to them.[16] Therefore, both the religious and the secular sphere engaged in these querelles des femmes and Shakespeare would have been aware of them as reflected on by Portia in *Julius Caesar* when she uses similar argumentation to Speght.

So far, this chapter focused on the patriarchal state of the early modern society, and it created a fairly straight-forward picture. However, could Shakespeare write such various female characters if the situation was as unequivocal as it can seem if we oversimplify it? The knowledge of Shakespeare indicates that the matters were far more complicated. If we begin with the simplest point: it was a time dominated by female rulers. Even the consolidation of power of the Tudor Dynasty was marked by a woman: it was Henry VII who seized the crown for the Tudors, but the influence and power of his mother Lady Margaret Beaufort is well-known. The rule of his infamous son Henry VIII is well beyond the scope of this thesis, however, it is certain that Henry's first wife, Catherine of Aragon, was the first female ambassador in Europe[17] and Catherine was even made a regent when

[15] Joseph Swetnam, *The Arraignment of Lewd, Idle, Froward, and Unconstant Women*, https://pages.uoregon.edu/dluebke/WesternCiv102/SwetnamArraignment1615.htm, accessed 10 Feb 2022
[16] Rachel Speght, *A Mouzell for Melastomus,* http://www.luminarium.org/renascence-editions/rachel.html, accessed 10 Feb 2022
[17] Helen Matheson-Pollock, Joanne Paul, Catherine Fletcher, ed. *Queenship and Counsel in Early Modern Europe* (New York: Springer International Publishing, 2018), *ProQuest Ebook Central*, https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/cuni/detail.action?docID=5455197, accessed 2 Feb 2022, 36

Henry was waging war in France.[18] Henry's second wife, Anne Boleyn, was also very much involved in politics and the daughters of these two queens were both crowned as Mary I and Elizabeth I. Elizabeth, whose long rule has become legendary, was the Queen for most of Shakespeare's youth and adult life. These Queens may shed a light on Cleopatra, but what about the other upper-class women whose lives could be analogous to Portia, Calpurnia, Lavinia, Virgilia, Volumnia, or Octavia?

Except for the queens, women tended to escape the notice of historians. Rackin explains:

> There are far fewer historical records of women than of men, and the questions with which modern historians approach the records that have been found are heavily fraught with present concerns and present controversies. [...] Because the experience of women tends to be occluded in the historical record, there is the temptation to universalize.[19]

Not only are there fewer historical records, but the way that women's lives were, and to a certain extent still are, interpreted is much less objective than men's. If the experience of fewer women was memorised, we assume that such experience must have been universal to most women of the time. No such mistake is made when it comes to men, as the abundance of sources makes it clear that men led many different lives. Additionally, when women's history is interpreted, the current political atmosphere tends to have an effect on how this interpretation is made. Therefore, it is challenging to understand the real circumstances of women in early modern times which could aid us to comment on Shakespeare's female characters. On one hand, *A Feminist Companion to Shakespeare* explains:

> Woman's place was within doors, her business domestic ... Women of evident intelligence themselves accepted this divorce between the private (feminine) and public (masculine) spheres and, despite the recent precedents of Mary

[18] J. E. Paul, New Catholic Encyclopedia (Detroit: Gale, 2003), https://go-gale-com.ezproxy.is.cuni.cz/ps/i.do?p=GVRL&u=karlova&id=GALE|CX3407702147&v=2.1&it=r#content, accessed 2 Feb 2022, 268

[19] Rackin, 26

> Queen of Scots, Mary Tudor and Elizabeth, they shared the age's 'distaste [...] for the notion of women's involvement in politics.'[20]

The connection between female rulers and the idea that women should get involved in politics is denied which also brings up a point which is going to be absolutely essential for discussing the female characters in Shakespeare's Roman plays – the distinction between the private – female sphere, and the public – male sphere. This distinction tends to be undisputed amongst academics; however, could Rackin's assertion about women's absence from politics be a result of the overgeneralization based on the lack of sources?

Many researchers would certainly think so and they would agree that "elite women, from queens and regents to ambassadors' wives, were crucially important to the conduct of informal (and formal) policy."[21] As the abovementioned examples within the Royal household suggest, women would often participate in politics on the behalf of their absent male relatives:

> Elite women did participate actively in early Tudor politics. [...] The operation of national and local government was seen as part of the personal patronage of not only the monarchy but also powerful aristocratic and gentry families. This led to a considerable blurring of the boundaries between the public and private spheres and it was accepted that high ranking women could exert political or other influence on behalf of their husbands, sons or wider family and clientage networks.[22]

However, the issue is that they would often escape the historians' notice as historians tend to focus on the institutions to which women did not have access:

> political historians have traditionally concentrated on institutions which excluded women, such as the privy council, Parliament, the law courts and administrative bodies. They have thus created the impression that high politics were an exclusively male concern.[23]

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[20] Phyllis Rackin, "Misogyny is Everywhere," in *A Feminist Companion to Shakespeare*, ed. Dympna Callaghan, 61

[21] Helen Matheson-Pollock, Joanne Paul, Catherine Fletcher, 38

[22] Eales, 48

[23] Eales, 46

All these institutions did not accept women as a rule and considering their importance in the governing body of the English system, it is easy to infer that women were excluded from the political arena whatsoever. However, does that mean that the only way for women to influence the political developments was via a conversation with their husbands, such as Shakespeare presents it in *Julius Caesar*?

Elizabeth Kolkovich introduces the institution of lottery pageants: "Largely overlooked by scholars, they drew attention to elite women's influential roles in households, literary circles, regions, and court politics and can therefore teach us a great deal about women's networks and political activities in early modern England."[24] It is essential to note that Kolkovich again mentions the issue that many women-led organisations have been overlooked by scholars; however, that does not mean that these organisations did not exist nor that their contribution to the political scene was irrelevant. Oftentimes, these institutions, similarly to many Shakespearian heroines, would be located on the edge between traditional female roles and an active participation in the society. The existence of female presence in politics does not necessarily need to go against the mainstream men-dominated narrative. For the analysis of the very political Roman plays and the female presence in them, this fact is essential as heroines such as Volumnia, Portia, and perhaps to a certain extent even Cleopatra, often participate in politics in similar ways.

The last point to be made in this chapter is about women who would surround Shakespeare at different stages of his life; from his early life in Stratford to London. For most of his life, Shakespeare would not be surrounded by such upper-class ladies as discussed above. When we examine the women who surrounded Shakespeare, we might be

[24] Elizabeth Zeman Kolkovich, "Performing Patronage, Crafting Alliances," in *The Politics of Female Alliance in Early Modern England*, ed. Christina Luckyj, Niamh J. O'Leary (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2017), ProQuest Ebook Central, https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/cuni/detail.action?docID=5109877, accessed 12 Feb 2022, 107

forced to question some popular misconceptions about Shakespeare – the misogynist and such. In *Shakespeare and Women*, we learn that

> We now know [...] that a great many women exercised their own choice in negotiating marriages for themselves and for other women as well, but we still tend to assume that patriarchal control was the norm. We also know that the majority of executors of wills in Shakespeare's England were women, but we still assume that most women were deprived of economic power and authority. We now have evidence of women's widespread participation in pre-Reformation drama, but we still tend to assume that women's exclusion from the London professional companies followed a long-standing tradition of all-male performance. We know that in Shakespeare's London, women were a visible presence all over the city, including the playhouses, but we still tend to assume that Shakespeare's plays should be read from the point of view of a male spectator who would have responded to representations of women's power and autonomy as occasions for anxious hostility.[25]

Rackin makes two very important points. Many women took active roles in their lives: they chose their spouses, controlled their finances, and participated in the artistic circles in London. Such assertions do not discredit the prevailing research about the patriarchal society in early modern England; rather, they complement it. They show that although Shakespeare would be aware of the norms of the society, he would also encounter many women who lived their lives differently.

We also often assume that Shakespeare's plays were written for male spectators. Perhaps it has something to do with the all-male cast of the plays during Shakespeare's time, but it is noteworthy that the plays were written and performed for both genders. As Rackin emphasises, "women also participated in the business of the theatrical companies as gatherers or box-holders. Standing at the doors to collect entrance fees from the playgoers, these women would have been a highly visible presence in the playhouses."[26] This is a crucial point: women were there working in theatres and enjoying the plays as audiences. The space was not a male-only place and it was a place of entertainment. The audience did

[25] Rackin, 2
[26] Rackin, 42

not go to the theatre to get educated and moralised. They got that in Church. Neither were Shakespeare's plays necessarily considered to be a sort of intellectual pleasure. Rather, the plays were fun and they were meant to entertain all their audience. As Rosalind says in her epilogue:

> I'll begin with the women. I charge you, O women! for the love you bear to men, to like as much of this play as please you: and I charge you, O men! for the love you bear to women (as I perceive by your simpering, none of you hates them) that between you and the women, the play may please.[27]

Clearly, the plays were written to be watched by both men and women. However, even more importantly, there was one thing that Shakespeare needed even more than an audience: a patron. These patronages were often operated by women: "Elite women were also actively involved in dispensing patronage to artists, writers and clergymen, whose artistic and literary creations served to magnify the wealth and position of their patrons and their families."[28] We know that one of Shakespeare's patrons was the Queen herself. Rackin goes as far as to claim that "the most obvious evidence of women's influence is the fact that a number of the London companies had female patrons."[29] We can safely assume that women had a much bigger say in art that we might be tempted to assert.

Overall, we have demonstrated that the position of women in early modern England was a complex one: all the patriarchal hindrances which Shakespearian heroines deal with in his plays have precedents in the contemporary society. Women faced a great deal of prejudice and obstacles and the distinction between the public/male sphere and the domestic/female sphere was carefully observed. However, many women stepped up into a position of power anyway and women of the upper-class enjoyed some degree of unofficial and official power. Even women of other classes were not always dependent on men and

[27] William Shakespeare, *As You Like It* in *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare,* Epilogue
[28] Eales, 52
[29] Rackin, 46

were often responsible for their own destinies. We can conclude that not unlike today, Shakespeare's writing reflected the contemporary political atmosphere but at the same time, women similarly to men occupied various positions and inhabited different ideologies which Shakespeare reflected in his plays as well. This complex situation has been assessed by an increasing volume of feminist criticism.

1.2. Feminist Scholarship on Shakespeare

Having discussed the position of early modern women in society, we have established a base that most of the feminist criticism heavily alludes to. This part traces the discourse on Shakespeare's heroines, investigating how feminist theory initiated and affected our interest in Shakespeare's female characters. We look at the history of the criticism focused on Shakespeare's female characters to exemplify the extreme variety of opinions on how Shakespeare approached heroines and how we should interpret them. This chapter contrasts the views that Shakespeare was a misogynist with the anachronistic views that Shakespeare was an (almost) feminist. Then the chapter examines how Shakespeare's women characters' interpretation developed over time up until the present moment in which the concerns of gender in Shakespeare are more relevant than ever with even more issues arising such as cross-gender casting.

When analysing Shakespeare's heroines, it is vital to understand that the cultural idea of what it means to be a woman is an idea that has been evolving since Shakespeare's time until today and beyond, and therefore the understanding of these characters, or the way they have been portrayed on stage, risks being determined to a great extent by the current perception of what being a woman means. Callaghan puts it simply: "for "woman" is never an already accomplished, cold, hard, self-evident fact or category, but always a malleable

cultural idea as well as a lived reality that, to use a Derridean formulation, *always already has a history*."[30] Therefore, it is essential to consider our own perception of what being a woman means which might not fully correspond to what Shakespeare's Cleopatra believes it to be. A key seems to be to focus on the characters inside the play, their words, and their actions:

> Character criticism concentrates its energies on the dramatic personae of a play, and works [...] to supply their actions with psychological motivation, and consequently to explain them as resulting from a combination of inborn traits, early life experience, and current circumstances.[31]

Such an investigation can lead us to an understanding of what the role of women was in Shakespeare's Roman tragedies. Such character-focused criticisms of female characters date as far back as the 19th century when Mary Cowden Clarke, an author and a Shakespearian, wrote the *Girlhood of Shakespeare's Heroines* in which she invented a sort of 'prequels' to Shakespeare's plays to concern the girlhood of Shakespeare's heroines to explain why they act the way they do in their adulthood.

Undoubtedly, such "criticism" is seen as naïve and unprofessional today and even though Clarke insisted that "sentiment is to be avoided throughout this series,"[32] it is still rather an addition to Shakespearian works than a criticism of the works themselves. Nevertheless, the idea behind the book is sensible and innovative; Clarke explains that she does not take into consideration any historical period because "the development of character, not of history, has been the intention."[33] Clarke was one of the first ones concerned with the psychology of Shakespeare's heroines.

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[30] Dympna Callaghan, "Introduction" in *A Feminist Companion to Shakespeare*, 2

[31] Juliet Fleming, "The Ladies' Shakespeare," in *A Feminist Companion to Shakespeare*, ed. Dympna Callaghan, 31

[32] Mary Cowden Clarke, *Girlhood of Shakespeare's Heroines* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), Cambridge Books Online https://doi-org.ezproxy.is.cuni.cz/10.1017/CBO9780511701498, accessed 20 Jan 2022, iii-iv

[33] Clarke, iii

When it comes to the interpretation of Shakespeare's attitudes to women, there has not been much consensus apart perhaps for the need to ground the criticism in the attitudes to women during Shakespeare's time, i.e., the reason for the preceding part. Callaghan says: "we can only tell what Shakespeare means about gender, sexuality, race, or social relations by reading his texts in the context of the culture in which he wrote them."[34] However important it is for us to understand Shakespeare's attitudes to women, any criticism of Shakespeare's heroines cannot be solely based on these presumed attitudes. Nevertheless, an informed understanding of them can complement our textual analysis. For now, let us discuss how others have dealt with this question. Rackin agrees with Callagan:

> Recent feminist Shakespeare scholarship has relied heavily on historical accounts of the place of women in Shakespeare's world, which is often invoked to ground interpretations of the playscripts in a foundation of historical fact. Nonetheless, it is important to remember that [...] historical writing itself is a kind of story-telling. The reconstruction of past lives is finally an impossible task, compromised by the distance and difference that separate the history-writing present from the historical past it seeks to know.[35]

Rackin underscores the issue that the first part of this chapter discussed: that if criticism concentrates too much on the historical circumstances, it may risk focusing on a historians' account of truth rather than the actual atmosphere in Shakespeare's society. However, it also risks interpreting the female characters as mere victims: "especially in the field of the Renaissance, feminist Shakespeare criticism has been almost completely shaped by the scholarly consensus about the pervasiveness of masculine anxiety and women's disempowerment in Shakespeare's world."[36] Henceforth, the cultural and historical circumstances must be considered critically when applying to a specific character in order

[34] Dympna Callaghan, "Introduction" in *A Feminist Companion to Shakespeare*, 3
[35] Rackin, 26
[36] Phyllis Rackin, "Misogyny is Everywhere," in *A Feminist Companion to Shakespeare*, ed. Dympna Callaghan, 65

not to arrive at an oversimplified conclusion which tends to relegate women into the domestic sphere and deny them any agency in the public sphere.

Even though the Roman plays are inherently political, this thesis interprets them from the perspective of women. As Callaghan says, "feminism has no investment in identifying the complex subjugation of women in patriarchy with mere victimization. Nor can the position of women be reduced to or elided with all other forms of social hierarchy."[37] This is a crucial point for any investigation which intends to characterise the women of the Roman plays. It would be tempting to come to the conclusion that women in those plays are mere passive victims, however, as Blair explains:

> minor agency refers to an act that is small in scope but significant as it diverges from, and thus destabilizes, the standard operations of power as defined by the majority. This concept may help readers locate and analyze the subtly resistant ways that some of Shakespeare's women exercise power.[38]

With the exception of Cleopatra, the Roman women often exercise the minor agency as explained by Blair in order to ignite a significant action. Women in Shakespeare's plays, especially the Roman plays, often use the minimal or obscure power they were granted by the patriarchal society in order to influence the public affairs. We can observe such actions in Volumnia, Virgilia, Portia, and Calpurnia.

The Elizabethan drama introduced characters as we know them today: flawed heroes, likeable villains, and those somewhere in between. Ultimately, Shakespeare's characters have the personalities of real people. However, some feminists ask whether this assertion can be extended to the female characters as well? McLuskie argues against that: "unlike the male characters who can play the roles of lover, tyrant, king, man, woman, the only

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[37] Dympna Callaghan, "Introduction" in *A Feminist Companion to Shakespeare*, 5

[38] Kelsey Blair, "The Power to Die: Liveliness, Minor Agency, and Shakespeare's Female Characters," in *Shakespeare's Things : Shakespearean Theatre and the Non-Human World in History, Theory, and Performance* ed. Brett Gamboa and Lawrence Switzky (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2019), ProQuest Ebook Central, https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/cuni/detail.action?docID=5981700, accessed 10 Feb 2022, 123

alternative for a woman character is 'not woman' or a range of identities determined by sexuality: maid, widow or wife, mother or 'the posture of a whore'."[39] McLuskie's argument is accurate to a great extent: indeed, when a Shakespearian woman does or tries to do something beyond the domestic sphere of women, often she argues that she is not an ordinary woman. A typical example of that can be Portia who argues that as she is surrounded by esteemed gentlemen, she is more qualified than other women to be included in political decisions: "Think you I am no stronger than my sex, / Being so father'd and so husbanded?"[40] Portia seems to embrace McLuskie's theory that she can either be a woman or "not woman". A man can be anything: he can embrace all the shades of what it means to be a human being in Shakespeare's plays, but a woman can only assume an identity determined by sexuality or claim not to be a woman. However, there is one significant discrepancy in this theory: what about Cleopatra?

Cleopatra encompasses everything: she is a lover, a tyrant, and a queen. She defies any conclusion that scholars have tried to establish about Shakespeare's female characters. There is no clear way to state that women in Shakespeare possess or do not possess agency. As Novy says, "this contrast between emphasizing women's agency and emphasizing women's containment [...] has been central in the development of feminist Shakespeare criticism, though a critic might acknowledge both and analyse their interaction."[41] Even though female characters are much more limited in number and roles than male characters, because "there was no question of representing a woman by an actual woman's body and so

[39] Kathleen McLuskie, "'Nay, Faith, Let Me Not Play a Woman, I Have a Beard Coming': Women in Shakespeare's Plays," *Critical Survey* 4, no. 2 (1992): 114–23, JSTOR http://www.jstor.org/stable/41555641, accessed 15 Feb 2022, 117

[40] William Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar* in *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*, 2.1.296-297

[41] Marianne Novy, *Shakespeare and Feminist Theory* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2017), ProQuest Ebook Central, https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/cuni/detail.action?docID=4985940, accessed 28 Jan 2022, 6

she must be *represented* by a set of recognisable and accepted conventions,"[42] Shakespeare still created many exceptions: a lot of diverse, complex female characters, such as Cleopatra, whose roles and personalities are interesting enough to deserve their own place in Shakespearian criticism.

The biggest bone of contention among feminist critics, who constitute the backbone of the criticism which concerns itself with Shakespeare's women characters, is whether the plays promote female subordination or challenge patriarchy. Novy introduces this polarisation when she contrasts two views on Shakespeare: a daring statement that "Shakespeare saw men and women as equal in a world which declared them unequal"[43] and "other early feminist critics maintain that the plays promote the subordination and exclusion of women."[44] Perhaps it is the fact that it is possible to reach both of these contrasting conclusions which supports the idea that actually, Shakespeare wrote a variety of diverse female characters. I suppose that if we tried hard enough, we could pigeonhole each of Shakespeare's female characters into some sort of a typical role that a woman could occupy in early modern England. However, we could probably assign such a category to men as well, and therefore this methodology might be excessive. It is also relevant to note that Shakespearian heroines differ based on the genre of the play: "the development of the heroine of Shakespeare's comedies and the evolution of his tragic heroine form two such separate and distinct series."[45] Obviously, a heroine is seemingly more important for a comedy as the play usually contains a marriage for which a woman was needed. However, it should not be taken as an prerequisite that women could occupy only certain positions in the tragedies. Rather, it points out the variety of women in Shakespeare's plays.

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[42] McLuskie, 114
[43] Novy, 6
[44] Novy, 6
[45] Henry David Gray, "The Evolution of Shakespeare's Heroine," *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 12, no. 1 (1913): 122–37, JSTOR http://www.jstor.org/stable/27700214, accessed 12 Feb 2022, 122

The criticism of Shakespearean heroines tends to go hand in hand with the feminist theorists' interest in Shakespeare's plays. Even though many actresses have written their own interpretation of female characters, some as early as in the 18th century, the more serious criticism has concerned itself mainly with the need to connect the historical reality with his plays, and the need to justify or question the position of Shakespeare as the most celebrated of all writers. As Callaghan indicates, "feminist Shakespeareans no longer consider themselves as purely literary scholars but as cultural historians."[46] The irony of the need to defend Shakespeare has also not been lost on many critics: "the important question of what it means for women to read and defend a poet whom everyone is reading, and who needs no defending."[47] However, in a world which is increasingly more concerned with social and political implications of art, it makes sense to question whether Shakespeare's texts and characters do not portray inappropriate social dynamics. Such a study may affect even the mainstream staging of the plays, because "something Shakespeare scholars have known all along, namely, that performance altered Shakespeare's playtexts and continues to do so."[48] Therefore, the discussion is relevant even for concerns such as cross-gender casting in Shakespeare's plays today because the need for cross-gender casting arises from the perceived lack of complex female characters written by Shakespeare himself.

[46] Dympna Callaghan, "Introduction" in *A Feminist Companion to Shakespeare*, 4
[47] Juliet Fleming, "The Ladies' Shakespeare," in *A Feminist Companion to Shakespeare*, ed. Dympna Callaghan, 35
[48] Dympna Callaghan, "Introduction" in *A Feminist Companion to Shakespeare*, 4

1.3. Women in Shakespeare's Rome

The Roman plays constitute a distinctive subcategory of Shakespeare's tragedies. They stand somewhere in between tragedies and histories, and it is a fine line that finally categorises them amongst the tragedies. Even though the Roman plays portray real, historical characters and historical events, they are too far away from the historical realities of the Elizabethans. Perhaps that is why the very First Folio categorised them as tragedies: "John Heminges and Henry Condell, Shakespeare's fellow actors and the compilers of the first collection of his plays in the First Folio (1623), [...] gather[ed] plays about England under the rubric of History and plays about Rome under the rubric of Tragedy."[49] In addition, Shakespeare was following historical sources sporadically, as Draper says: "he had no high regard for classical authenticity"[50] which presents another hindrance to their potential categorisation as histories. When we discuss the Roman plays, we have in mind five plays: *Julius Caesar, Antony and Cleopatra, Coriolanus, Titus Andronicus,* and *Cymbeline.* As I have already mentioned, for the purpose of this thesis, I have decided to focus solely on the first four plays. *Cymbeline* is a problematic play; whilst the other four Roman plays are indubitably tragedies, *Cymbeline* was placed amongst tragedies in the first folio, but the recent scholarship has considered it to be more of a romance. Its setting in Britain further undermines the potential categorisation with the other four plays. For these reasons, *Cymbeline* has often been excluded from many lists naming and analysing the Roman tragedies and my thesis follows a similar assumption.

[49] Robert S. Miolam, "Shakespeare's Ancient Rome : Difference and Identity," in *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare's History Plays,* ed. Michael Hattaway (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), ProQuest https://www.proquest.com/books/shakespeares-ancient-rome-difference-identity/docview/2138000445/se-2?accountid=15618, accessed 16 Feb 2022, 193

[50] John W Draper, "The Realism of Shakespeare's Roman Plays," *Studies in Philology* 30, no. 2 (1933): 225–42, JSTOR http://www.jstor.org/stable/4172205, accessed 18 Feb 2022, 227

The Roman tragedies might be relatively easily grouped together, nevertheless, that does not imply that they would be excessively similar, i.e., *Julius Caesar* is a distinctly political play while *Antony and Cleopatra*'s primary concern is the love story. Nevertheless, it makes sense to examine them together as their historical setting invites a logical supposition that they complement each other. Occasionally, they even share the same characters: Marcus Antonius and Octavius Caesar both appear in *Julius Caesar* and *Antony and Cleopatra*. As Innes concludes, *Titus Andronicus, Julius Caesar, Antony and Cleopatra* and *Coriolanus* [...] are all set in Rome and relate to the historical situation of the culture for which they were written, and not always in the same ways."[51] Clearly, these plays are not only set in Rome: *Antony and Cleopatra* spends a significant time in Egypt and *Coriolanus* spends the later acts exiled. However, their composition had to reflect all: the ancient times in which they were set, their geographical location of the Mediterranean region, and the early modern times for which they were intended. However, for all their similarities, the tragedies are actually set significantly apart timewise:

> *Titus Andronicus,* has its ostensible setting in a rather cloudily created late Rome of some kind – and the imprecision is important. *Julius Caesar* and *Antony and Cleopatra* are often paired together because of their relative closeness in terms of their setting at the end of the Republic and the beginning of the Empire. And *Coriolanus,* which is probably the last of the openly Roman plays that Shakespeare wrote, is set near the beginning of the Republic.[52]

The Roman tragedies are a complex set of plays which ambitiously cover some of the most famous historical personalities, events, and battles of all time. Even though they have many differences, they are similar in how they juggle the Roman setting and "how Shakespeare adapted this extracted material to concerns and values characteristic of Elizabethan age."[53]

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[51] Paul Innes, *Shakespeare's Roman Plays* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2015), ProQuest Ebook Central https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/cuni/detail.action?docID=4763930#, accessed 16 Feb 2022, 1

[52] Innes, 2

[53] Gary B. Miles, "How Roman Are Shakespeare's 'Romans'?" *Shakespeare Quarterly* 40, no. 3 (1989): 257–83, JSTOR https://doi.org/10.2307/2870723, accessed 17 Feb 2022, 257

Both of these – the Roman times and values of the Elizabethan age are directly relevant to the analysis of women characters in Shakespeare's Roman tragedies.

What are the Roman tragedies about? As their characters and settings suggest, their plots are epic:

> [the Roman tragedies] depict councils, battles, rebellions, invasions, and crises in government. Both examine the nature of sovereignty, tyranny, patriotism, imperialism, and honour. Both explore the shifting relationships between the public and private selves, between rhetoric and reality, between war and peace.[54]

The Roman tragedies are political in every sense of the word. Their plots concern the destinies of countries, and political scheming on the highest level. There is always a lot at stake and the characters' actions reflect that. The battles are legendary: whether it may be the battle between Brutus and Cassius versus Octavianus Caesar and Marcus Antonius in *Julius Caesar*, the battle between Marcus Antonius and Cleopatra versus Octavianus Caesar in *Antony and Cleopatra*, or any battle in *Coriolanus*, these battles decide the fates of the whole of the Roman Republic, similarly to each of the rebellions, council meetings, or invasions; in the Roman tragedies, there tend to be two layers of meaning. The overt implications are one of them: the winner becomes the ruler of a Republic/Empire, and his ideology will be implemented amongst his subjects. The second layer of meaning is personal: every character has some private reasons for his/her actions and their personal tragedy. As Miles indicates: "Shakespeare's emphasis upon the private, interior dilemmas of his characters may be understood as an enrichment of the material that he found in his ancient sources."[55] It is perhaps one of the most distinguishing aspects of Shakespeare's writing: his ability to create complex, fully fledged characters with deep internal ruminations, dilemmas, and questionable motivations. Therefore, the Roman tragedies are similar to other

[54] Miolam, 193
[55] Miles, 282

Shakespearian tragedies in their heartrending endings, complex characters, and shocking events. However, their rhetoric and political discourse cause them to stand out and create a subcategory of their own.

The main reason for the explicit political commentary in the Roman tragedies is precisely that distance between them and the Elizabethan times which enabled Shakespeare to comment on various aspects of political arena without risking his own position. However, even though Shakespeare might be able to comment on politics because the politics of his Roman plays seemingly had nothing to do with the politics of his day, it would be impossible for some of the contemporary aspects not to reflect in the plays. Therefore, the plays create a curious amalgam of Ancient Rome and Elizabethan England. This is a very vital point when it comes to the consideration of its female characters as the attitudes of society determine to a certain extent the roles of women in the plays, and therefore it is important to determine to what extent the plays reflect Rome and to what extend they reflect England.

On one hand, Draper notes:

> The three Roman plays [...] *Julius Caesar, Anthony and Cleopatra,* and *Coriolanus*, [...] present no significantly Elizabethan characters or situations; for Shakespeare, especially in the latter two, was following Plutarch very closely, and such Elizabethan elements as exist are only fragmentary allusions or mere metaphoric ornaments.[56]

Some famous descriptions of Cleopatra in *Antony and Cleopatra* are taken almost literally from Plutarch and the play's discourse is very Rome-specific. Miles would add that "the Romans Shakespeare chose for his subjects were driven by intense pressures to compete for power and distinction"[57] which was very characteristic of the Roman times when the need to politically and militarily prove yourself was peeking – as we can observe in Caius Martius' struggles in *Coriolanus*. Plutarch's *Lives* was the main source for Shakespeare's version of

[56] Draper, 225
[57] Miles, 259

Antony and Cleopatra and *Julius Caesar* which is essential to note as we also need to take into consideration that Plutarch's description does not necessarily need to reflect Rome's attitudes as each historian's research reflects his/her own perception to a certain extent (analogously to the first chapter on how differently many historians have seen the position of women in early modern society). Considering that Plutarch was Shakespeare's main source of material for his Roman plays, it must be observed that "Plutarch's *Lives* reflects the tendencies to stereotype, to polarize, and to exaggerate that are inherent in the propaganda surrounding his subjects, tendencies reinforced by Plutarch's own habits as a biographer."[58] Therefore, it is important to remember that those aspects of Shakespeare's Roman plays, which reflect Rome, do not necessarily reflect the historical Rome but rather Plutarch's and other historians' stylised Rome.

On the contrary to the assumption that the Roman plays are exclusively Roman, we must take into consideration all the parts which Shakespeare simply concocted and also all the non-Roman anachronisms. Braden points out: "oldest illustration of any Shakespearean performance shows *Titus Andronicus* being staged in Shakespeare's own time with a conspicuous mix of Roman, Elizabethan, and medieval costumes."[59]

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Picture 1 - Painting Depicting Tamora and Roman Conquerors, from c. 1595

[58] Miles, 272
[59] Gordon Braden, "Shakespeare's Roman Tragedies," in *A Companion to Shakespeare's Works, Volume I : The Tragedies,* ed. Richard Dutton, Jean E. Howard, and Jean E. Howard (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2003), ProQuest Ebook Central https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/cuni/detail.action?docID=350884&pq-origsite=primo#, accessed 12 Feb 2022, 200
[60] Rackin, 115

This mixture can be especially relevant to the interpretation of female characters. Whilst men are often more specifically situated in their environment, i.e., Ancient Rome, women might exist "outside" of any era. The reason for this might be simple: men are the ones making most of the political decisions in the Roman tragedies, and therefore Shakespeare needed to create more distance between himself and the men whose ideology he might have been extolling. However, women usually did not hold such strong political opinions and even if they did, they would not be taken as seriously as men would, and therefore Shakespeare could have made them more contemporary. By doing so, Shakespeare would have killed two birds with one stone. He would not endanger himself by making the political text too obviously relevant for the present times but, at the same time, he would make the play more accessible to his audience. Rackin comments on the same painting as Braden that

> in keeping with the ancient Roman setting of the play, Titus is dressed in a classical-looking draped garment, perhaps copied from a Roman statue; but Tamora wears a much more modern costume. [...] The anachronism of Tamora's costume is suggestive because it implies that even when her male antagonist is seen as belonging to a specific historical context, the woman's characterization is untouched by the contingencies of time and place. [61]

Even though we do not have any surviving picture of Cleopatra from Shakespeare's times, the description of her attire suggests that it is rather a contemporary dress. Cleopatra orders Charmian: "Cut my lace, Charmian."[62] The lace implies a contemporary dress rather than a Roman or Egyptian attire, which confirms the hypothesis which deems men to be more Roman and women more English in the Roman plays.

Certainly, women were not the only characters whose clothes betrayed a mixture of Roman and Elizabethan culture, but their examples stand out more than those of their male counterparts. More importantly, the references to the Elizabethan Era were more significant than the details of clothing. In many instances, women would question their gender, namely

[61] Rackin, 114
[62] Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra,* 1.3.72

Portia or Cleopatra. These instances are highly suggestive of the way Elizabeth I herself played with the question of gender.[63] In addition, many scenes were completely made up by Shakespeare, such as one of the most famous scenes of Marcus Antonius' speech following the murder of Caesar. Finally, some scenes such as "the mob-scenes, which he added at the beginning and later on are very Elizabethan."[64] Therefore, we can conclude that the Roman tragedies are affected by both – Roman culture and Shakespearian Elizabethan culture as well. Both these cultures, as well as a lack of belonging to any specific culture as such are relevant for women characters in these plays.

Women certainly have more roles in Shakespeare's Roman tragedies beyond the mere connective point between Rome and England. The Roman plays are concerned with the public space, and as in both the Roman and English societies women's place was in the domestic sphere, as was discussed in the previous chapters, women were often relegated into an observant role: "in Shakespeare's English and Roman worlds women voice important insights that go unheeded."[65] This cannot be truer for characters such as Virgilia whose main role in *Coriolanus* seems to be to be ignored by pretty much everyone throughout the whole play, perhaps with the exception of one steamy kiss from her husband. Octavia has conclusions made about her loyalty without any of her input by her brother Octavianus Caesar; Calpurnia's well-meant advice to Caesar falls on deaf ears, and Lavinia's tongue is cut out so that she cannot even attempt to say something. McLuskie says: "Part of Shakespeare's achievement is in taking that conventional pattern and creating the illusion of idiosyncratic characters, making, as it were, their own story."[66] Even though Calpurnia is ignored, Miolam points out that "both English and Roman women often oppose the tragic

[63] See John N. King, "Queen Elizabeth I: Representations of the Virgin Queen," *Renaissance Quaterly,* 43.1 (1990), JSTOR www.jstor.org/stable/2861792
[64] Draper, 226
[65] Miolam, 193
[66] McLuskie, 118

march of history and all its destruction."[67] Calpurnia warns Caesar against going to the Senate that night, Portia begs to be included in the conspiracy, Octavia begs for her short-term husband and brother to settle aside their grievances, and Volumnia prevents her son from destroying Rome:

> Lavinia, likewise, wanders through *Titus Andronicus* as a victim of Gothic and Roman barbarity, finally stabbed by her own father, the paterfamilias. Playful and indulgent, Cleopatra mocks the austere values of Romanitas – Stoic fortitude, self-sacrifice, military honour, and constancy. Even a woman who celebrates the male warrior code of honour, Volumnia, halts her son's invasion of Rome in *Coriolanus*.[68]

Women often try to prevent the die-is-cast decisions in the Roman plays and even though they are mostly ignored, it is significant that they appear to be mostly right. Moreover, women do actively influence the decision making in the Roman plays – Volumnia is the supreme example as her son is but her puppet and almost every decision he makes is directly or indirectly influenced by her. Finally, there is Cleopatra – a woman who takes action into her own hands and wields as much political power as any of the men in the plays

[67] Miolam, 193
[68] Miolam, 194

Chapter 2: *Julius Caesar*

It seems aptly fitting to open my investigation with a play in which women are relegated into marginal characters and progress through the plays based on the amount of space which women inhabit in them, i.e., begin with *Julius Caesar,* continue with *Coriolanus* and *Titus Andronicus* and conclude with *Antony and Cleopatra*. *Julius Caesar* persists as a play dominated by the discourse of political nature. A play without a hero, *Julius Caesar* stars some of the most famous and legendary men in the history of humankind. Be it Julius Caesar, Brutus, or Mark Antony, these men shaped history and the play focuses mostly on their historical and political relevance. In regard to that, Shakespeare took inspiration from Plutarch's *Lives.* As Dobson et al explain: "This was Shakespeare's first play to use Plutarch's *Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans*: it closely follows the relevant sections of Plutarch's biographies of Caesar, Brutus, and Antony, although Shakespeare compresses and transposes events at will."[1] Shakespeare at places almost copies Plutarch's material and yet, Shakespeare adds or completely changes other moments. Plutarch can, therefore, provide some supporting evidence that can occasionally be used in our analysis. For example, I turn to Plutarch when discussing the issue of Portia's wound because in that case, I find it significant that the wound was already mentioned in *Lives.* Nevertheless, we ought to treat *Lives* rather as an inspiration for Shakespeare and not assign any crucial importance to it during the analysis of neither *Julius Caesar* nor *Antony and Cleopatra.*

Julius Caesar is a political play and therefore firmly situated in the public sphere. As can be inferred from the first chapter, the exclusion of women seems to come naturally if we

[1] Michael Dobson, Stanley Wells, Will Sharpe, and Erin Sullivan, eds. *The Oxford Companion to Shakespeare* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), ProQuest Ebook Central, https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/cuni/detail.action?docID=5824833, accessed 9 March 2022, 849

follow prevailing theory and disregard the exceptional cases as seems to be the case with *Julius Caesar*. *Julius Caesar* is the only play out of the four discussed plays which seems to rigorously follow the concept which assigns men to the public sphere and women to the private sphere. Whilst the other plays transgress this division to different extents, *Julius Caesar* is a men's play. We have only two women characters in the whole play, and both are relevant because they are wives of the protagonists. As Gray notes: "Julius Caesar stands in the list of tragedies where [...] we have again a man's world, with a couple of women hardly sketched in a play complete without them."[2] My analysis focuses not only on Portia's wound, but also on her possible pregnancy, her gender-bending interpretation of herself, and her relationship with Brutus. When it comes to Calpurnia, I focus on the issue of her incapability to have children, how she affects the way the audience perceives Caesar, and how she represents a cautionary tale of an ignored woman.

2.1. Portia

"I have a man's mind, but a woman's might!"[3] Portia exclaims famously in frustration on the day of Caesar's assassination because she was left in oblivion by her husband. A character left to her own devices, which are extremely minimal because she is a woman, Portia spends the play trying to make herself relevant only to be ignored and rejected to finally die off stage. We first meet Portia after a clandestine meeting of Brutus and the other conspirators occurred in her house and Portia, woken by the unusual activity, demands to know what was happening. The second and last time Portia graced the stage with her presence was on the day of Caesar's assassination when she could sense that something was

[2] Gray, 126
[3] Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar,* 2.4.7.

wrong. Not knowing what was happening, she sent Lucius to investigate and conversed with the soothsayer. Her tragic life and ending in the play are defined by a few key elements which I am going to discuss in this chapter. These are her gender-bending ruminations, her role as a wife and the way she influences Brutus' characterisation, her presumed pregnancy, and the shocking wound she inflicts upon her thigh.

It is clear that Portia hates being a woman, or more precisely, being what was expected for a woman to be like in Shakespeare's version of Ancient Rome. If we accept the presupposition that Portia is pregnant, she does not seem particularly interested in becoming a mother as she intentionally wounds herself and goes out in the chilling morning weather. Moreover, Portia detests not being included in plans – she wants to help Brutus with whatever he is planning and when she senses that something is off, she is desperate to send Lucius to investigate as she is unable to go herself. Portia is a witty, curious, and proactive woman who cannot stand that her position is supposed to be domestic which renders her unable to help her husband. To free herself, she uses reasons and arguments to try to persuade Brutus that she deserves to be included in his schemes. Portia does not argue that she has the right to be included because she is a woman, rather, she argues that she is unlike other women, and therefore should be informed.

Portia expresses great dissatisfaction about the secretive ways of her husband. She complains that "You have ungently, Brutus, / Stole from my bed: and yesternight, at supper, / You suddenly arose and walk'd about."[4] Clearly, Brutus, his mind consumed by the conspiracy, rather impolitely keeps walking away from Portia without providing any excuse. Portia is right to complain – even though as a woman, she should rather stay silent – because in the domestic sphere, Brutus should be hers. Her first interest in Brutus' affair appears domestic rather than public. McNeir notes this "incompatibility between public and private

[4] Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar,* 2.1.237-239

life"[5] – Brutus and Portia's domestic life falls apart because of Brutus' involvement in the public affairs. Portia is clever; she introduces that she should be included in Brutus' plan not because she would want to overstep to the public sphere where as a woman she does not belong. Portia claims that the issue that Brutus is dealing with has been affecting their private life, and therefore she deserves to know what it is that disturbs her domestic sphere. Portia also expresses concern for Brutus. She says that he should not be out and awake so early in the morning either. When Brutus tells her that "It is not for your health thus to commit / Your weak condition to the raw-cold morning,"[6] she retorts: ""Not for yours neither."[7] Therefore, at the beginning of her argument, Portia establishes an authority why Brutus should confide in her. That authority is based on her position as a woman and the resulting right to know the state of her husband and household. However, as we learn later on, this was a rhetorical device from Portia to make her argument more plausible. She, in fact, does want to be included in the public sphere.

Having failed at persuading Brutus to confide in her, Portia turns into a clever flatterer. At first, Portia concedes that every man has the right for an occasional bad temper: "that impatience [...] / Which sometime hath his hour with every man."[8] An interesting gender-related paradox is noteworthy here. Portia seems to value constancy as a manly virtue and repeats how much she wishes to possess this quality. She says: "I have made a strong proof of my constancy"[9] and "O constancy, be strong upon my side."[10] Women tend to be traditionally criticised as overemotional, changeable, hysterical: to put it simply, inconstant. Portia wishes to avoid this stereotype and does not permit herself to become inconstant;

[5] Waldo F. McNeir, *Shakespeare's Julius Caesar: A tragedy without a hero* (Mainz: Akademie der Wissenschaften und der Literatur, 1970), 3
[6] Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar,* 2.1.235-237
[7] Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar,* 2.1.237
[8] Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar,* 2.1.248, 251
[9] Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar,* 2.1.299
[10] Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar,* 2.4.7

however, she excuses such vice in her husband and all of men. Portia seems to adopt the double stereotype which judges women more harshly in their vices than men. Such an adoption goes hand in hand with Portia's seeming disregard for her own gender.

Portia continues her flattery in which she camouflages her manipulation: "Brutus is wise, and, were he not in health, / He would embrace the means to come by it."[11] Portia keeps her constancy and relatively good spirit, as a woman should, and tries to reason with Brutus by appealing to his ego. However, when even this attempt fails, and Portia is told rather straight-forwardly "Good Portia, go to bed"[12] as if she was a child and Brutus a resigned, exhausted parent, Portia finally loses her temper. She attacks her husband:

> 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 theumy and unpurged air
> To add unto his sickness?[13]

It is fascinating to note the change in tone from Portia's previous appeals. Her previous requests were polite, appealing to Brutus' reason and affection towards her. However, when Brutus refuses her demands, Portia abandons her womanly submission. Such a quick change in demeanour suggests that Portia was only faking her identity as a model woman. When the charade did not work to her benefit, Portia lets her emotions free and sarcastically attacks Brutus' silly excuse. However, she realises very soon that such a behaviour is inappropriate in a woman of her station and kneels in front of Brutus.

Having now abandoned the pretence of a humble, obedient wife, Portia decides to embrace her identity, claiming not to be an ordinary woman:

> I grant I am a woman; but, withal,
> A woman that Lord Brutus took to wife.

[11] Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar,* 2.1.258-259
[12] Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar,* 2.1.260
[13] Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar,* 2.1.261-267

> I grant I am a woman, but withal,
> A woman well reputed – Cato's daughter.
> Think you I am no stronger than my sex,
> Being so fathered and so husbanded?[14]

Portia turns her argument completely around. She claims that she needs to know of the plot precisely because she is not like other women. Portia admits that she is a woman but despite that she possesses the qualities of a man. She declares to have acquired these qualities by her association with high-esteemed men: her husband, Brutus, and her father, Cato. Portia uses the argument that because of her husband and father, she was elevated into a stronger individual than a usual woman is. Portia demeans her sex to underscore her own uniqueness. Nevertheless, even when Portia denounces her sex, Brutus does not relent and confide in her. All Portia's argumentation fell on deaf ears – whether it be her appeal to her right to know what happens in her domestic sphere, flattery, emotional outburst, or renouncing her gender, Brutus refuses to see Portia as worthy of his secret.

Portia's ruminations on her gender continue in her second scene in the play. Portia is home alone as Brutus went to the Senate to assassinate Caesar and Portia senses that something is off. The first sentence she utters serve to underscore her discrimination based on her gender: "I pry'thee, boy, run to the senate house: / Stay not to answer me, but get thee gone."[15] Portia cannot freely leave the house as a woman, and therefore she is forced to send Lucius. The fact that the scene is opened with this statement is not insignificant; it underscores Portia's hopelessness as a woman as she literally cannot do anything, even if her motivation is to help her husband. This scene also highlights Portia's inability to stay out of the public sphere. Her curiosity might be interpreted negatively as a traditional vice in a woman; however, the plot of the play seems to go against such an interpretation. The plot of the play rather suggests that if women were allowed to participate in the public sphere, there

[14] Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar,* 2.1.292-297
[15] Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar,* 2.4.1 - 2

might have been no tragedy at all. It might not be too much of a stretch to point out that both Portia and Calpurnia try to prevent their husbands from actions which will eventually ruin them. In the end, as Portia said earlier, "that impatience [...] / Which sometime hath his hour with every man"[16] suggests that men are impatient, reckless, and quick-tempered and can therefore make unfortunate decisions which have not been thought trough. Such an assertion appears to be true for both Caesar and Brutus who act based on their pride, their friends' insistence, and their emotions rather than well-reasoned decisions. Brutus' schemes do not really include a plan outlining what to do after the assassination, which is why Mark Antony is able to seize the moment and turn the tide against the conspirators. In both cases when women try to intervene, they make good points and if they were listened to, the situations would have turned out for better.

Following Portia's desperate attempt to learn what is happening, she utters her most noteworthy assertion on gender: "I have a man's mind, but a woman's might. / How hard it is for women to keep counsel?"[17] Portia associates her rational capacity with that of a man, however, she also retains something of a woman. Portia seems to complain about woman's weak might to keep secrets and prays for constancy so that she would not reveal that her husband has some sinister plan. However, I see this obvious interpretation as problematic despite it being literally what Portia says. Even though it makes sense in the context of the scene, it does not seem to make much sense in the context of the play. Portia worries that because she is a woman, she might reveal some of Brutus' secrets to Lucius. However, this is a completely illogical thing for her to say for many reasons.

First, Lucius is Brutus' closest servant. He sleeps in a room next to Brutus so that Brutus can awake him by simply calling to him: "What, Lucius! ho!"[18] Lucius was also the

[16] Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar,* 2.1.248, 251
[17] Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar,* 2.4.7-8
[18] Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar,* 2.1.1

one to prepare the room for the meeting with the conspirators: "Get me a taper in my study, Lucius."[19] Lucius then also finds an incriminating letter in his study which he gives to Brutus: "I found / This paper."[20] Lucius also lets Cassius in; the fact that Cassius visits Brutus in the middle of the night, combined with his master's nervousness, makes it obvious that the meeting has clandestine purposes. Brutus does make sure that Lucius does not see the other conspirators' faces, however, Lucius witnesses Ligarius coming back. Therefore, Portia's fear of accidentally revealing her husband's secret is illogical because Lucius knows much more of the plot than her and if Brutus trusted him, he should be trustworthy and loyal.

The second reason why Portia's fear of revealing the secret is illogical is that she spent the whole previous scene persuading her husband to confide in her, insisting that she is constant and that he can trust her to keep his secret. Clearly, Portia was very certain that she could help Brutus rather than endanger his mission. Therefore, how come that Portia is suddenly so worried about revealing a secret she does not even know? These two actions are contradictory. It might be argued that it is to point out women's inconstancy, but such an argumentation would be defeated by the simple fact that Portia genuinely cares for Brutus. She tells Lucius to convey to Brutus that "Say I am merry"[21] not to trouble him and by the end, she commits suicide when Brutus' situation becomes desperate. Therefore, if Portia was worried about actually revealing the secret, she would never want to hear it in the first place. Finally, Portia revealing any secret does not make sense from the characterisation point of view: would a woman willing to stab herself to prove her constancy be this inconstant?

If we accept that Portia's statement is illogical in the context of the play, we are left with an explanation that Portia encrypted her exclamation with hidden meaning. In the previous scene, Portia was always hesitant to oppose woman's subservient role – she would

[19] Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar,* 2.4.7-8
[20] Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar,* 2.4.36-37
[21] Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar,* 2.4.45

kneel after her outburst and claim that her virtues are thanks to her male's acquittances. Therefore, I suggest that by "I have a man's mind, but a woman's might"[22] Portia complains that despite her witty mind, which could help Brutus in this precarious situation, she has no might as a woman to do anything. Portia hid this double meaning of complaint and frustration because she would not feel comfortable of expressing such an idea explicitly, as she did not feel comfortable with defying the position appropriate for her gender in Act II Scene Two. Such an interpretation would correspond to Portia's frustrations in the previous scene as well.

The last point to be made about Portia's ruminations on gender is Portia's statement that "how weak a thing / The heart of woman is!"[23] Portia once again asserts herself as a woman; however, this sentence is spoken in the context of her love for Brutus. Portia finds it very difficult to bear not knowing what might happen to Brutus. This assertion seemingly confirms the idea that Portia truly loves Brutus and would never willingly do anything that would give her the possibility to betray him. Portia and Brutus' relationship can be better examined when we discuss Portia's words on marriage.

Portia sees marriage as a relationship in which woman should be obedient to her husband but at the same time, her husband should treat her as his companion rather than a servant or a sexual object. Portia obeys Brutus "[you] gave a sign for me to leave you. So I did."[24] Portia takes the marriage vows very seriously: "By all your vows of love and that great vow / Which did incorporate and make us one, / That you unfold to me, your self, your half."[25] Portia subscribes to the early modern idea of marriage which saw men and women essentially becoming the same person after marriage. A seemingly romantic idea, it meant

[22] Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar,* 2.4.7
[23] Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar,* 2.4.39-40
[24] Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar,* 2.1.247
[25] Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar,* 2.1.272-274

that a femme covert lost most of her independent rights as her husband would speak for her in public sphere. Portia knows that Brutus would be the one to carry the plan out, however, as she is his half, she should know what is bothering him so that she could support him.

Portia's most revealing speech on marriage follows Brutus' request for Portia not to kneel in front of him:

> I should not need, if you were gentle Brutus.
> Within the bond of marriage, tell me, Brutus,
> Is it excepted I should know no secrets
> That appertain to you? Am I yourself
> But, as it were, in sort of limitation;
> To keep with you at meals, comfort your bed,
> And talk to you sometimes? Dwell I but in the suburbs
> Of your good pleasure? If it be no more,
> Portia is Brutus' harlot, not his wife.[26]

Portia delivers a defence for women. Such defences were not unheard of in early modern England, as suggested by the example of Rachel Speght in chapter one. Portia is not arguing for equality or any modern feminist idea. She is rather indicating that if a wife is to do her duty, which is to be a support to her husband, he must treat her accordingly. If Brutus does not confide in her, she cannot help him. Portia complains about the idea that all a wife should be is a companion at meals and an object of sexual gratification. Portia argues for a relationship based on mutual trust and respect. A woman would honour and obey her husband who would in return trust her with his secrets and value her more than he might value a prostitute or a mistress.

Having discussed the issues of marriage, it seems obvious to follow the discussion with the way Shakespeare uses Portia as a device of characterisation of Brutus. Hartsock notes that "the addition by Shakespeare of the tender scenes with Portia and particularly with Lucius speaks strongly for the good Brutus."[27] Similarly to Shakespeare's omission of the

[26] Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar,* 2.1.279-287
[27] Mildred E. Hartsock, "The Complexity of Julius Caesar." *PMLA* 81, no. 1 (1966): 56–62, JSTOR https://doi.org/10.2307/461308, accessed 15 Feb 2022, 60

possibility of Brutus being Caesar's son, Portia is to awaken more sympathy in the audience for the troubled Brutus. She also explains to us how Brutus behaves in private: "It will not let you eat, nor talk, nor sleep."[28] Showing us Brutus' moral struggles, Shakespeare invites us to feel more sympathy towards Brutus. As Portia is the only one who has access to a private citizen Brutus, she is the one to show us that side of his. However, Brutus' unwillingness to confide in Portia suggests a vice in him. McNeir notes:

> When the conspirators have left [...], his wife Portia, sensing his spiritual malaise, pleads to be taken into his confidence, which she deserves. He refuses and deceives her as well as himself. [...] At the end of the scene the unquestioning loyalty to Brutus of Ligarius, who is really physically ill but enthusiastically joins the conspiracy, contrasts with Brutus's unwillingness to trust Portia.[29]

By deceiving Portia, Brutus deceives and condemns himself. He should have trusted her for as she explained, she should have been his closest companion as his wife. Therefore, Portia makes Brutus more sympathetic to the audience but she also indicates fatal vices in Brutus which would later lead to his downfall.

The next issue to discuss about Portia is her supposed pregnancy. This issue is especially relevant considering that pregnancy is the very first thing mentioned in the play in regard to Calpurnia's infertility. Pregnancy provides an intriguing connection between the public and private spheres. Even though it concerns mainly women, for men it represents an important issue of an heir. It is no coincidence that Caesar was so desperate for Calpurnia to get pregnant at the beginning of the play. The line that suggests that Portia might be pregnant is: "It is not for your health thus to commit / Your weak condition to the raw-cold morning."[30] The line remains ambiguous because the "weak condition" may just be a remark on the fact that Portia is a woman. However, the word "condition" suggests a special condition. It is

[28] Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar,* 2.1.252
[29] McNeir, 10
[30] Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar,* 2.1.235-236

noteworthy that in his soliloquy, Brutus equates Caesar with pre-birth imagery: "And therefore think him as a serpent's egg, / Which, hatch'd, would as his kind grow mischievous, / And kill him in the shell."[31] Certainly, Brutus uses the metaphor to indicate that Caesar must be stopped before he becomes a dictator. However, combined with pregnancy being the very first issue in the play, this metaphor might indicate that the issue of children (heirs) is often on many characters' minds when they make important decisions.

The last, possibly the most controversial concern to discuss about Portia is her wound. Portia goes to an extreme measure to prove her constancy:

> I have made strong proof of my constancy,
> Giving myself a voluntary wound
> Here, in the thigh: can I bear that with patience
> And not my husband's secrets?[32]

Such extreme is Portia's measure that we might be tempted to dismiss her statement as a metaphor. However, Plutarch's *Lives* can illuminate the issue. Plutarch says:

> She took a knife, such as barbers pare the nails with, and putting all her attendants out of the chamber, she inflicted a deep wound in her thigh, so that there was a large flow of blood, and, shortly after, violent pains and shivering fever came upon her in consequence of the wound.[33]

Portia wounded herself to prove her constancy to Brutus. The extremity of her action strengthens not only Portia's resolve, but also my previous argument about the illogicality of Portia worrying that as a woman, she might disclose Brutus' secrets. In fact, this action of Portia, no matter how shocking, fits with the overall tone of the play. Dobson speaks of "its [*Julius Caesar*'s] characters lucid and eloquent [rhetoric] even when persuading others to adopt the most violent and primitive behaviour."[34] Indeed, Portia speaks most eloquently about her act of self-harm. However bizarre it may seem to us, Brutus is rather impressed

[31] Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar,* 2.1.32-34
[32] Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar,* 2.1.299-302
[33] Plutarch, *Lives,* transl. Aubrey Stewart and George Long (London: George Bell & Sons, 1892), https://www.gutenberg.org/files/44315/44315-h/44315-h.htm, accessed 2 Feb 2022, 410
[34] Dobson, 851

than disgusted: "O ye gods, / Render me worthy of this noble wife!"[35] Therefore, we might assume that this act of Portia was not deemed improper but rather as Portia intended it – a proof that she is more than an ordinary woman and deserves to be included in the plan of men. Indeed, the wound was the only argumentation of Portia which worked on Brutus as he was about to disclose his secret to her if they were not interrupted by Ligarius. Therefore, it is of the utmost intrigue that in the 1953 film version of *Julius Caesar* directed by Joseph L. Mankiewicz, Mankiewicz decided to cut Portia's wound altogether. The film skips lines 299 to 305[36], and therefore Portia's wound does not exist in the film version. Considering that a few scenes later, the film depicts Caesar being repeatedly stabbed and covered in blood, Portia's wound was not cut because of brutality concerns. There were occasions in which Shakespeare's heroines were too active, or extreme, for twentieth century's artists or audience, and even such extreme measures, such as cutting important lines from the play, were taken. It may be our interpretation of the women of Shakespeare which relegates them to secondary positions rather than their actual roles within the play.

2.2. Calpurnia

Calpurnia's role is even more limited than Portia's. Nevertheless, Calpurnia's name is the very first thing that Caesar utters in the play. In the second scene of the play, Calpurnia's infertility is the first thing discussed when Caesar instructs Calpurnia to be touched by Mark Antony:

> Forget not, in your speed, Antonius,
> To touch Calpurnia: for our elders say
> The barren, touched in this holy chase,
> Shake off their sterile curse.[37]

[35] Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar,* 2.1.303-304
[36] Joseph L. Mankiewicz, director. *Julius Caesar* (1953: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer), 39:54
[37] Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar,* 2.1.303-304

This scene is noteworthy for many reasons despite of Calpurnia only having one short line: "Here, my lord."[38] It implies that the primary role of women in the Roman society set up by the play is to produce children. Calpurnia's inability to do that would contrast with Portia's possible pregnancy. Caesar's preoccupancy with an heir might be shown to justify Brutus' actions as Caesar might have been preparing for a sort of father-son dictatorship. However, the scene also sets an important prerequisite for the second scene that Calpurnia appears in.

The second and last scene that Calpurnia figures in takes place in the morning before Caesar's assassination. Caesar was awoken by Calpurnia's screams: "Thrice hath Calpurnia in her sleep cried out, / 'Help ho! They murder Caesar!'"[39] Caesar is thrown of his balance and asks his servant to go to the priests to learn their opinion on bad omens regarding him: "Go bid the priests do present sacrifice, / And bring me their opinions of success."[40] The fact that Caesar asks for a consultation with the priests, combined with his and Calpurnia's first scene in which Caesar instructs her to touch Mark Antony to cure her infertility, suggests that it is not that Caesar would disregard superstition. On the contrary, Caesar seems to take superstition seriously but he disregards Calpurnia's warning rather on the basis of her being a woman.

As Portia, Calpurnia tries to wear her husband down with her argumentation. Calpurnia begins by explaining her frightening vision to her husband. Having vividly narrated her scary vision to Caesar, Calpurnia admits that "these things are beyond all use / And I do fear them."[41] Shakespeare introduces this obvious contrast between a man and a woman. Whilst Caesar refuses to admit fear, Calpurnia is at more liberty to freely express her emotions. When Caesar answers her fears with philosophical remarks, Calpurnia follows

[38] Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar,* 1.2.4
[39] Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar,* 2.2.2-3
[40] Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar,* 2.2.5.6
[41] Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar,* 2.2.25-26

Portia's suit and moves to flattery: "When beggars die, there are no comets seen; / The heavens themselves blaze forth the death of princes."[42] As Portia, Calpurnia sugar-coats her argument in compliments. When the servant comes back, delivering a message from the priests that they would also not recommend Caesar to go forth, Caesar is still not swayed. It is only when Calpurnia offers him a way to save his face that he relents:

> Do not go forth today: call it my fear
> That keeps you in the house and not your own.
> We'll send Mark Antony to the senate house,
> And he shall say you are not well today.[43]

Calpurnia persuades Caesar by appealing to his manly vulnerability: if it is not him but his wife who appears fearful, Caesar can give in to his own fears and stay at home. Caesar is afraid, if he was not, he would not walk around his palace in his nightgown, summoning servants to go to the priests. Calpurnia plays the role of the perfect wife who gives her husband a way out that he could not have taken without her because he had to always appear strong in public.

However, similarly to Coriolanus, Caesar also has an overexaggerated sense of duty as he is not at peace at sending a lie to the Senate which Portia suggested: "Say he is sick."[44] As Decius presses him for a reason, Caesar at first tries to exercise his authority by claiming that "the cause is my will." Nevertheless, very soon, he blames it all on Calpurnia: "Calpurnia here, my wife, stays me at home"[45] and even adds "and on her knee / Hath begg'd that I will stay at home today."[46] Calpurnia's role for Caesar is the scapegoat on whom he can lean and blame his own weakness. And yet all that Decius has to say is one sentence which crumbles all of Calpurnia's argumentation and Caesar's way out. As was demonstrated, Caesar values omens, just not women's input. When Decius says "This dream

[42] Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar,* 2.2.30-31
[43] Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar,* 2.2.50-53
[44] Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar,* 2.2.65
[45] Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar,* 2.2.75
[46] Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar,* 2.2.81-82

is all amiss interpreted"[47] and claims that Calpurnia's dream means that Caesar would meet with glory, Caesar does not hesitate to immediately favour a man's interpretation over a woman's. Decius is not even reluctant to say, in front of Calpurnia, that he understands her dream better than she does: "This by Calpurnia's dream is signified."[48] Neither does Decius find it improper to interfere in between the spouses. As Amussen notes: "All marriages, happy and unhappy, were carefully watched by neighbours. In both town and countryside, people expected to know what others were doing: our idea that family life is "private" was not part of sixteenth century thinking."[49] Therefore, it is not strange nor uncommon that Decius would interfere in a private discussion between Calpurnia and Caesar, and that his word would be more valued than Calpurnia's.

When Decius indicates the ridicule that Caesar would suffer if he listened to his wife, "'Break up the senate till another time, / When Caesar's shall meet with better dreams,'"[50] it is not omens that Decius is mocking, but the fact that Caesar would listen to a woman. Calpurnia may show us a more human side of Caesar; otherwise her role in the play is to be dismissed on the basis of her gender: "How foolish do your fears seem now, Calpurnia! / I am ashamed I did yield to them."[51] Calpurnia's situation shows how easily a woman could be dismissed in Shakespeare's Rome and that even if a woman constructed a great argument, a man's point of view would always be preferred even if his argumentation was much weaker. It also underscores the domestic/public sphere division. As McNeir observes: "The private citizen in a dressing gown [Caesar], harkening to his wife's human fears, is transformed into the public official and empire-seeker as he dismissed Calpurnia's

[47] Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar,* 2.2.83
[48] Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar,* 2.2.90
[49] Susan Dwyer Amussen , "The Family and The Household," in *A Companion to Shakespeare*, ed. David Scott Kastan (New Jersey: Blackwell Publishing, 1999), 88
[50] Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar,* 2.2.98-99
[51] Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar,* 2.2.105-106

misgivings as foolish."[52] As Calpurnia has no other way of asserting her limited power than trying to appeal to her husband, she is defeated and all that is left for her to do in the play is to fetch Caesar's robe and let him go.

Both Portia and Calpurnia portray the powerlessness of Roman women who are relegated to the domestic sphere. However, that does not mean that the play portrays them as unimportant. On the contrary, Portia and Calpurnia seemed to be the only characters who rightly judge other people's intentions. Additionally, Portia is depicted as a strong person when she suffers her voluntary wound. For the 1953's film adaptation, Portia seemed to be too strong of a woman and so they shortened her scene. We do not know what happens to Calpurnia after Caesar dies; it is as if she lost relevance when her husband is gone. Portia commits suicide when her attendant is not present: "her attendants absent, swallow'd fire."[53] The implication that women should not be left alone – in charge of their own lives – is striking. Brutus also does not mourn Portia for too long. In fact, his "speak no more of her"[54] follows almost immediately. *Julius Caesar* portrays a patriarchal society which excludes women from any participation in the public sphere and where men always treat women as an afterthought. Nevertheless, the two women characters portray strong, intelligent women skilled in the art of argumentation and unwilling to stay silent and passive. Similarly to the exceptional women described in chapter one, Portia and Calpurnia try to yield some power even if they are not supposed to possess any.

[52] McNeir, 7
[53] Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar,* 4.3.156
[54] Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar,* 4.3.159

Chapter 3: *Coriolanus*

Even though *Coriolanus* is, similarly to *Julius Caesar*, a very political play full of betrayals, fears of power usurpations, and switching sides, "Shakespeare moves the feminine from the margins where he placed it in *Julius Caesar* to the center, making Volumnia a major character."[1] Unlike in *Julius Caesar*, which features strong but ignored women, Volumnia appears to be the most influential character in the play. A driving force behind most of her son's decisions, Volumnia moves the plot forward, creates the protagonist, and resolves the conflict at the end. Dobson goes as far as to call Volumnia "the most fully developed older woman in the canon."[2] Volumnia is an active, energetic character whose opinions and loyalties make her the antihero or even the villain of the piece.

Volumnia is not the only female character in the play. Virgilia and Valeria are complete opposites of Volumnia. "Angelic women," they seem to be completely satisfied with being relegated into the domestic sphere and they have no desire to participate in activities which do not include patchwork or childcare. In that, Virgilia differs also from Portia. For all these characters, Shakespeare again searched for inspiration in Plutarch; this time, "Shakespeare took the story of the play from Plutarch's *Life of Coriolanus*."[3] However, as always, Shakespeare was very loose in following the original material which is especially relevant for an analysis of Volumnia, whose role Shakespeare decided to enlarge considerably. Even though Shakespeare uses Plutarch as a resource as he did with *Julius Caesar*, the reception and revivals of *Coriolanus* have been considerably less enthusiastic.

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[1] Coppélia Kahn, *Roman Shakespeare: Warriors, Wounds and Women* (London: Routledge, 1997), EBSCO https://search-ebscohost-com.ezproxy.is.cuni.cz/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip,shib&db=e000xww&AN=40473&lang=cs&site=ehost-live&scope=site, accessed 10 March 2022, 95

[2] Dobson, 797

[3] George B. Harrison, "Introduction" in *The Tragedy of Coriolanus*, ed. G. B. Harrison (London: Wyman and Sons, 1947), 13

Julius Caesar is often applauded and studied for its political rhetoric; *Coriolanus*, meanwhile, is rather not staged for its controversial political message. Much less studied than *Julius Caesar* overall, women characters are thanks to Volumnia much more studied in *Coriolanus* than in *Julius Caesar*. In fact, Volumnia tends to be one of the most discussed characters of the play and she also constitutes most of the discourse on *Coriolanus* in this thesis.

3.1. Volumnia

Unlike Portia and Calpurnia in *Julius Caesar*, Volumnia enjoys a lot of lines in *Coriolanus*. Harrison notes that "he [Shakespeare] made more of the influence of Coriolanus' mother than he found in Plutarch."[4] Dobson agrees that Shakespeare [...] greatly expands Volumnia's role (inventing all the other episodes [except her appeal in the first scene of act five] in which she appears)."[5] Clearly, if Shakespeare decided to make her role much more significant than Plutarch claimed her to be, Volumnia is indeed one of the most important, if not the most vital, characters in the play. Her power is subtle, and manifests through influencing the male characters, but unlike the women in *Julius Caesar*, Volumnia succeeds at implementing her will. Luckyj notes that "feminist and psychoanalytic critics [...] usually find in her the chief cause of both Coriolanus's masculine aggression and his eventual death at the hands of the Volcians,"[6] a.k.a. all the crucial elements of the play. My investigation of her contribution to the play is divided into two parts. First, I discuss

[4] Harrison, 14
[5] Dobson, 794
[6] Christina Luckyj, "Volumnia's Silence," *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900,* 31, no. 2 (1991): 327–42, JSTOR https://doi.org/10.2307/450814, accessed 12 March 2022, 328

Volumnia as a mother and then I ruminate on Volumnia's last scene and its implications for how members of audience perceive Volumnia's character arc.

Most of the antagonism that Volumnia displays is due to her troubled approach to motherhood. As an active woman, Volumnia manages to find a way to influence the public sphere even though she is a woman in a society which appears more politicised and militarised than even that of *Julius Caesar*. As Luckyj notes, "Volumnia's first appearance on the stage is both a shock and a relief. With a burst of tremendous energy, she ruptures the opening tableau of silent, dutiful women so idealized in Renaissance marriage manuals."[7] Volumnia's active womanhood would be intriguing to observe if it did not translate into her controversial approach to raising her son and did not stem from her excessive hubris and ambition which often lead to the downfall of characters, regardless of their gender, in the context of the Ancient world. As a mother, Volumnia is destructive and if we are able to feel any compassion for Coriolanus by the end of the play, we feel an equal resentment towards Volumnia. As Knowles notes, "[Coriolanus] is a series of accidents without any substance. He has no essential being, no feelings, no soul. He is an accumulation of public attributes – fame, glory, reputation – which must be renewed by action."[8] Coriolanus appears to be by far the least retrospective, ruminative of Shakespeare's protagonists and he was built to be this way by his mother. Coriolanus lacks a father, or any father figure whatsoever and only Volumnia, apart from to a lesser extent Menenius, exerts influence over him. Kahn notes that "[Shakespeare] follows Plutarch in leaving the father's place vacant, but enlarges the mother's role considerably to make her pertinent at every moment to the tragic action."[9] It is almost as if Coriolanus was just a physical body following his mother's brain.

[7] Luckyj, 330
[8] Ronald Knowles, "Action and Eloquence: Volumnia's Plea in *Coriolanus*," *Shakespeare Bulletin* 14, no. 4 (1996): 37–38, JSTOR http://www.jstor.org/stable/26353349, accessed 18 March 2022, 38
[9] Kahn, 95

Coriolanus was conditioned to become who he became by his mother. In her first speech, Volumnia says: "When yet he was but tender-bodied, and the only son of my womb; [...] [I] was pleased to let him seek danger where he was to find fame. To cruel war I sent him."[10] In fact, Virgilia's speech just a few lines beneath Volumnia's evokes Coriolanus' childhood via the description of his son's childhood: "I saw him run after a gilded butterfly; [...] or whether his fall enrage'd him, or how 'twas, he did so set his teeth and tear it."[11] Volumnia comments: "One of his father's moods."[12] Volumnia raised her son to become cruel and focused on his physical strength rather than intelligence. This strikes back when Coriolanus fails at the marketplace. However, it enables Volumnia to exercise power over her son even in his adulthood.

Not very motherly, from our point of view; however, Kahn argues that

> Volumnia acts within the established feminine parameters by bearing and rearing a son, the play conforms to conventional gender binarism. Her complicity with Roman militarism is no less conventional. But it is precisely because Volumnia holds such power over her son as a mother that her advocacy of the dominant martial ideology gives her a crucial political leverage.[13]

The role of a patrician mother in Shakespeare's Rome inferred a strong sense of patriotism, which makes Volumnia's statements more understandable. Volumnia wishes for her son to succeed, and that in Shakespeare's Rome means to inhabit traditional masculine military characteristics. Nevertheless, even if we remember that such extreme patriotism would not be uncommon, Volumnia seems to go too far when Virgilia asks her "But had he died in the business?"[14] Volumnia answers "Then his good report should have been my son; [...] I had rather had eleven [sons] died nobly for their country than one voluptuously surfeit out of

[10] Shakespeare, *Coriolanus,* 1.3.4,5,10,11
[11] Shakespeare, *Coriolanus,* 1.3.58,60-61
[12] Shakespeare, *Coriolanus,* 1.3.66
[13] Kahn, 96
[14] Shakespeare, *Coriolanus,* 1.3.19

action."[15] Traub notes that "Volumnia acts as though she wishes she could replace Coriolanus on the battlefield."[16] Her enthusiasm for her son's military achievements seems to encompass a certain pity that she could not participate in war events herself. As a result, if an opportunity to distinguish herself in the service to her country was denied to her, Volumnia dedicates her energy into becoming a mother whose son will excel on the battlefield.

Shortly afterwards, Volumnia revels in her son's injury: "it more becomes a man / Than gilt his trophy."[17] Shakespeare's Volumnia treads on the fine line between a patriotism expected from a Roman character and a vicious, cold mother. Knowles argues that there is a connection between the missing father and Volumnia's extremity: "Volumnia took the place of Coriolanus' dead father, supressing the feminine in herself and her son to instil in the youth the masculine e Roman military virtues of strength, asceticism, and hardihood, joined with the skills of weaponry and patrician leadership."[18] Knowles's argument corresponds to the fact that Volumnia is the only parent-like figure in the play, and the only one exerting authority over Coriolanus. However, I do not necessarily agree that it is because Volumnia substitutes the missing father for Coriolanus. Volumnia rather sees her femininity, her role of a mother, as the source of her son's manliness. It is precisely her role as a woman that turns Coriolanus into a war machine rather than her substituting a role of a male character. Volumnia says to Coriolanus: "Thy valiantness was mine, thou suck'dst it from me."[19] As Traub notes, "Volumnia claims her breast to be the physical source of her martial son's manhood."[20] Volumnia associate breast-feeding, one of the most motherly, feminine actions,

[15] Shakespeare, *Coriolanus,* 1.3.20,23-24
[16] Valerie Traub, "Gender and Sexuality in Shakespeare," in *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare* ed. Margareta de grazia and Stanley Wells (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 138
[17] Shakespeare, *Coriolanus,* 1.3.39-40
[18] Knowles, 38
[19] Shakespeare, *Coriolanus,* 3.2.129
[20] Traub, 138

with her son's valiantness. As Kahn puts it, "Though Volumnia raises her son in the name of the father, in doing so she exercises a uniquely maternal power that eludes patriarchal controls over women."[21] Therefore, it seems obvious that Volumnia associates her role as a mother with passing beliefs in honour, patriotism, and asperity to her son. To Volumnia, that is what being a mother is about and clearly, her role in the play derives from this belief.

Volumnia might be the only character in the play to hold such a position and the other characters do not seem aware of the radicality of her personality and beliefs. When Coriolanus returns from war and sees his mother, he exclaims: "You have, I know, petition'd all the gods / For my prosperity!"[22] Two lines almost uncomfortable to read as we know that Volumnia did the very opposite when we witnessed her a few moments ago commenting on Coriolanus: "O! he is wounded, I thank the gods for 't."[23] Volumnia seems to be misunderstood by the other characters – they do not fully understand the extent of her patriotism, and the desire to see her son succeed. Volumnia's power over Coriolanus, who does not seem to be able to intellectually rival her, is demonstrated in the famous scene in Coriolanus' house when Volumnia and Menenius persuade Coriolanus to return to the marketplace and deliver a speech worthy of an aspiring politician rather than a rough soldier. Coriolanus does not understand what it means to be a politician: "Would you have me / False to my nature? Rather say I play / The man I am."[24] Even though Coriolanus is a very militant character, his honesty and purity are difficult not to admire. His simple language contrasts with Volumnia's complex metaphors and apt retorts: "You might have been enough the man you are / With striving less to be so."[25] The difference in the language of Volumnia and Coriolanus is striking and serves to underscore that the role of Volumnia in the play is to be

[21] Kahn, 97
[22] Shakespeare, *Coriolanus,* 2.1.184-185
[23] Shakespeare, *Coriolanus,* 2.1.128
[24] Shakespeare, *Coriolanus,* 3.2.15-17
[25] Shakespeare, *Coriolanus,* 3.2.19-20

the mastermind behind the scenes. Volumnia, similar to Portia or Calpurnia, knows when to use rational and when emotional arguments but unlike the ignored heroines of *Julius Caesar*, Volumnia always succeeds. When Coriolanus seems deaf to their rational arguments, in which Volumnia and Menenius try to explain to him that being a politician entails falsehood, hypocrisy, and pretence, Volumnia strikes an emotional argument:

> At thy choice, then.
> To beg of thee, it is my more dishonour
> Than thou of them. Come all to ruin. Let
> Thy mother rather feel thy pride than fear
> Thy dangerous stoutness; for I mock at death
> With as big heart as thou. Do as thou list.
> Thy valiantness was mine, thou suck'dst it from me;
> But owe thy pride thyself.[26]

Volumnia tells her son that his behaviour shames her and rather than acknowledging his principled attitude, she blames it all on his pride. Volumnia reminds him that she is the sole reason he can be proud of himself. It is from her that he got his valiantness which enabled him to sneak into Corioles on his own and win the battle for the Romans. All these honours, he is so sure of that he does not need his presumed inferiors to praise him, are thanks to Volumnia. However, this excessive pride is only his. The virtues he got from his mother but for his vices he has only himself to blame. Knowles puts it simply: "Coriolanus' mother knows only too well the power of action to persuade."[27] Indeed, Volumnia's scolding works miracles and Coriolanus concedes immediately: Pray, be content: / Mother, I am going to the marketplace; / Chide me no more."[28] This exchange shows that Volumnia's influence over Coriolanus is absolute, as Volumnia is still able to exert motherly authority over Coriolanus despite Coriolanus being a grown-up man.

[26] Shakespeare, *Coriolanus,* 3.2.124-131
[27] Knowles, 37
[28] Shakespeare, *Coriolanus,* 3.2.130-132

The culmination of Volumnia's motherly role comes in Act V, Scene 3. Coriolanus is about to attack Rome and Volumnia, Virgilia, Martius, and Valeria are sent to change his mind. Volumnia uses two arguments based on her role as a mother to persuade her son to spare his home country. The first argument is non-verbal: Volumnia kneels. We saw Roman women kneeling in front of their male relatives before: Portia knelt in front of Brutus and even though Brutus found it distasteful, it did not seem out of place. Kahn explains: "With the exception of mothers, within the patrician class women commonly kneel to men, as their wives, daughters, sisters; only mothers as progenitors share in the authority and honor accorded to fathers."[29] Volumnia kneeling to Coriolanus is significant because in Act II, Scene 1, it was the opposite: Coriolanus knelt in front of Volumnia[30] and even now just before Volumnia knelt, Coriolanus had knelt first. Volumnia kneeling to Coriolanus is improper and unnatural – parallel to what Coriolanus' would-be conquest of his patria would be. Even if Coriolanus would be deserving of the display of respect, having his mother kneeling in front of him would be improper. On top of that, Coriolanus knows that he does not deserve his mother's respect: "Your knees to me? to your corrected son?"[31] "Corrected" meaning rebuked or reprimanded, Coriolanus is aware of his misgivings despite his attempt to justify his actions based on the Romans' unfair treatment of him. By kneeling, Volumnia assumes a role in the family's power dynamics which she is not supposed to inhabit, and this discrepancy works in favour of her argumentation.

The second argument of Volumnia is appealing to Coriolanus' loyalty to his family. Knowles indicates that "Volumnia's argument in both is extraordinary for what it appears to leave out as much as for what it puts in."[32] It is noteworthy that in spite of Volumnia's

[29] Kahn, 101
[30] Shakespeare, *Coriolanus,* 2.1.185
[31] Shakespeare, *Coriolanus,* 5.3.57
[32] Knowles, 37

obsession with patriotism, she does not try to persuade Coriolanus by appealing to his sense of honour or nationalism. Knowing that such an argumentation would fail, as Menenius failed and Coriolanus' grudge against Rome is too painful, Volumnia shows Coriolanus the destruction he would bring upon his family had he conquered Rome. As Knowles notes, "Virgilia, young Martius, and Volumnia constitute Coriolanus' family and so register that third-placed duty spelled out by Cicero, the obligation to parents and family after that to the gods and patria."[33]Volumnia engages her son's emotional attachments to his family; the same attachments she tried to banish from him since childhood. Volumnia indicates the impossible situation that Coriolanus put his family in:

> And state of bodies would bewray what life
> We have led since thy exile. Think with thyself
> How more unfortunate than all living women
> Are we come hither; since that thy sight, which should
> Make our eyes flow with joy, hearts dance with comforts
> Constrains them weep and shake with fear and sorrow,
> Making the mother, wife, and child, to see
> The son, the husband, and the father, tearing
> His country's bowels out.[34]

Volumnia emotionally blackmails her son when she shows him that as his mother, her role is supposed to be to support him. However, her role as a patrician Roman woman entails her loyalty to her country. Showing no sympathy to how Rome treated her son, Volumnia refuses to admit that Rome might be partly at fault for the unfortunate situation of hers as she rather puts all the blame on her son. Volumnia's speech also indicated that because of their gender, the women of Coriolanus' family did not have any way to alter the unfortunate situation.

Volumnia continues escalating her argument. Having spoken for Coriolanus' family, Volumnia moves to remind Coriolanus of the mother-son relationship they share:

> There is no man in the world
> More bound to's mother, yet here he lets me prate
> Like one i' the stocks. – Thou hast never in thy life

[33] Knowles, 37
[34] Shakespeare, *Coriolanus,* 5.3.96-104

> Show'd thy dear mother any courtesy,
> When she (poor hen), fond of no second brood,
> Has cluck'd thee to the wars, and safely home
> Loaden with honour.[35]

Volumnia manipulates facts to suit her narrative – not unlike when she urged Coriolanus to do at the marketplace. She reminds him of his presumed loyalty to her, who has always supposedly loved him above everyone. Moreover, Volumnia again emphasises that Coriolanus has achieved his glory thanks to her, which makes the improperness of this situation even more striking. Volumnia accuses Coriolanus of taking away her role as a mother: "That thou restrain'st from me the duty which / To a mother's part belongs."[36] As Volumnia's role as a mother was taken away from her, she has no son: "This fellow had a Volscian to his mother."[37] The disinheritance finally does the trick and Martius abandons his mission. Once again, Volumnia's role in the play proved to be that one of the strongest character who can get what she wants via argumentation. However, the strength of her character does not indicate anything about the morality of her position. As Coriolanus foreshadows:

> You have won a happy victory to Rome;
> But for your son – believe it, O, believe it!-
> Most dangerously you have with him prevail'd,
> if not most mortal to him.[38]

Volumnia saved Rome on the expense of her son's life. As Volumnia indicated before, she was in a position when her loyalty to her son clashed with her loyalty to her country. Volumnia could not win as she could not get both. As we know, Coriolanus was right – he was killed shortly afterwards for his betrayal of the Volsces. As Volumnia's role in the play

[35] Shakespeare, *Coriolanus,* 5.3.159-167
[36] Shakespeare, *Coriolanus,* 5.3.167-168
[37] Shakespeare, *Coriolanus,* 5.3.178
[38] Shakespeare, *Coriolanus,* 5.3.186-189

is crucial, and therefore we have always been made aware of her view on events, it is striking that her view on what she achieved by persuading Coriolanus is never made known.

Volumnia is undoubtedly one of the main characters in the play, which makes it so astonishing that after her appeal to Coriolanus, she has no further lines. It is genius, really, as a plot device, not to give Volumnia any lines after Coriolanus exclaims:

> Ladies, you deserve
> To have a temple built you. All the swords
> In Italy, and her confederate arms,
> Could not have made this peace.[39]

We are made aware that Volumnia deterred her son's attack, and that she should be celebrated in Rome as a hero because she achieved a win that no one but her could have accomplished. Volumnia always seemed to have wanted to achieve great things, and because that opportunity was denied to her because of her gender, she fulfilled that desire via her son. By the end of the play, Volumnia finds herself in a position even she had not anticipated: she is hailed by all Rome as the hero of the city. She does not achieve this fame via her son, but earns it herself. Nonetheless, the very short scene of Act V, Scene 5, in which Volumnia, Virgilia, and Valeria triumphally enter Rome, is suspiciously devoid of any line of Volumnia's. As one senator shouts "Behold our patroness, the life of Rome!"[40] and all the onlookers cry "Welcome, ladies, welcome,"[41] we would expect Volumnia to revel in the attention. However, "Volumnia's last appearance in Shakespeare's Coriolanus is a brief and silent one,"[42] very much unlike the Volumnia we got to know in the play. Is Volumnia joyful or mournful? It is left for a director of any staging to decide. Therefore, we are not told what Volumnia thought about saving Rome at the expense of her son's life. Did she regret it? The omission of Volumnia's feelings in the conclusion of the play is what renders Volumnia a

[39] Shakespeare, *Coriolanus,* 5.3.207-210
[40] Shakespeare, *Coriolanus,* 5.5.1
[41] Shakespeare, *Coriolanus,* 5.5.7
[42] Luckyj, 327

truly complex, Shakespearian heroine whose role in the play – whether she is a power-hungry, ladder-climbing opportunist or rather a person who realised that her actions led to the death of her son – remains on the director, or the reader, to decide.

3.2. Virgilia and Valeria

The role of the other ladies in the play is small. It is Volumnia who usually does the talking and has the authority to begin or end any conversation. While Volumnia is a complex character, whose role is to drive the play's action and we are left ambiguous as to how much we are supposed to dislike her, Virgilia is her polar opposite. As Luckyj notes, "two women who are utterly polarized - the gentle, "feminine" Virgilia and the powerful, "masculine" Volumnia."[43] The wife of Coriolanus, Virgilia is domestic, passive, and tame and more importantly, she chooses to be this way. Her role is straight-forward: she is fully confined into the domestic sphere and her job is to support her husband and raise their son. Within the play, she functions as a contrast to Volumnia and her presence during Volumnia's final appeal to Coriolanus gives Volumnia more place for argumentation. Valeria, a friend, of Virgilia, is a character similar to Virgilia, but less miserable, who acts as her confidant.

We first meet Virgilia in conversation with Volumnia. Both women are sewing in their house. While Volumnia is delivering monologues, Virgilia acts as a person moving the argument forward, mimicking the role of those asking questions in philosophical texts of the Greek philosophers. Virgilia suggests, but does not insist on, a counter-argument or prompts Volumnia, who then continues to expand on her point. Virgilia never actively engages in conversation. When Virgilia expresses hope for her husband to have "no blood"[44] on himself,

[43] Luckyj, 330
[44] Shakespeare, *Coriolanus,* 1.3.38

Volumnia gets a chance to explain her view on the honour men draw from being injured in a battle. Virgilia's role is someone to whom Volumnia can vent her ideas that she might be unable to explicitly express in the presence of men. She is passive, and quiet, which provides Volumnia with a lot of space for expressing herself and the audience with the possibility to understand Volumnia's personality.

Virgilia does not only fall into the domestic sphere; unlike all the other female characters which were analysed so far in both plays, Virgilia is happy there. In fact, Virgilia decided that she would not leave the house until her husband returns: "I'll not over the threshold till my lord return from the wars."[45] Even when both Volumnia and Valeria urge her to go out, Virgilia refuses, in spite of Valeria's suggestion, to visit a sick female friend when Valeria asks her: "I must have you play the idle huswife with me this afternoon."[46] Valeria is not asking Virgilia to be rebellious by any chance, but Virgilia is depicted as revelling in her misery, as finally Volumnia and Valeria agree that in Virgilia's current state, she would "disease our better mirth"[47] and Valeria leaves. Even though Virgilia seems to be the model wife, her behaviour in the first scene comes across as slightly unreasonable, especially when we later learn from Coriolanus that Valeria is "The noble sister of Publicula, / The moon of Rome, chaste as the icicle."[48] Considering the good reputation that Valeria enjoys, Virgilia's insistence on staying at home comes across as unreasonable and too passive.

Virgilia is depicted as very emotional. Gray calls Virgilia a "sufferer from the acts of others"[49] and indeed, all Virgilia does in the play is reacting to the terrible things happening around her. When Coriolanus is banished, and Volumnia asks him practical questions, such

[45] Shakespeare, *Coriolanus,* 1.3.76
[46] Shakespeare, *Coriolanus,* 1.3.70
[47] Shakespeare, *Coriolanus,* 1.3.104
[48] Shakespeare, *Coriolanus,* 5.3.65-66
[49] Gray, 130

as where he intends to go, Virgilia has but two lines which consist entirely of emotional outbursts: "O heavens! O heavens!"[50] and "O the gods."[51] Her role is limited to providing emotions to the play full of characters whose main attributes centre around acting tough and austere. Virgilia's role in the pleading to Coriolanus is mainly to be used in an argument by Volumnia who instructs Virgilia: "Daughter, speak you: / He cares not for your weeping."[52] Through Volumnia, we learn that Virgilia's role in the scene is again to provide emotions as she has been weeping throughout. Additionally, even though Volumnia instructs Virgilia to speak, she never gives her an opportunity to do so. The only time that Virgilia actually speaks in this scene, apart from greeting Coriolanus, is when she shows Coriolanus his son in an attempt to move him. Right before this moment, Volumnia was chiding Coriolanus that he was betraying her, "thy mother's womb / that brought thee to this world."[53] Virgilia follows up on that argument by showing the product of her womb – their son: "Ay, and mine, / That brought you forth this boy to keep your name / Living to time."[54] Even Virgilia's only argument firmly situates her within the domestic sphere, in which she assigns herself the role of the only one via whom Coriolanus can continue his bloodline so his name can live forever.

Women in *Coriolanus,* albeit only three, portray three very different female characters, confirming assertions made in chapter one that the role of women in Shakespeare's Roman tragedies cannot be overgeneralised. Each woman in *Coriolanus* has a different role. Virgilia is the distressed wife whose role is to represent a domestic woman, passive to a fault, who makes the emotional stakes of the play higher and together with her son, they are the only characters who inspire Coriolanus to be more human. Valeria inhabits the role of a well-natured lady who shows that a woman can be both: chaste and yet not just

[50] Shakespeare, *Coriolanus,* 4.1.12
[51] Shakespeare, *Coriolanus,* 4.1.39
[52] Shakespeare, *Coriolanus,* 5.3.156-157
[53] Shakespeare, *Coriolanus,* 5.3.124-125
[54] Shakespeare, *Coriolanus,* 5.3.126-128

passive. Volumnia is a three-dimensional character with a clear goal for which she strives throughout the play. When by the end of the play Volumnia not only achieves the goal of being celebrated and respected but exceeds it by not only reaching that ambition via her son but by herself, she pays for it as it causes the death of her only son. Volumnia is designed as a morally grey character whose level of villainess can be decided by a mere smile or frown of the actress portraying her during her final scene. Considering that Volumnia raised Coriolanus to be perhaps one of the least complex of Shakespeare's protagonists, Volumnia's role seems to be similar to the one of Brutus in *Julius Caesar* in the sense that even though the tragedy is called *Julius Caesar*, we witness mainly Brutus' bad decisions which lead to his tragic fate. Parallelly, *Coriolanus* follows the trajectory constructed by Volumnia; this 'Tragedy of Volumnia' reaches a realistic ending in which the main protagonist paid a price too high for achieving her ambitions.

Chapter 4: *Titus Andronicus*

Women in *Titus Andronicus* appear to be predecessors of the women in *Coriolanus* to some extent. In *Titus Andronicus*, we have again a manipulative mother and a contrasting, younger, chaste woman. Rogener notes: "Like *Coriolanus'* Volumnia, *Titus'* Tamora exploits her maternity to political ends."[1] Even though their roles may seem similar, Tamora and Lavinia are vastly different characters from Volumnia and Virgilia. While Tamora and Lavinia, i.e., the "female characters are here made to serve the construction of Titus-patriarch, tragic hero, and, from our vantage point, central consciousness,"[2] Volumnia and Virgilia had no such roles as Volumnia had her own purpose and Virgilia provided rather the emotional anchor of the play than serving to characterise anyone else. Unlike all the other plays which find their source material in Plutarch, "*Titus Andronicus* has no direct sources."[3] An early play, *Titus Andronicus* is certainly unique within the Shakespearian canon. The tremendous use of violence, most of it enacted on its female characters, has been shocking audiences since the play's first staging.

Even though the play may seem less intellectual and more crude than other Shakespeare's plays, *Titus Andronicus* is complex in its own way and despite the story of Titus' seemingly plain revenge tragedy's drama, both Lavinia and Tamora, especially the Queen of Goths, complicate the story. As Kahn notes, *Titus Andronicus* is "a serious critique of Roman ideology, institutions, and mores."[4] If *Titus Andronicus* is a critique of Rome, it

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[1] Lauren J. Rogener, "Womb Rhetoric: The Martial Maternity of Volumnia, Tamora, and Elizabeth I," in *The Palgrave Handbook of Shakespeare's Queens* ed. Kavita Mudan Finn and Valerie Schutte (New York: Springen International Publishing, 2018), ProQuest https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/cuni/detail.action?docID=5471182, accessed 16 Mar 2022, 131

[2] Douglas E. Green, "Interpreting 'Her Martyr'd Signs': Gender and Tragedy in Titus Andronicus," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 40, no. 3 (1989): 317–26, JSTOR https://doi.org/10.2307/2870726, accessed 18 Mar 2022, 319

[3] Dobson, 996

[4] Kahn, 39

is inferred that the barbarous characters should not be taken as pure evil. Therefore, assertions such as Green's who describes the women as "Lavinia and Tamora, as utter victim and consummate avenger"[5] or Carney's who calls Tamora "a monstrous tragic queen"[6] should be taken with a grain of salt. In my analysis, I first focus on Lavinia and her object-like role within the play. Then I turn my attention to Tamora and examine her moral descent. I also dedicate a short mention to the nurse, who as an attendant to Tamora, is so far the first female character encountered in these Roman tragedies not of a noble status but rather a labourer.

4.1. Lavinia

Lavinia's story arch, because story arch seems more appropriate to describe what happens to Lavinia in the play rather than a character arch, is tragic and can be divided into three sections. Lavinia starts off as a bargaining tool, then she is defiled and her fate drives her father mad with despair, and following her identification of her rapists, she is a pawn in her father and uncle's revenge plan. Out of all the women analysed in this thesis, Lavinia is the most passive character and the only one who actually fits the over-simplified assertions discussed in chapter one about the passive, domestic roles of women in Shakespeare's Roman tragedies.

We first encounter Lavinia when she welcomes her father back in Rome: "My noble lord and father, live in fame!" [...] / And at thy feet I kneel, with tears of joy."[7] As was discussed before in relation to Volumnia, it was customary for Roman women to kneel unless

[5] Green, 319
[6] Jo Eldridge Carney, "'I'll Find a Day to Massacre Them All': Tamora in 'Titus Andronicus' and Catherine de Médicis," *Comparative Drama* 48, no. 4 (2014): 415–35, JSTOR http://www.jstor.org/stable/24615320, accessed 16 Mar 2022, 432
[7] Shakespeare, *Titus Andronicus,* 1.2.95,98

they were mothers who should not kneel to their children. Nevertheless, Lavinia is from the beginning introduced as a model daughter who is modest, obedient, and chaste. Titus is overjoyed at the sight of his daughter whom he has presumably not seen for ten years: "Lavinia, live; outlive thy father's days, / And fame's eternal date, for virtue's praise!"[8] Lavinia's role in the play is firmly established by this short exchange. Lavinia is an object rather than a person, valuable for its virtue. The foreshadowing of Titus also sets up Lavinia's role in the play – Lavinia is valuable only as long as her virginity and reputation remain intact. The moment Lavinia is ravished, Titus seems to magically abandon his wish for Lavinia to outlive her father's days and kills her himself. As Kahn notes, "For Titus, Lavinia's worth resides in her exchange value as a virgin daughter."[9] Even his sorrow is internal – Titus' pain comes not from the pain that his daughter experiences, but rather its secondary effect it has on his honour, as demonstrated by his exclamation: "Die, die, Lavinia, and thy shame with thee; / And with thy shame thy father's sorrow die!"[10] Clearly, Lavinia does not hold any importance as a person but only as and object.

The object-like treatment is underscored in Lavinia's second scene in which she is passed in between Saturninus, Bassianus, and her male relatives. Saturninus decided to marry Lavinia to advance her male relatives' standing: "Titus, to advance / Thy name and honourable family, / Lavinia will I make my emperess."[11] Titus also does not see Lavinia as particularly relevant to this exchange as he appreciates the honour that Saturninus shows to him: "I hold me highly honour'd of your grace."[12] Lavinia is not considered – she is the object of the exchange which brings her male relatives honour and her future husband a loyal supporter. Hilský writes:

[8] Shakespeare, *Titus Andronicus,* 1.2.104-105
[9] Kahn, 41
[10] Shakespeare, *Titus Andronicus,* 5.3.
[11] Shakespeare, *Titus Andronicus,* 1.2.175-177
[12] Shakespeare, *Titus Andronicus,* 1.2.183

> Arranged weddings and marriages of convenience were not such an ordinary occurrence as we might have thought in Shakespeare's England. Mostly they occurred in aristocratic families. Romantic love existed in Shakespeare's England, but it was more common in lower social classes.[13]

Therefore, it might not be too bold to assume that Lavinia's role as an exchange value is a feature which would have been noted even in early modern England. As discussed in chapter one and explained by Hilský, it was not uncommon for an aristocratic daughter to be married off, however, as we can note in many of Shakespeare's comedies or even in a tragedy such as *Romeo and Juliet*, the daughter would usually have at least something to say about her change of marital status. Therefore, the lack of Lavinia's personality is limited to her; it is not a feature we could excuse as customary for the age nor can we observe it in other Shakespeare's plays, certainly not in those discussed in this thesis.

The role of Lavinia in *Titus Andronicus* is not merely to be passed between men, but she also serves as an object to be saved. Willbern explains: "the fantasy of rescuing a woman from various kinds of attack (invasion, rape) is central to the action of *Titus Andronicus*."[14] It is in the 'rescue' of Lavinia that Titus kills his own son, and it is to rescue their mother that Demetrius and Chiron want to kill their half-brother. However, I would argue that the fantasy of rescuing a woman remains truly just a fantasy in the minds of the male characters because what they actually repeatedly do in the play is rather than 'rescuing' a woman is salvaging their family's reputation. The woman does not need to be rescued as long as their reputation remains intact. In fact, the woman can even be killed if it means restoration of the lost reputation, as was the case with Lavinia.

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[13] Martin Hilský, *Shakespearova Anglie: Portrét doby* (Praha: Academia, 2020), 377. Translated by me from: "Dohodnuté svatby a sňatky z rozumu nebyly v Shakespearově Anglii tak obvyklým jevem, jak se často má za to, a docházelo k nim především v aristokratických rodinách. Romantická láska v Shakespearově Anglii existovala, ale byla častějším jevem v nižších společenských třídách."

[14] David Willbern, "Rape and Revenge in 'Titus Andronicus,'" *English Literary Renaissance* 8, no. 2 (1978): 159–82, JSTOR http://www.jstor.org/stable/43446900, accessed 15 Mar 2022, 163

The only scene is which Lavinia has some significant lines and shows a bit of personality is her encounter with Tamora and her sons just before her rape. Lavinia was walking around with Bassianus during the hunt when they came across Tamora and Aaron. As was mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, Shakespeare complicates the story. The fact that Lavinia is a good daughter, and a victim, does not mean that she comes across as a good person. Lavinia is, similarly to Volumnia, obsessed with duty and honour though in a completely different way. Such an obsession does not necessarily translate well with the audience, no matter if a modern or early modern one, especially if it comes at the price of one's humanity. When Bassianus and Lavinia come across Tamora and Aaron in a lonely part of the forest, they mock and explicitly point to Tamora's infidelity and threaten to tell on them to the emperor. In one of the most witty speeches of play, Lavinia says:

> Under your patience, gentle empress,
> 'Tis thought you have a goodly gift in horning;
> And to be doubted that your Moor and you
> Are singled forth to try experiments.
> Jove shield your husband from his hounds today;
> 'Tis pity they should take him for a stag.[15]

Lavinia accuses Tamora of having a great talent of making a cuckhold of her husband by engaging in strange sexual practices with Aaron and concludes her speech by a clever word play on the imagery of the ongoing hunt and the stag that Tamora made from Saturninus. Followingly, Lavinia tells Bassianus "And let her joy her raven-coloured love; / This valley fits the purpose passing well."[16] As it would be out of Lavinia's character to demonstrate some agency of her own, it is Bassianus to say: "The king my brother shall have note of this."[17] Lavinia and Bassianus explicitly threaten Tamora, and, as discussed in chapter one,

[15] Shakespeare, *Titus Andronicus,* 2.3.65-70
[16] Shakespeare, *Titus Andronicus,* 2.3.83-84
[17] Shakespeare, *Titus Andronicus,* 2.3.85

such a threat of accusing woman of infidelity, of being a "whore," implies danger not only to the woman's reputation, but to her life as well.

The issue that complicates the dichotomous interpretation of the play's heroines is Lavinia's lack of empathy in this scene. The scene that follows, in which Tamora, Demetrius and Chiron discuss how they are going to rape and maim Lavinia, firmly establishes the play's villains by making them commit such inexcusable, horrid deeds. In that following scene, Lavinia accuses Tamora of "No grace? no womanhood?"[18] Without attempting to compare the two situations, as they are clearly incomparable, Lavinia seems to lack precisely that kind of womanly sympathy which she later rightfully accuses Tamora of lacking. It is essential to reiterate that in *Titus Andronicus*, Shakespeare was criticising Roman society. Keeping that in mind, the character of Tamora started off as the protagonist of a revenge tragedy, rather than Titus. As Kahn notes: "The play's first scene locates the initiating mechanism of the revenge play not in an injury done to the hero through his kin as in *The Spanish Tragedy* or *Hamlet,* but in the hero's injury to a mother."[19] Tamora was captured, paraded through Rome, her oldest son killed in front of her for religious purposes, and married off to the emperor of the state which destroyed hers. Tamora did plan a terrible revenge to enact on Titus' family, but Lavinia did not know that at that point. Therefore, by Lavinia's upholding of the patriarchal order which deems woman's unfaithfulness unacceptable, by refusing to empathise with Tamora's situation, Lavinia ceases to be such a shallow character and becomes more layered. Even though we might interpret this characteristic as a flaw, it is the only time in the play when Lavinia engages in an actual dialogue, and therefore her role in the play is enriched by this short scene in which Lavinia becomes, even if just for a while, a person rather than an object.

[18] Shakespeare, *Titus Andronicus,* 2.3.182
[19] Kahn, 44

Lavinia retains some of her wit when she pleads with Demetrius and Chiron not to be raped. "In conformity with the usual decorum, the rape of Lavinia is not enacted onstage."[20] In the build-up to the rape, however, Lavinia uses clever metaphors to insult Tamora's sons by indicating that they are illegitimate. "The raven doth not hatch a lark,"[21] Lavinia retorts, inferring that Chiron cannot be Aaron's child. However, Lavinia continues: "Some say that ravens foster forlorn children,"[22] indicating that Chiron lacks a father, and therefore his father must have been another of Tamora's lovers. After this witty exchange, Lavinia pleads with Tamora by reminding her that Titus could have killed her, but he did not. Tamora is not persuaded, telling Lavinia that instead, Titus killed her son. Following these interactions, Lavinia ceases to be a person again and becomes a personification of values: "O! keep me from their worse than killing lust, / And tumble me into some loathsome pit, / Where never man's eye may behold my body."[23] For Lavinia, preserving her honour becomes the only thing that matters. When it fails and Lavinia is raped, her role in the play is to become the mechanism which hands the role of the enactor of the revenge tragedy from Tamora to Titus: "The aftermath of the unrelenting deconstruction of Roman values leaves Titus stranded in a nightmare world, where Lavinia's body becomes his new 'map of woe' and her speechless complaint a new alphabet."[24] After her rape, Lavinia lost any value she had as a person, and therefore is treated as a walking dead bringing shame and sorrow to her family for the rest of the play.

Lavinia's role in the rest of the play is central; however, she is not active, she is just an object that needs to be avenged. As Kahn explains, "This sophisticated awareness of the politics of textuality is interwoven with the play's central concern: the politics of sexuality.

[20] Kahn, 45
[21] Shakespeare, *Titus Andronicus,* 2.3.149
[22] Shakespeare, *Titus Andronicus,* 2.3.153
[23] Shakespeare, *Titus Andronicus,* 2.3.176-178
[24] Dobson, 998

And in the schematically patriarchal world of *Titus,* sexuality is a family matter that only the father can deal with."[25] The extent to which Lavinia's virginity matters to her father, her uncle and herself, is absurd. With her hands and tongue cut out, Marcus comments that Lavinia blushes, and therefore she must have been raped. Later, when Lavinia writes Demetrius and Chiron's names in the sand, even that act was suggested to her by her uncle:

> In the stage action so suggestive of woman's relation to patriarchal language and power, Lavinia follows her uncle's guidance, takes a staff in her mouth, and scratches in the earth the names of the crime and the criminals. Then, instead of inciting her kinsmen to revenge, she becomes part of the ritual her uncle leads.[26]

Lavinia's role is to be a pawn in patriarchal games. Her suffering is secondary, as Titus makes clear: "Both her sweet hands, her tongue, and that more dear / Than hands or tongue, her spotless chastity."[27] "The mutilations are an afterthought, a corollary to the main crime."[28] Lavinia has no lines before her murder and we do not know what feelings she had on that matter. Titus sacrifices his only daughter, whom he claimed to love but rather saw as an investment, to satisfy patriarchal society for whom a spoilt daughter was seen as a shame. When Lucius decided to bury Titus and Lavinia together, we understand that Lavinia's role in the play was truly just an object of Titus' revenge as he is not seen as an offender against her by her brother.

4.2. Tamora and The Nurse

Tamora is a much more active and unspoken character than Lavinia. Even though she often sends her sons to do her bidding, Tamora determines her own destiny. Tamora is

[25] Kahn, 40
[26] Kahn, 50
[27] Shakespeare, *Titus Andronicus,* 5.2.176-177
[28] Kahn, 45

also by far the most villainous of all the characters examined in this thesis. In fact, Tamora is the only actual villain, considering that Volumnia falls into that category disputably. My examination of Tamora focuses on two of Tamora's roles in the play: her role as a mother and her role as a seductress. By the end of this chapter, I also mention the nurse, Tamora's servant, and discuss her role in the play in relation to Tamora and otherwise.

Tamora's introduces herself to the audience as a mother: "A mother's tears in passion for her son."[29] Tamora enters the play as a victim rather than a villain. Having been captured by the Romans, Tamora indicates the pointless murder of her oldest son: "But must my sons be slaughter'd in the streets / For valiant doings in their country's cause?"[30] Tamora indicates the hypocrisy of the Romans: they celebrate those willing to die for Rome but do not respect those expressing the same valiantness for their countries. The murder of Alarbus is pointless, and when Tamora calls it "cruel, irreligious piety!"[31] it is difficult to disagree with her. In Tamora's first scene, her role is to depict what many critics agree to be one of the main themes of the play: the criticism of the Roman society and its values.

From her hopeless situation at the beginning, Tamora quickly climbs up on the social ladder when Saturninus chooses her to become his wife, the empress. The way that Tamora becomes an empress seems unplanned; as Saturninus did not want Lavinia anymore, Tamora was the only other woman standing around. Even Saturninus says that it was his "sudden choice."[32] However, Saturninus showed Tamora a surprising mercy just before Lavinia was taken away from him, and he also called Tamora a "fair queen."[33] Considering the brutality of this Rome of Shakespeare's, the mercy that Saturninus was about to show Tamora is unusual. Logan claims that "Saturninus embraces Tamora, not because of her apparent

[29] Shakespeare, *Titus Andronicus,* 1.2.43
[30] Shakespeare, *Titus Andronicus,* 1.2.49-50
[31] Shakespeare, *Titus Andronicus,* 1.2.67
[32] Shakespeare, *Titus Andronicus,* 1.2.255
[33] Shakespeare, *Titus Andronicus,* 1.2.200

virtue, but because of her physical attractiveness."[34] Tamora's reply to Saturninus combines both her motherly and seductress' rhetoric: "She will a handmaid be to his desires, / A loving nurse, a mother to his youth."[35] Tamora fully embraces these two roles of hers and determines to achieve vengeance.

The newly-wed spouses, Tamora and Saturninus, are strangely enough bound by the same desire for revenge on the house of Titus Andronicus. As Saturninus has just become an emperor while Tamora has experience in ruling, she becomes a sort of predecessor of Lady Macbeth. Tamora influences Saturninus' decisions and wraps him around her little finger:

> You are but newly planted in your throne;
> Lest then the people, and patricians too,
> Upon a just survey, take Titus' part,
> And so supplant you for ingratitude,
> Which Rome reputes to be a heinous sin.[36]

Tamora explains to Saturninus that they cannot have revenge on Titus now, as the people would turn against them. Titus has just returned from ten-years-long conquests in which he won Rome many battles; if Saturninus acted against him, people would not appreciate it. Tamora reminds of Lady Macbeth in this scene, though because of the supposed age difference, Tamora treats Saturninus almost maternally. Rogener notes: "Tamora exhibits a drive that is distinctly political, and sets about achieving her aims in a way that is explicitly maternal."[37] In a play in which maternal figures are largely absent, Tamora uses her maternal powers to influence Saturninus.

In the same speech, Tamora also establishes her role as the enactor of the revenge tragedy in the first part of the play. Tamora vows to destroy Titus and his family:

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[34] Sandra Logan, *Shakespeare's Foreign Queens : Drama, Politics, and the Enemy Within* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), ProQuest https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/cuni/detail.action?docID=5391871, accessed 10 Mar 2022, 172
[35] Shakespeare, *Titus Andronicus,* 1.2.268-269
[36] Shakespeare, *Titus Andronicus,* 2.1.381-385
[37] Rogener, 132

I'll find a day to massacre them all,
And raze their faction and their family,
The cruel father, and his traitorous sons,
To whom I sued for my dear son's life;
And make them know what 'tis to let a queen
Kneel in the streets and beg for grace in vain.[38]

Tamora explains her reasons for needing vengeance. Titus robbed her of her son and humiliated her. The way that Tamora describes the improperness of a queen like herself forced into such a position foreshadows Cleopatra and her pride and unwillingness to have something like this done to her by Octavianus.

Tamora's role is altered when she instructs her sons to rape Lavinia. Even though she somehow fulfils her vengeance, we learn that the revenge tragedy is not about Tamora's revenge, but Titus' revenge for injustices that keep happening to him throughout the play. As Titus takes the role of an avenger, Tamora finds herself the villain. Tamora's descent into evilness is marked by two motivations: the motivation to save herself and the motivation to avenge Alarbus. Lavinia threatened to expose Tamora's love affair with Aaron, and therefore Tamora had to get rid of her if she wanted to save her life. Tamora expresses her hatred for Rome: "Here never shines the sun; here nothing breeds,"[39] and in the same speech blames Lavinia's accusation on her prejudice towards her because she is not a Roman: "And then they call'd me foul adulteress, / Lascivious Goth, and all the bitterest terms."[40] When Lavinia confuses Chiron with her speech about how both brothers are illegitimate sons from Tamora's previous lovers and raised by Aaron, Tamora, unlike her sons, understands her implications very well, which is why she urges: "I know not what it means; away with her."[41] Therefore, one of the reasons why Tamora becomes the villain is self-preservation. As a textbook villain, Tamora is willing to commit heinous crimes in order to save herself.

[38] Shakespeare, *Titus Andronicus,* 2.1.387-392
[39] Shakespeare, *Titus Andronicus,* 2.3.96
[40] Shakespeare, *Titus Andronicus,* 2.3.109-110
[41] Shakespeare, *Titus Andronicus,* 2.3.157

The second reason for Tamora's villainess is her thirst for revenge. When Aaron tells her his plan to have Lavinia raped as a revenge on Titus, Tamora exclaims: "Ah, my sweet Moor, sweeter to me than life!"[42] Clearly, Tamora appreciates the plan for revenge even before Lavinia threatened her. Later, Tamora uses a similar argumentation that won Volumnia's case in *Coriolanus*: she appeals to her sons that if they do not enact revenge for her, she will no longer consider them her sons: "Revenge it, as you love your mother's life, / Or be ye not henceforth call'd my children."[43] Tamora remembers how Titus wronged her:

> I pour'd forth tears in vain,
> To save your brother from the sacrifice;
> But fierce Andronicus would not relent.
> Therefore, away with her, and use her as you will,:
> The worse to her, the better lov'd of me.[44]

Tamora wants Titus to feel how she felt and in an eye-for-an-eye attitude, she destroys Lavinia the way he destroyed Alarbus. "Thus Tamora gets back at Titus through his daughter by mocking and despoiling his investment in her."[45] As Tamora seals Lavinia's terrible fate, her transformation into the villain of the piece is complete.

The last episode to mention is when the nurse brings Aaron his and Tamora's baby. This scene is important because it problematises Tamora's character and introduces another female character. So far, Tamora has been claiming that many of her actions were motivated by being a mother. However, when she has an illegitimate son with Aaron, she wants Aaron to kill the child so that Tamora can save herself: "Aaron, it must [die]: the mother wills it so."[46] Even though Tamora has a reason why she cannot keep the baby, as Demetrius says, "By this our mother is for ever sham'd,"[47] and as was mentioned in chapter one, woman's shame usually also meant her financial and social descent that could easily lead to her death,

[42] Shakespeare, *Titus Andronicus,* 2.3.51
[43] Shakespeare, *Titus Andronicus,* 2.3.114-115
[44] Shakespeare, *Titus Andronicus,* 2.3.163-167
[45] Kahn, 41
[46] Shakespeare, *Titus Andronicus,* 4.3.83
[47] Shakespeare, *Titus Andronicus,* 4.3.114

her dismissal contrasts hugely with Aaron's willingness to save the baby no matter the costs. Therefore, Tamora's insistence of the need to revenge her oldest son appears to be more connected with the humiliation it brought her rather than motherly love.

The role of the nurse is small and it is mainly to add characterisation to Aaron. When Aaron kills the nurse in cold blood, we are reminded of his evil nature in case we forgot it because on his tender treatment of the child. What is noteworthy is Aaron's interaction with the nurse as an interaction between two oppressed people – the nurse because of her gender, Aaron because of his skin colour. Stanton says: "If the Nurse has disparaged his and his son's color and regards it as needing extermination, he will revenge himself by disparaging her sexual status, and, after she has been reduced to being a whore, he saves the child and kills her."[48] The nurse conscribes to seeing the child as less worthy because of his colour; she even calls him "a devil."[49] Aaron, parallelly, has no problem with using the nurse's gender to get back at her. The interaction between the nurse and Aaron is uncomfortable as it includes two oppressed people insulting each other based on the reasons for their oppression.

Women in *Titus Andronicus* depict problematic characters. Lavinia, a character who lacks personality for most of the play, exists mainly as a motivation for her father's behaviour. Her obedience comes across as too extreme, strongly contrasting with characters such as Juliet in *Romeo and Juliet* who, despite their goodness, keep agency. Tamora's role in the play is double: at first, she is the initiator of the revenge tragedy. Afterwards, she is the main villain whose death is celebrated at the end of the play.

[48] Kay Stanton, ""Made to write 'whore' upon?": Male and Female Use of the Word "Whore" in Shakespeare's Canon," in *A Feminist Companion to Shakespeare*, ed. Dympna Callaghan, 103
[49] Shakespeare, *Titus Andronicus,* 4.2.66

Chapter 5: *Antony and Cleopatra*

The last in the investigation of heroines in Shakespeare's Roman plays is the only play which has the heroine's name in the title: *Antony and Cleopatra.* The longest of the plays, it also devotes most lines to the female characters. *Antony and Cleopatra* contains the most female characters from the Roman plays as we have Cleopatra, Octavia, Charmian, and Iras. It is the eponymous heroine who confused critics since the publication of the play. Some critics were so at loss trying to understand Cleopatra, that they claimed her character corrupts the quality of the play, "holding that since her [Cleopatra's] self-expression is psychologically inconsistent, the resolution of the play is unrealistic and confusing."[1] It is one thing to criticise Cleopatra as a controversial female character, but drawing conclusions about the play as a whole because of that impression seems rather excessive.

Cleopatra has an interesting critical and stage history. To examine it is well beyond the scope of this thesis, however, a very brief overview contributes greatly to a study focused on Cleopatra's role within the play. Woodbridge conducted innovative research focused on male sexist criticism of Cleopatra in 1960s, in which she claims:

> I do not think it would be going too far to suggest that many male critics feel personally threatened by Cleopatra and what she represents to them. In Cleopatra's case, critical attitudes go beyond the usual condescension toward female characters or the usual willingness to give critical approval only to female characters who are chaste, fair, loyal, and modest: critical attitudes toward Cleopatra seem to reveal deep personal fears of aggressive or manipulative women.[2]

[1] Dolora G. Cunningham, "The Characterization of Shakespeare's Cleopatra," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 6, no. 1 (1955): 9–17, JSTOR https://doi.org/10.2307/2866047, accessed 20 Mar 2022, 9

[2] Linda Woodbridge (née L. T. Fitz, the name under which she published this essay),"Egyptian Queens and Male Reviewers: Sexist Attitudes in *Antony and Cleopatra* Criticism," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 28, no. 3 (1977): 297–316, JSTOR https://doi.org/10.2307/2869080, accessed 20 Mar 2022, 298

A strong statement, however, in light of Woodbridge's research it seems particularly important for any study of Cleopatra to use rather very recent criticism which might be devoid of such assertions. Nevertheless, *Antony and Cleopatra* had an interesting history because of Cleopatra. The play was misunderstood and not very popular after Shakespeare's death. John Dryden's *All for Love; or, the World Well Lost,* an imitation of Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*, was preferred. Rackin explains: "His [Dryden's] play supplanted Shakespeare's throughout the Restoration and eighteenth century. As such, it participated in the codification of the gendered morality of private life that was to be a central tenet of modern Western belief."[3] In regard to Cleopatra's characterisation, Rackin adds: "Even at the end of the seventeenth century [...] [Dryden] found it necessary to transform Shakespeare's dangerously powerful and supremely artful heroine into a stereotype of artless feminine helplessness."[4] It was only after Shakespeare, when the play was changed, that Cleopatra was made less complex and more fetishized: "Subsequent 19th-century critics largely concentrated on the character of Cleopatra, to whom even those who regarded the play as a simple moral warning against dissipation responded vigorously."[5] However, not all of that criticism was sexist or negative. Swinburne wrote: "in Cleopatra we found the incarnate sex, the woman everlasting."[6] Though not negative, not very nuanced either.

Only recently, pioneered by Woodridge, has Cleopatra been granted more nuanced analyses by feminist critics: "In later 20th-century criticism the play has been of particular importance to feminist critics interested in Shakespeare's representations of sexual difference."[7] Furthermore, Cleopatra fascinated poststructuralist feminists who even used her in order to express their arguments, such as when Hélène Cixous formulates her

[3] Rackin, 119
[4] Rackin, 119
[5] Dobson, 776-777
[6] Algernon Charles Swinburne, *A Study of Shakespeare* ed. Edmund Gosse, Project Gutenberg 2005: https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/16412, accessed 21 Mar 2022, page numbers not available
[7] Dobson, 777

triumphant femininity on Cleopatra: "the intelligence, the strength of Cleopatra appear particularly in the work she accomplishes – a work of love – on the distance, the gap, the separation: she only evokes the gap in order to fill it to overflowing, never tolerating a separation that could harm the lover's body."[8] Clearly, the interpretation of Cleopatra tends to be politicised.

I am interested in the role of Cleopatra within the play and her characterisation which focuses on the two main aspects: Cleopatra's role as the Queen of Egypt and as a lover of Antony, and the incompatibility of these two roles, which, however, does not stem from Cleopatra's gender but rather Antony and Cleopatra's responsibility as the leaders of their nations. By the end of this chapter, I will have also discussed the role of Octavia and briefly commented on Charmian and Iras.

5.1. Cleopatra

As the second most speaking female character in all Shakespeare's plays, Cleopatra is given the space to develop into a complex character. Cleopatra concerns herself with a number of issues; I focus on her views on romantic relationships and the way she approaches her rivals, Cleopatra's role as the Queen of Egypt and her soliloquies, and the relationship between Cleopatra and Antony. The investigation is concluded by an examination of Cleopatra's character after Antony's death as I, unlike some of the mentioned critics, believe that the end of the play illuminates the supposed irregularities in Cleopatra's characterisation.

Much of the criticism of Cleopatra comes from the way Cleopatra treats her rivals in Antony's affection, Fulvia and Octavia. Cleopatra is jealous and often seen berating the other

[8] Hélène Cixous, *La Jeune Née* in Toril Moi's *Sexual Textual Politics* (London: Routledge, 1991), 117

women from which a lot of criticism deduces flaws in her character. As Woodbridge notes: "Cleopatra is seen as the archetypal woman: practicer of feminine wiles, mysterious, childlike, long on passion and short on intelligence – except for a sort of animal cunning."[9] Indeed, Cleopatra is seen criticising Fulvia whom she presumably never met in the first scene of the play: "Else so thy cheek pays shame / When shrill-tongu'd Fulvia scolds."[10] Berating of love rivals makes Cleopatra seem very immature.

The culmination of Cleopatra's jealousy is presented in Act III, Scene 3 when Cleopatra queries the messenger about Octavia's appearance. Cleopatra is told that Octavia is short, low-voiced, old, round faced and really, the messenger would out of fear of Cleopatra say anything to debase Octavia. Cleopatra's exaggeration, which role is clearly comic relief, such as that Shakespeare tends to put into his tragedies, makes Cleopatra seem stupid when she says: "dull of tongue and dwarfish!"[11] Cleopatra overstates the simple fact that Octavia is short. When Cleopatra exclaims on behalf of the messenger: "He's very knowing; / I do perceive't. – There's nothing in her yet. - / This fellow has good judgement,"[12] Cleopatra seems gullible, easily deceived, and shallow. However, Griffith suggests that "Queen Elizabeth, according to Sir James Melville's report, made the same kind of minute inquiries from him, about her rival, the queen of Scots."[13] Taking an inspiration from the relatively recently deceased English monarch would suggest that Cleopatra can be taken seriously. Despite Shakespeare using her character as a comic relief in a few scenes, such as this one or in Act IV, Scene 4 when Cleopatra attempts to dress Antony into his armour, Cleopatra's role as a comic relief does not necessarily indicate any

[9] Woodbridge, 298
[10] Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra,* 1.1.31-31
[11] Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra,* 3.3.18
[12] Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra,* 3.3.27-29
[13] Elizabeth Griffith, *The Morality of Shakespeare's Drama Illustrated* (London: T. Cadell, 1775), Eighteenth Century Collections Online: http://name.umdl.umich.edu/004885264.0001.000, accessed 18 Feb 2022, 467

connection to her gender or slow wit. Therefore, these comic scenes do not diminish the intellectual value of her soliloquies. Similarly to Prince Hal, who engages in a lot of comic moments but nevertheless matures into a great king by the end of *Henry IV, Part 2*, Cleopatra matures with Antony's death. Cleopatra's seriousness as well as silliness do not mean that Cleopatra cannot be understood, rather the scene with the messenger indicates the danger of a ruler surrounding herself/himself with flatterers.

Despite Cleopatra's jealousy, she presents a very level-headed comments on the love triangle that she engages in. It is the love affair with a married man that causes Cleopatra to be called "many near-synonyms for whore."[14] However, Cleopatra is fully aware of the danger of engaging in a love affair with a married man: "Why did he marry Fulvia, and not love her? - / I'll seem the fool I am not."[15] When Fulvia dies and Antony does not seem particularly shaken, Cleopatra remarks:

> O most false love
> Where be the sacred vials thou shouldst fill
> With sorrowful water? Now I see, I see,
> In Fulvia's death how mine receiv'd shall be.[16]

Even though Cleopatra hates Fulvia, these lines prove that she is fully aware of the risks of dating a married man. Cleopatra's understanding that as Antony deceives his wife, he might also be deceiving her, indicates maturity, not naivety. Cleopatra's request to Antony: "I pr'ythee, turn aside and weep for her,"[17] shows that Cleopatra adjusts her level of seriousness based on the situation. Cleopatra's character is versatile, but rather than inferring her inconstancy from that, I argue that as the Queen of Egypt, Cleopatra is used to adjusting her reactions based on the circumstances. As Woodbridge explains, "The persistent idea that Cleopatra cannot be understood [...] owes much to the notion that women in general are

[14] Stanton, 108
[15] Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra,* 1.1.41-42
[16] Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra,* 1.3.63-66
[17] Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra,* 3.3.79

impossible for men to understand."[18] Rejecting this simplistic reading, Cleopatra's character is precisely what the critics were denouncing about her: a realistic character. Most people show a different face when in public and in private, can tame their anger when told sombre news, and mature if stricken by a tragedy. Cleopatra embodies all these points.

Cleopatra's role in the play is also for Shakespeare to provide a commentary on vices and virtues in a ruler. Similarly to Lear, Shakespeare demonstrates the dangers of flattery on Cleopatra's comic relief scene with the messenger. The messenger's first scene also underscores an issue typical for rulers: the tendency to punish commoners at will. When told that Antony got married to Octavia, Cleopatra strikes the messenger down with the words: "The most infectious pestilence upon thee."[19] The motif of a "shooting the messenger" is not uncommon in literature. Cleopatra's outburst criticises this feature in a ruler and depicts a bad quality in Cleopatra that keeps consistently repeating: Cleopatra acts before thinking. However, when given a moment to gather herself, Cleopatra recognises her fault and says: "These hands do lack nobility, that they strike / A meaner than myself; since I myself / Have given myself the cause."[20] Cleopatra is a complex ruler; she succumbs to some of ruler's bad habits but is able to remedy her mistakes as well. Cleopatra demonstrates that a ruler does not have to be only good or bad, but can also be somewhere in between.

Cleopatra's relationship with Antony is central to the play as it tends to be seen as causing both Antony's and Cleopatra's downfall. Their relationship seems toxic – even though the critics have emphasised Cleopatra's Lady Macbeth-like manipulation with Antony, the manipulation is rather mutual. I believe that the tragedy of the relationship of Antony and Cleopatra lies in trying to reconcile the irreconcilable: their positions as the leaders of their respective countries, and lovers. Both Antony and Cleopatra have a lot of

[18] Woodbridge, 315
[19] Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra,* 2.5.61
[20] Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra,* 2.5.83-35

responsibility outside their relationship which makes them hurt each other as a result. Antony must marry Octavia and the duty comes even at the expense of hurting Cleopatra. Cleopatra must retreat from the battle if she hopes to save her country's armada, even if it means abandoning Antony. Antony and Cleopatra are not allowed to put themselves first: their duty as leaders comes first and as they know this about each other, they are unable to trust each other throughout the play. As Swinburne says:

> Romeo and Juliet were simply lovers, and their names bring back to us no further thought than of their love and the lovely sorrow of its end; Antony and Cleopatra shall be before all things lovers, but the thought of their love and its triumphant tragedy shall recall other things beyond number—all the forces and all the fortunes of mankind, all the chance and all the consequence that waited on their imperial passion, all the infinite variety of qualities and powers wrought together and welded into the frame and composition of that love which shook from end to end all nations and kingdoms of the earth.[21]

Swinburne captures the nature of Antony and Cleopatra's relationship perfectly: their relationship is much more complicated than a simple love story and encompasses politics and military strategy that extraordinarily both lovers are involved in equally.

The relationship of Antony and Cleopatra tends to be interpreted as causing the tragic end of Antony. Yet the play is called *Antony and Cleopatra* which suggests that it is about the tragedies of both of them rather than a tragedy of Antony being caused by his engagement with Cleopatra. It is also noteworthy that it is Antony that dies first and his death serves as a character development for Cleopatra, and therefore it seems erroneous to claim that Antony is the central piece. As we have observed in the previous plays, Shakespeare had no problems with altering Plutarch's narratives. Even within *Antony and Cleopatra* Shakespeare changes the timeline when he "has Antony's involvement with Cleopatra pre-date the death of his wife Fulvia, although historically it began after Antony had already married her successor Octavia."[22] By doing that, Shakespeare shows their relationship to be more constant.

[21] Swinburne, page numbers not available
[22] Dobson, 771

Moreover, if the tragedy was mainly about Antony, he would not have died first even if in Plutarch he does.

Therefore, I find the assertions such as Traub's that "the threat by alien femininity is embodied by Cleopatra, the Egyptian queen who seduces and ultimately causes the downfall of one of the most powerful men in the world,"[23] imprecise. Octavius got rid of Lepidus; he would have probably tried to wage a war against Antony anyway. Furthermore, Cleopatra is always talked about as a seductress – both by the critics and within the play – but the play does not tell us how their relationship started. Philo makes an opening statement about Antony being changed by the relationship, but he does not indicate who seduced whom. It seems that the automatic assumption that Cleopatra seduced Antony is based rather on gender assumptions on the critics' side than the text itself. Therefore, Cleopatra's role in the play is not to cause the downfall of Antony, but rather to have a private and a public tragedy of her own when her public role as the Queen of Egypt and a private role as a lover both meet their unfortunate ends. As McLuskie says: "It remained for *Antony and Cleopatra* to give us the tragic heroine unsurpassed in all literature. The play is not of Antony, in the sense that *Hamlet, Othello, King Lear* and *Macbeth* have been men's plays."[24] Rather, it is a star-crossed lovers' tragedy, such as *Romeo and Juliet*, but a more mature version, with problems that the first-time teenage lovers did not need to deal with. Both characters occupy leading positions, and therefore their love story includes a significant political dimension. This conclusion seems to be confirmed by the ending of the play, in which Octavianus concludes: "She [Cleopatra] shall be buried by her Antony; / No grave upon the earth shall clip in it / A pair so famous."[25]

[23] Traub, 136
[24] McLuskie, 127
[25] Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra,* 5.2.357-359

The last part of Cleopatra's role in the play to be examined is her behaviour after Antony's death. Antony's death causes a character development in Cleopatra, who ruminates more on her actions and takes more thoughtful decision. As Cleopatra was showed to act first and think second before Antony died, Cleopatra the "widow" decides to die and follow Antony to the grave unless she could do her country service by staying alive. Cleopatra becomes a more stable and a better ruler by the end of the play. Even though some critics might find the ending confusing, it makes sense if we accept that Cleopatra is changed by Antony's death. As discussed, Antony and Cleopatra's relationship was constantly stained by insecurity and distrust on both sides. However, as Antony instructs Cleopatra how to save herself on the expense of Octavianus, and therefore Rome, and commits suicide because he believed Cleopatra to be dead, Cleopatra understands that Antony truly loved her. Moreover, Cleopatra understands she loved him as well. The tragedy removes the dilemma between choosing Antony or Egypt from Cleopatra's life and eliminates Cleopatra's doubts about the genuineness of their relationship. This hardened Cleopatra delivers her most powerful soliloquy on the meaning of life, worthy of a play's protagonist. In the soliloquy, Cleopatra claims that love can make "this world did equal theirs [gods'] / Till they had stol'n our jewel [Antony]"[26] and she resolves to die: "we have no friend / But resolution and the briefest end."[27] Cleopatra does not change her mind, she tries to kill herself with a dagger but is disarmed by Proculeius. Afterwards, Cleopatra is willing to listen to Octavianus' plans for her. She says: "He words me, girls, he words me, that I should not / Be noble to myself."[28] Cleopatra suggests that for the sake of her children and her country, she would be willing to abandon her plan. However, when she learns that Caesar would parade her and her children through Rome, she decides to die a Queen of Egypt. Cleopatra says:

[26] Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra,* 4.13.78-79
[27] Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra,* 4.13.91-92
[28] Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra,* 5.2.190-191

> My resolution is plac'd, 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.[29]

What Cleopatra was lacking in decisiveness in the first part of the play, she found after Antony's death and in that is precisely the tragedy of Cleopatra. Cleopatra becomes the perfect ruler by developing her virtues and correcting her vices only when she is about to die.

Cleopatra is a fascinatingly complex rather than insufficiently characterised female character who, as a typical protagonist, has many roles in her play. Furthermore, Cleopatra is a queen and a lover and has to try to reconcile these two roles which are conflicting for her. Her relationship with Antony depicts a mature love story which cannot throw everything away like Romeo and Juliet could. Antony and Cleopatra juggle their relationship in the midst of the political crisis in which they are both the main players. Cleopatra, situated firmly in the public sphere, can never put her desires above her country's interests and struggles in her relationship of which her intelligence never allows her to be unquestioning. Similarly to how male protagonists tend to find their motivation when their female lover is killed off, Cleopatra finds her resolve with Antony's death and decides to die honourably as the Queen of Egypt.

5.2. Octavia, Charmian and Iras

Apart from Cleopatra, there are three other female characters with lines in the play: Octavia, Charmian, and Iras. Fulvia, a character important for the development of the relationship between Antony and Cleopatra, is never on stage and dies off screen. In Octavia,

[29] Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra,* 5.2.237-240

we encounter a female character with not much agency in which we can observe similar tendencies as in Lavinia or Virgilia. Charmian and Iras, on contrary, depict great characters of servant women, such as are very rare in Shakespeare's Roman tragedies, as the only other female character not of a high-born background is the nurse in *Titus Andronicus* whose role is minimal.

Octavia is introduced by Agrippa as a great beauty: "Octavia [...] ; whose beauty claims / No worse a husband than the best of men."[30] Her beauty, and her virtue are extorted to appeal to Antony; however, it is clear that Antony does not care about any of that as for him the match is political. Octavianus makes Octavia's role in her marriage clear: "The power of Caesar, and / His power unto Octavia."[31] Octavia does not matter; what matters is that Antony and Octavianus will be united by Octavianus' sister. Octavia does not show much personality during her first meeting with Antony. As Antony informs her that they will not be seeing much of each other due to his public duties, Octavia replies: "All which time, / Before the gods my knee shall bow my prayers / To them for you."[32] Octavia immediately adapts her duty of a sister to that of a wife and her first interaction with Antony confides her into the domestic sphere in which she waits for him.

So far, the use of Octavia was that of Lavinia: a bargaining tool between powerful houses. Octavia was a dutiful sister by not resisting marrying Antony, a widower with a well-known extramarital relationship with Cleopatra, and then she immediately became a perfect wife whose first loyalty is to her husband. Octavia is seen as a good, dutiful woman but she is not very interesting as a character. It is noteworthy that even those who interpreted her as exemplary did not find it in themselves to show much interest in her. Sarah Fielding's *The Lives of Cleopatra and Octavia* gives us a didactical account of the lives of these two ladies

[30] Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra,* 2.2.132-133
[31] Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra,* 2.2.148-149
[32] Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra,* 2.3.3-5

in which we are instructed to dislike Cleopatra and admire Octavia. Fielding's inspiration came from many sources including Plutarch and Shakespeare. However, even though Fielding's aim is for her readers to side with Octavia, she cannot help it but give her some resistance to her political use: "As I [Octavia] was very handsome, and Sister to the adoptive Son of Julius Caesar. I dreaded from my Youth that I should be sacrificed to political Views."[33] Fielding can justify the superiority of Octavia's character only by adding elements not present in Shakespeare in which Octavia shows that she is not a woman without any opinion or inner resistance. Such an example indicates that Octavia or Lavinia, characters who are models of domestic, obedient women, would need to be given at least an explanation for their behaviour if they were to be regarded as instructive for women. As Octavia ends up unhappy in both Fielding and Shakespeare, her role also indicates that more agency might be desirable.

The only time that Octavia speaks her mind is when she tells Antony of the difficulty of her situation when her husband and her brother are at war against each other. Her argumentation reminds of Volumnia and Virgilia's plea to Coriolanus when they discussed women's dilemma when they are put in the middle of a conflict and they, unable to influence it, should cheer for both sides. Octavia says:

> A more unhappy lady,
> If this division chance, ne'er stood between,
> Praying for both parts.
> The good gods will mock me presently
> When I shall pray, 'O bless my lord and husband!'
> Undo that prayer by crying out as loud,
> 'O, bless my brother!' Husband win, win brother.[34]

[33] Sarah Fielding, *The Lives of Cleopatra and Octavia* ed. Christopher Dyer Johnson (PhD diss., University of Delaware, 1991, ProQuest: https://www-proquest-com.ezproxy.is.cuni.cz/docview/303903615?pq-origsite=primo, 231
[34] Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra,* 3.4.12-18

Octavia underscores the ludicrousness of her position and even Antony instruct her to make her own decisions, similarly to how Fulvia or Cleopatra make them: "Choose your own company, and command what cost / Your heart has mind to."[35] Even though Octavia's obedience and dependency might be associated with qualities desired in women, her extreme compliance is not portrayed as favourable. Even Octavianus shuns his sister when she comes back and accepts her only when he understands that she is willing to do what she is not supposed to: denounce her husband. Octavia's role in the play is limited to the demonstration of the vulnerable situation a woman is led to when she is taught to be obedient to a male authority under any circumstances.

The last two women of the play, Charmian and Iras, offer a rare glimpse into the role of women who are not high-born in Shakespeare's Rome. Dobson notes that Shakespeare "develops [...] the roles of Cleopatra's women Charmian and Iras"[36] more than can be found in Plutarch. The fact that Charmian and Iras have bigger roles than in the source material shows that their roles within the play are significant. In fact, Charmian and Iras act the roles that Shakespeare usually reserves for male servants, soldiers, visitors of inns, and other supporting characters of lower social standing. The first scene in which Charmian, Iras and Alexas receive the soothsayer is a typical Shakespearian comic relief scene though this time of a sexual nature. When the soothsayer claims to be predicting Charmian and Iras' future, the women engage in a funny banter:

> Iras: Am I not an inch of fortune better than she?
> Charmian: Well, if you were but an inch of fortune better than I, where would you choose it?
> Iras: Not in my husband's nose.[37]

[35] Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra,* 3.4.37-38
[36] Dobson, 771
[37] Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra,* 1.2.58-60

The role of Iras and Charmian in this scene is double. They are supposed to provide the respite that Shakespeare famously puts into his tragedies, but they also depict the sexual looseness of Cleopatra's household. It is also noteworthy that following this dialog, the two women make sexual jokes on the expense of their male colleague, Alexas, whom they consider to be a handsome but not very virtuous fellow. Iras and Charmian are given the space to speak freely and express women's sexual desires aloud and quite explicitly. Despite that, Charmian and Iras are shown in the rest of the play to be loyal and obedient servants, dying honourably by their mistress' side. Therefore, it might be concluded that their sexual openness does not invite criticism of their characters but simply serves as a moment for the audience to laugh.

A very interesting scene occurs between Cleopatra and Charmian, when Cleopatra pressures Charmian to concur that Cleopatra never loved Caesar as much as she loves Antony. The scene is important as in another previously discussed scene, there seems to be a clear criticism of a ruler surrounding herself with flatterers. In this scene, we observe that Charmian is a brave and outspoken confidant of Cleopatra as she refuses to tell Cleopatra the untruth she wants to hear. Charmian mocks Cleopatra's words by repeating how Cleopatra used to extol Caesar, and when Cleopatra threatens her, she retorts: "I sing but after you."[38] This steadfastness in Charmian is particularly impressive as she forces Cleopatra to admit the truth. She did, indeed, sang praises of Caesar in the past, and thanks to Charmian, Cleopatra confronts the fact. Moreover, Cleopatra reflects on her relationship with Caesar by saying: My salad days, / When I was green in judgement, cold in blood, / To say as I said then!"[39] Charmian's role in this scene is to make both Cleopatra and the audience aware that Cleopatra and Antony's relationship is mature and far away from the

[38] Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra,* 2.2.74
[39] Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra,* 2.2.77-79

reckless days of youth. This is not the only time that Charmian advices Cleopatra who listens to her advice. When Cleopatra gets irrationally angry at the messenger bringing the news of Antony and Octavia's marriage, Charmian persuades Cleopatra not to take it out on the messenger: "Good madam, keep yourself within yourself: / The man is innocent."[40] Following these words, Cleopatra contains her anger and starts acting as a queen should. Cleopatra and Charmian's relationship portrays how a rapport between a ruler and an advisor should look like.

Antony and Cleopatra contains four significant female characters. Cleopatra, with her "combination of erotic power and political authority"[41] challenged the men within the play as well as the play's audiences and critics. She is a flawed character in all her aspects – an imperfect ruler, a moody lover but she finds her purpose in her tragedy by the end of the play as she becomes more resolute and constant. These imperfections should not be attributed to her gender, but rather her role as a ruler and a lover. Nevertheless, it is certain that apart from Octavia and her tragic fate, the other women of this play, be it Cleopatra, Charmian, or Iras, challenge the presumed gender stereotypes of women who are supposed to be confided in the domestic sphere and quiet about their sexuality.

[40] Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra,* 2.5.77-78
[41] Rackin, 117

Conclusion

The role of women in William Shakespeare's Roman tragedies is the central concern of this thesis. The thesis first examines the role of women in early modern England. The first chapter problematises stereotypes and challenges the prevailing misconceptions that women in early modern England all conformed to a set of rules. I suggest that women in early modern England occupied various positions and even though it is indisputable that the early modern society was a patriarchal one, it does not mean that many women would not openly, or through manipulation inside their households, influence the public sphere of political and social life. It also tends to be assumed that as no women were allowed to perform on stage during Shakespeare's time, his plays are supposed to cater to male desires and tastes. Many of Shakespeare's patrons, audiences, or theatre employees were in fact women, and therefore these plays do not function within some sort of all-male world but rather reflect and occasionally challenge the nuanced gender situation of the time. I also discuss how the Roman plays are specific in their treatment of women and as I come to the obvious conclusion that the Rome of Shakespeare is not the Ancient Rome, it becomes clear that Shakespeare used Rome as he used his sources: Rome is a setting, but it does not limit the play's themes, messages, nor characters. If anything, the Roman plays are similar in their political focus, and most of the women in Shakespeare's Rome participate, or attempt to participate, in the public sphere of politics. Therefore, Shakespeare's Roman heroines tend to have a connection to the politics of their time even though their gender should theoretically confide them into the domestic sphere.

My thesis analyses the Roman plays starting with the play in which women are most marginalised towards the play in which women are central. Opening my investigation with *Julius Caesar*, it becomes obvious that despite the play's near exclusion of women, there is

a lot to be said about them. Portia became so difficult to handle for twentieth century film makers that the most famous film starring Marlon Brando omits the wound she voluntarily caused herself. The wound, a.k.a. the most discussed issue of *Julius Caesar* amongst feminist critics, is a highly disturbing but - in the brutal context of the play - a powerful gesture. Portia's role is not only to make Brutus more human, but also to discuss how a marriage should look like and provide a contrast to Caesar and Calpurnia's relationship. Calpurnia is introduced to the play by her infertility and in her only proper scene, she is used as a foreshadowing device and a character which points to the vices of Caesar's. Both women are relegated into the domestic sphere, but neither of them is satisfied with such a position and even though they do not aspire to become active participants in the public sphere, they demand their opinions to be considered by their husbands and their husbands to confide in them with their plans. Ultimately, neither Portia nor Calpurnia manage to get what they want; not for their lack of trying but rather because of the crashing power of the patriarchy. Their failure to persuade their husbands to listen to them and take them seriously leads to both of their husbands' demise. In their attempt to engage in public sphere, Portia and Calpurnia are similar to Volumnia with the difference that Volumnia succeeds in that endeavour.

Coriolanus contains three women: Volumnia, Virgilia, and Valeria. Volumnia's role is motherly. However, Volumnia's motherhood is based on a nationalistic desire to see her son succeed and bring glory to the state. As Coriolanus is a volatile, unwise character, Volumnia becomes the brain of the play and she is the person who drives the action, plot, and determines the ending. As Volumnia causes the destruction of her only son, she is the manipulative villain of the piece whose ultimate punishment for her hubris and ambition remains ambiguous. Even though Coriolanus' story is concluded, we are not told how Volumnia's story ended. Volumnia becomes the heroine of Rome – she is celebrated as a national hero and a saviour. She achieves fame that she always desired but never envisioned

for herself as she saw society as gendered, and her role was to be the influencer behind the scenes. Almost accidentally, Volumnia manages to achieve the status her son threw away by his inability to adjust to the dirty, hypocrite discourse of politicians. However, all this came at the cost of her son's life. As the last thing we observe is for Volumnia to walk across the stage wordlessly as she is welcomed in Rome, we do not know whether her story ended in a tragedy as she realised that the price she paid for her ambitions was too high; or whether Volumnia sacrificed her son as she claimed she would gladly do for her country's sake and reaps the rewards for herself. In that case, *Coriolanus* would be unique in the tragedies of Shakespeare as it would end with the villain's triumph.

Titus Andronicus is an unusual play and its women have extraordinary roles as well. Tamora, the defeated Queen of Goths, can be considered a predecessor of Lady Macbeth and her villainous ways move much of the plays' plot forward. Tamora precedes Volumnia in her successful attempt to influence the public sphere but differs from the rest of the female characters in her explicit villainess. Lavinia might represent the most physically tried character in all Shakespeare's plays. Her disfiguration is extreme and even though she mainly fulfils the role of a passive, obedient daughter, her presence raises important questions about violence, rape, and punishment. Lavinia is not interested in participating in the public sphere and spends her time in the play in a passive role of a thing that lost its value. The ending of the play, when Titus murders Lavinia for having been defiled, is an act which invites further research to be carried on this issue and its portrayal in *Titus Andronicus*.

Finally, *Antony and Cleopatra* does not bore in its length as the play's numerous lines are used to create one of the most complex of Shakespeare's female characters. When discussing Cleopatra, it is essential to make note of the complicated relationship critics have had with the main heroine. Their attempts to simplify Cleopatra's character and her role in the play only underscore her complexity and importance. Cleopatra is unique because unlike

even Tamora, she is the sole ruler of her country, and therefore unlike any of the other women, she does not need to rely on the manipulation of her men for power. Having said that, it does not mean that Cleopatra would not manipulate with Antony; she does, but Antony manipulates with her as well. The play's interpretation, that the seductress Cleopatra causes the downfall of a great man Antony, is overly simplistic as the relationship between Antony and Cleopatra is complex and even though many critics focus on Cleopatra's use of her "female powers" to enchant Antony, Antony often uses similar tactics of flattery and sexual gratification to manipulate with Cleopatra. This proves that these tactics are not limited to females after all. My analysis suggests that, as the last utterance of the play indicates, the tragedy of Antony and Cleopatra is a tragic story of two people who did love each other, but whose life circumstances and positions did not allow them to experience their relationship in such a way which would enable them to trust each other. Neither Cleopatra nor Antony were willing to set aside their leadership roles which forced them to repeatedly hurt each other's feelings. The idea that it was the migling of Rome and Egypt which caused their downfall seems rather inaccurate as well. Both Cleopatra and Antony would have become the target of Octavianus' ambition regardless of their relationship status, as the play makes clear in the way that Octavianus usurps power piece by piece by disposing of his rivals. Therefore, the private tragedy of Cleopatra and Antony, the lovers, and the public tragedy of Cleopatra, the Queen of Egypt, and Antony, the Triumvir, coincide in one epic tragedy of love in which politics plays an integral part.

Antony and Cleopatra also contains Octavia, a character very similar to Virgilia and Lavinia. All these three women suffer fates of diverse cruelty as a result of their incapability to actively participate in decisions regarding their own lives. For most of the plays, Octavia and Lavinia are treated as objects rather than people. These three characters represent the women we might expect to find in a play written in early modern England with a Roman

setting. They are chaste, obedient, and passive and if it were only for them, we could claim that women in these plays are the guardians of the domestic sphere who do not participate in the public sphere and are fully dependant on their male relatives.

However, as demonstrated before, Octavia, Virgilia, and Lavinia's roles are contrasted with the roles of the main female characters, much more active women, who all actively participate or seek active participation in the public sphere. Portia, Calpurnia, Tamora, Volumnia, and Cleopatra are all interested in the public sphere and express their opinions on how political actions should be conducted. However, they go about it in diverse ways. Some try to influence their men, some hold power by themselves. Some use their power for heroic purposes, some for villainous ends. In addition, we must not forget that the Roman plays also contain female characters in the roles of servants – the nurse, Charmian, and Iras, who do not hold any power but serve as aiders to the main female characters and provide comedic relief in the plays.

As my thesis concludes that women play integral parts in the Roman plays, it invites further research in the topic. It would be intriguing to conduct research on how Shakespeare's Roman women were interpreted by actresses during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Based on my brief investigation, the general attitude was to simplify their roles within the plays which would suggest that it is rather our recent and perhaps even contemporary interpretation which relegates these female characters into more secondary roles than they originally occupied in the plays. It would be also fascinating to further research plays, novels, films, or other art forms inspired by Shakespeare's Roman plays such as John Dryden's *All for Love; or, the World Well Lost* or Sarah Fielding's *The Lives of Cleopatra and Octavia* to compare how their treatment of female characters differs from Shakespeare's.

The indisputable conclusion of this thesis is that the role of women in Shakespeare's Roman tragedies is significant, more significant than might be expected. My argumentation which led me to the conclusion - that even though the Roman plays focus on the political, public sphere which tends to be the domain of men, the main heroines mostly actively participate, or express desire to actively participate in the Roman plays' plots, philosophical contemplations and political scheming; only the less central female characters may embody the passive ideal of a woman confined in the domestic sphere – suggests an unexpected importance of women in Shakespeare's Roman plays. These tragedies feature women in so many varied roles that these roles are not supplementary to the main action of the play but drive the play. Most of the female characters in Shakespeare's Roman tragedies have their own unique personality and perception of the world. Whether they carry the play because of their goodness, evilness, power, powerlessness, pro-active or passive approach, they are often as important to these plays as their male counterparts, and therefore they should be given as much critical attention as the male characters.

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