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TRACING THE PATH OF FEMALE AGENCY IN RENAISSANCE REVENGE TRAGEDIES

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ABSTRACT

This honors undergraduate thesis, entitled “Tracing the Path of Female Agency in Renaissance Revenge Tragedies,” explores each individual female character in the following works: *Titus Andronicus*, *Othello*, and *The Duchess of Malfi*. While many revenge tragedies seem to operate in a male-dominated world, I have found that through extensive textual analysis that it is, in fact, the women within these plays that affect the outcome of the acts of revenge the most. As seen with Lavinia and Tamora of *Titus Andronicus*, Desdemona, Emilia and Bianca of *Othello*, and the Duchess, Cariola and Julia of *The Duchess of Malfi*, female characters experience either a power shift or change at unexpected moments. Perhaps it is when they die that they influence their male counterparts the most, like Desdemona, or that it is when she seems most powerful that she experiences her greatest downfall, like Tamora. Some women even have their agency altered when they seem most weak, like Lavinia, who begins to rise in power after she is maimed and raped. These power changes often come unexpectedly for audiences, as at first glance it still seems that the men dominate plots of revenge. However, through my close textual examination, I have concluded that female characters in *Titus Andronicus*, *Othello*, and *The Duchess of Malfi* best exemplify just how significant women’s roles become in determining the outcome of revenge acts and thus the entire play.

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Introduction

As seen in most revenge tragedies, female characters live in worlds dominated by men on political, familial, and romantic levels and struggle to gain certain freedoms, as they are often depicted as restrained and victimized against their male counterparts. The small number of women compared to men in major works is striking: Bel-Imperia and Isabella among ten or more men in Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*; Ophelia and Gertrude among about nine major male characters in William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*; Castiza, Gratiana and the Duchess among a family of eight or so brothers and stepbrothers along with their numerous followers in Thomas Middleton's *The Revenger's Tragedy*. Seneca's *Thyestes* does not even include female characters at all and goes on to describe a battle for power between two brothers, Atreus and Thyestes, without a single mention of any lovers, wives, sisters, or mothers. Before delving into elements of plot, one can see that this basic character organization of revenge tragedies leaves women as the outnumbered gender and thus seemingly at a disadvantage in terms of gaining voice and respect.

It is thus also not surprising that most critics of revenge tragedy have focused on the male characters. Marguerite A. Tassi highlights her findings in studying gender roles and revenge in her preface of *Women and Revenge in Shakespeare: Gender, Genre, and Ethics*: "To see revenge anew...seemed like an exciting prospect years ago when I started this book. Much to my surprise, I found that extended studies on women and revenge in Shakespeare's plays were hard to come by," (10). Though many critical discussions of the genre exist, such as those by the

celebrated John Kerrigan, few focus on women in particular. What is mainly discussed is how “stories of revenge are ‘almost excessively masculine’ in their focus and concerns” and how they concentrate on the large number of male characters and their interactions – rather than the sparse female characters (Tassi, 18).

Tassi continues to say that “female characters articulate claims for revenge, often on rational and moral grounds, expressing passions associated with vengeance” and that they “articulate the need to move beyond grief into the realm of action, where they can see injustice paid back” (18). She emphasizes just how much female characters actually participate within the plot of revenge – to achieve a social purging or final justice – supporting the idea that they may even influence the outcome of the revenge in its entirety. Tassi’s statement about the active role female characters play within revenge tragedies is suggestive for three works on which this thesis is focused: *Titus Andronicus*, *Othello*, and *The Duchess of Malfi*.

In considering one of the most primary texts used by Shakespeare and others as inspiration for their revenge works, audiences and critics alike can regard Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* as an extensive example of female action. The lustful Tereus rapes his sister-in-law Philomela, and in return, his wife Progne bakes Tereus’s son into a meal for him to eat as revenge. Not only does Progne seek moral justice for her sister in devising and committing the act of revenge herself, but Philomela also dynamically participates by stitching the story of what happened into a tapestry to reveal the truth. Two sisters, though bound by blood and family honor, also connect by retaliating against the man that did them both physical and psychological harm.

Jessica Lugo explains Philomela’s unique communication in her critique of works by both Ovid and Shakespeare: “Tragedy transforms her from innocent victim to silent informant, and she is not long forced to suffer her mute imprisonment” (403). The fact that Philomela is a

“silent informant” makes her revealing of the truth particularly interesting, as it is when she is silenced that she speaks the most important information of the entire work. Though not all female characters in other revenge tragedies act as such, they often take their moments of weakness and turn them into opportunities for agency just as Philomela does. It is clear in reading Shakespeare, Kyd, Seneca, Webster, and other revenge tragedy playwrights from the Renaissance period that this ancient Latin narrative inspires plot, characterization, and the result of revenge itself.

Lugo goes on to comment on how Tereus, Philomela and Progne all “have gone beyond the extremes of human experience” and how *Metamorphoses* as a whole is a story of barbarism and uncivilized actions (404). This element of revenge tragedy seems to carry over throughout other works and acts as a constant feature of the genre and certainly includes female characters and how they play a part in such savagery. The settings of revenge tragedies include darker worlds, perhaps in foreign or faraway lands, where seemingly normal circumstances lead to unprecedented action by a select few. These unprecedented actions then inspire other characters to seek lustful, vengeful, or violent actions in return, usually creating a dim hope for survival for many. The world of revenge knows no boundaries, as Lugo suggests, and becomes one that houses secrets, betrayal and attempts to restore justice. All such elements become immediately transformed when a woman is involved, either due to her status, personality, or relations with others. Amidst plays filled with mostly male character, her gender defines the outcome of revenge.

Considering these traits of revenge tragedies and how women become active components of the plot, one may think of the different ways in which women control their own fates or the fates of other characters. In exploring Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus*, audiences see a very

similar story to that of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* with Lavinia as a silent informant and also Tamora, active in her own revenge against the Andronici. Though a less forceful female protagonist, Desdemona of Shakespeare's *Othello* proves her influence over her husband after she dies as Emilia defends her mistress for the sake of justice. Both remain detached from vengeful tendencies and die as respected characters. Bianca actively participates in the revenge, too, as her choices inadvertently help motivate Othello to murder his wife. Finally, in John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*, the Duchess, fully aware of what she is doing, acts in a manner that inspires revenge, but dies as a result as a proud and innocent being. Cariola defiantly defends her mistress against the vengeful men, yet faces death with fear and remorse. Julia, murdered by her lover, dies when she has the most authority over the Cardinal – when she finally discovers the truth about the Cardinal's and Ferdinand's revenge plot. All female characters are active within their respective revenge plots in one way or another – and whether they ascend or descend in power depends on the consequences of their own actions and actions of the surrounding men. Without their actions, the narratives would end differently, and it is clear that female involvement is integral to the outcome of revenge and how successful or unsuccessful it really is. In comparing *Titus Andronicus*, *Othello*, and *The Duchess of Malfi*, it becomes evident that female characters' agency within these tragedies is inspired not only by their various reasons for seeking revenge but also by their desires to remove themselves from such evil acts. Decisions of female characters within these three plays affect both the act and the outcome of the revenge and thus the play as a whole.

Chapter 1

Lavinia and Tamora of Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*

Introduction

In Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*, audiences get a taste of two polar opposite characterizations with the two female protagonists: Lavinia as a young obedient daughter and Tamora as an older power-hungry Empress. Both attribute significantly to the many revenge plots within the play and display levels of power in unexpected ways. For Lavinia, she is at first viewed as obedient to her father, Titus, and meek in action. Though desired for her beauty and social stature, she is used by Titus as a tool of marriage after the war ends and does not seem to voice her own opinions very often. However, it is after she is physically mangled and destroyed by Demetrius and Chiron that she ironically reveals the most important information of the play – the names of those who raped her – even when she cannot speak. For Tamora, one sees her ascent to power in marrying Saturninus and that this climb occurs gradually as she carries out Aaron's revenge plot against the Andronici. She is in most control of the situation when she dresses as Revenge at Titus's doorstep, but this actually starts her quick descent and ultimate downfall. Through Shakespeare's characterization of these two women, one understands the importance of their involvement within the revenge plots and how their active roles at moments of either power or weakness change the outcome of the play.

Lavinia: silent but active

Due to both her status as woman and also daughter of Titus, Shakespeare exposes Lavinia as a fairly powerless figure in the beginning of *Titus Andronicus*. Because Act I opens in the aftermath of the Roman war victory, the empery becomes available for a new leader to take and the Goth prisoners must suffer whatever punishment Titus and the Romans decide to bestow. Lavinia, as the daughter of the military general, thus becomes a tool who can be used for marriage. And she willingly offers herself, stating to her father, “O bless me here with thy victorious hand,” – and this is one of only two times in the entire first act that she chooses to speak, and she does so in obedience to her father (I.i. 166). Titus first agrees to her being Saturninus’s wife, whom he deems worthy of the Emperor’s title, as Saturninus claims she is “Rome’s royal mistress, mistress of my heart” (I.i. 244). This also expresses how much he desires Lavinia as a wife and how much his power dominates over her personal preferences. She is clearly an object of desire for her beauty, grace, and status and is referred to by Bassianus as “Gracious Lavinia, Rome’s rich ornament” – her entire being evidently desired by the men of the whole city (I.i. 55).

With words like “mistress,” “gracious,” and “ornament” being used to describe her, Lavinia represents a gift presented to Saturninus from Titus, something to be used for the pleasure of another. In giving his daughter as a gift to the new leader, Titus revels in his high hopes for the Emperor with the new marriage: “Lord Saturnine, whose virtues will, I hope,/ Reflect on Rome as Titan’s rays on earth,/ And ripen justice in this commonweal” (I.i. 228-230). However, Bassianus suddenly seizes Lavinia and states, “Lord Titus, by your leave, this maid is mine,” to disclose his betrothal with the general’s daughter and thus his rightful claim of her over that of his brother (I.i. 279). While Titus begins to object as Bassianus and Lavinia run away with her brothers’ help, Lavinia remains silent and acts as her lover orders and flees with him

immediately. It is clear that not only is she ruled by her father's wishes but also by her husband's protection, all without saying so much as an opinion during this first argument. Through her lack of speech and her compliance to men – who physically push and pull her around – one sees her lack of authority over her male counterparts and thus her submission to their wishes either way.

More dangerously, Lavinia also becomes an object rather than a subject early in the play when Tamora's two sons begin expressing their lustful desires for her. In speaking with Aaron and Chiron, Demetrius discusses what Lavinia means to him: "She is a woman, therefore may be wooed;/ She is a woman, therefore may be won;/ She is Lavinia, there must be loved" (II.i. 82-85). The audience knows by the nature of Demetrius and Chiron and by their argument over who deserves her more that the two sons do not mean to love her but to lust after her. Because Lavinia is a woman and because she is Titus's daughter, she becomes the sons' primary target to help Tamora fulfill her revenge against their family. Her chastity, a valued "treasury," further intensifies Demetrius and Chiron's lust for her because this makes Lavinia even more sexually desirable (II.i. 131). Aaron compares Lavinia to a "dainty doe," symbolizing both her meekness and her vulnerability as Tamora's sons begin to plan their hunt (II.i. 117). The mere fact that Lavinia is a woman and is capable of both withholding her virginity and then being physically available (even if by force) to please other men puts her in a powerless position, as she cannot help her gender and what it implies for Demetrius and Chiron.

Finally, Lavinia is most evidently objectified after her rape and mutilation occurs. Her chastity gone, hands dismembered, and tongue cut out, Lavinia appears physically and figuratively ruined as daughter of Titus and even just as a human being. Her beauty has been wiped completely from her face and body, and Marcus notices "a crimson river of warm blood,/ Like to a bubbling fountain stirred with wind,/ Doth rise and fall between thy rosèd lips" (II.iv.

22-24). This presents a haunting image to other characters and also the audience, as Lavinia seems only to decay and die from this point forward. When Marcus introduces Lavinia in this state to Titus, he says, “This was thy daughter,” to imply that her identity has been removed along with her innocence (III.i. 62). Marcus does not state that this is Lavinia or that this is the daughter of Titus, because she cannot be described as such in her current condition. Her status as desirable, chaste, and beautiful woman has been removed as soon as any person lays eyes on her, and they are horrified by her mutilated appearance. Again, Marcus describes Lavinia as a timid animal, one that cannot bring itself to come forth: “O, thus I found her straying in the park,/ Seeking to hide herself, as doth the deer/ That hath received some unrecuring wound” (III.i. 88-90). Seeming ashamed and physically unable to speak, Lavinia surpasses all former conditions of being subservient to the male characters and now not only allows them to act and speak for her but also must depend on it.

Though Lavinia appears to be at her worst state after Demetrius and Chiron rape and disfigure her, this ironically acts as the peripeteia, or turning point, in the plot of *Titus Andronicus* for this female character. Whereas before, Lavinia did not speak her opinion voluntarily; now she physically cannot speak at all and must rely on other means to communicate. But because Lavinia holds the secret to who and what happened to her (other than Demetrius and Chiron), she holds information that is vital to Titus’s revenge. Titus tells Lavinia, “And so beguile thy sorrow, till the heavens/ Reveal the damned contriver of this deed,” showing that his only hope is in the “heavens” for the name of who committed the rape (IV.i. 35-36). Though she cannot talk or hold anything in her hands, Lavinia takes action in other ways. In chasing the boy, Lucius, around with the book, she eventually draws everyone’s attention to the well-known story of Ovid’s *Metamorphosis*, where Philomela is raped and injured by Tereus, her

sister's husband. In writing "Stuprum. Chiron. Demetrius" in the sand, Lavinia reveals in Latin the names and actions of her exploiters (IV.i. 78). Finally, Titus and Marcus are able to connect the dots with Lavinia's clues. Not only does Lavinia actively expose who committed the crime but she does so within the bounds of less than one scene – the quickest and most efficient move she has made in the entire play.

Emily Detmer-Goebel highlights the importance of Lavinia as a source of information in her article, "The Need for Lavinia's Voice: *Titus Andronicus* and the Telling of Rape." She explains that at first, Lavinia's "ability to be a source of knowledge is underrated" as the men around her do not quite understand her actions in trying to tell them who raped her (84). Marcus, though he suggests the idea of Philomela at first, "fails to read Lavinia's use of the same source" as she grabs *Metamorphoses* from the young boy (85). Detmer-Goebel claims that this "reveals how the men are unaccustomed to seeing Lavinia as an authority and as a source of knowledge" as how much they do not comprehend rape from a woman's point of view. Titus and Marcus, in this scene, also clearly demonstrate their misunderstanding of women and perhaps male expectations of the extent women can communicate. Detmer-Goebel's focus on Lavinia as a source of information helps explain how her unexpected authority shocks Titus and Marcus just minutes later when she reveals the truth and helps justify the weight of the information she holds.

Lavinia's active role in releasing information about the rape to Titus then gives him the power to fulfill his next act of revenge, thus continuing the cycle of always trying to outdo the act of revenge that preceded. Because Titus can now get revenge against Tamora and her sons for what they have done, the play's plot can move along. In Titus's last words to Demetrius and Chiron before he cuts their throats, he states "that Lavinia 'tween her stumps doth hold/ The basin that receives your guilty blood," showing Lavinia's active participation in their murders

(V.ii. 182-183). Even though she does not have hands to kill them, she holds the basin to collect their blood and is present during their last moments. Demetrius and Chiron hear their fate, as declared by Titus, while Lavinia is looking directly at them. We know of her proximity because Titus calls her forth – “Lavinia, come,/ Receive the blood” – just before he slits their throats (V.ii. 196-197). Demetrius and Chiron stand completely powerless before Lavinia, and her participation in seeking revenge against the Goths further supports her ascent in authority despite her current physical condition.

With Titus’s act of revenge unfolding during the dinner scene, Titus also kills Lavinia, an act that is necessary for the purgation of their family name and society. Titus says in doing so, “Die, die, Lavinia, and thy shame with thee,/ And with thy shame thy father’s sorrow die!” (V.iii. 46-47). Though death seemingly would render Lavinia powerless at the end of the play, Shakespeare actually shows this as a moment of true obedience coming from the female protagonist. Her death does not signal the end of her power but its sustenance. Lavinia does not object to her own death and actively agrees to it, as she knows this must be done to preserve her honor and family name. She understands that the only way for society to move forward from such devastation is to rid everyone of the most gruesome physical reminder of the vengeful acts: her own physical presence.

Marguerite Tassi, author of *Women and Revenge in Shakespeare: Gender, Genre, and Ethics*, supports the need to remove the horror that Lavinia symbolizes: “Her presence embodies the anguished consciousness and defiled honor of the Andronici. Her gaping wounds are the bloodstained mementoes of crime that call the Andronici men to their ethical duty to carry out revenge” (98). Because Lavinia’s “gaping wounds” are “mementoes” for Titus, they must be removed from his presence for his own mental stability and thus that of Rome to be restored.

Though the audience pities Lavinia in her ravaged state, Tassi highlights the necessity to kill Lavinia and thus all “defiled honor.” After such a tragedy, peace cannot return without ridding the environment of every aspect of the crimes of the past.

Lavinia’s power, which ironically augments when she cannot even speak, becomes the tool with which to continue avenging the enemy and produces the most important information of the entire play. In affecting the outcome of the plot, Lavinia allows Titus to obtain justice against Tamora – the overall goal of committing revenge in the first place – and restore his family name. It is because Lavinia is a woman, and therefore because she is raped, that she determines Titus’s final actions and the punishment of other characters. Her femininity, what once could be viewed as a weak attribute, comes full circle and becomes an element of authority in confessing the truth to her father and accepting her own death.

Tamora’s wavering control

Aside from Lavinia, the only other female character in Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus* is the feisty Tamora, former Queen of the Goths and mother of Demetrius, Chiron, and Alarbus. However, unlike Lavinia who slowly gains power with the development of the plot, Tamora’s authority grows due to her status and actions before collapsing at the very end. In introducing Tamora, Shakespeare creates a social status that is consequential of actions of the plot. In Act I, Tamora, along with the other Goths, is now prisoners to the Romans due to their defeat in war and pleads as such. Her first lines in the play show her vulnerability:

Victorious Titus, rue the tears I shed,

A mother’s tears in passion for her son:

And if thy sons were ever dear to thee,

O, think my son to be as dear to me!...

But must my sons be slaughtered in the streets

For valiant doings in their country's cause? (I.i. 108-111, 115-116)

Tamora, former royalty, stoops to the position of a beggar as she pleads with Titus to spare her son's life and to think of his own sons and how they were fighting for the same cause on each respective side in the war. She even addresses her enemy as "Victorious Titus," an attempt to show forced respect. It becomes obvious that she truly loves her son and wants to protect him, but she has no means of doing so other than to plead. This notion of having to appeal to the enemy renders Tamora as utterly powerless in this opening scene, and she recalls this humiliation in speaking with her two surviving sons in Act II: "Remember, boys, I poured forth tears in vain/ To save your brother from the sacrifice" (II.iii. 163-164). Because the Goths lost the war, the queen and her family lay at the mercy of the Romans with their titles completely stripped from them. In killing Tamora's son Alarbus for sacrificial reasons, Titus exerts his military dominance over her right from the beginning and sparks her primary reason for revenge.

In her piece, "'The Gnawing Vulture': Revenge, Trauma Theory, and *Titus Andronicus*," Deborah Willis comments on the importance of revenge to uphold family honor and restore justice for those who have been killed, as such is the reasoning for Tamora's own revenge. She notes, "When family members are murdered, raped, or severely injured...the other members of the family also feel damaged, as if a part of the self has been lost or killed along with the family member" (30). In *Titus Andronicus*, Tamora feels "damaged" when Alarbus is killed as a post-war sacrifice and as a mother, feels "as if a part of the self has been lost" as he is her own kin. This damage is particularly evident in the opening scene when she is begging and crying before Titus and clearly shows how hurt she is by her son's death. Willis goes on to say that after

Tamora's loss, "sorrow' becomes 'an enemy' and the process of mourning is aborted. Revenge offers reempowerment and repairs family and personal identity....when the self has not come to terms with its losses, revenge's satisfactions prove temporary" (33-34). This transgression of loss and desperation leading to seeking revenge for temporary self-satisfaction somewhat justifies Tamora's actions. It is clear that her son's death has a profound impact on her psychologically and renders her emotionally wrought in the beginning of the play.

It is this powerful emotion that motivates Tamora to avenge her family name and to do so with burning rage. She declares, "I'll find a day to massacre them all/ And race their faction and their family,/ The cruel father, and her traitorous sons,/ To whom I sued for my dear son's life,/ And make them what 'tis to let a queen/ Kneel in the streets and beg for grace in vain" (I.i. 453-458). She again recalls her humiliation – as she would never expect herself, the Queen of Goths, to have to kneel and beg – and this shame motivates her anger and thus her need for revenge upon Titus and his family. Because the play opens with Tamora at a level of lesser power, one can expect that the sequence of plot events will allow her to rise to a more dominant level later.

Tamora immediately gains power when Saturninus – an emperor – chooses to marry an imprisoned Goth queen. Because she is on the losing side of the war and a woman, she – like Lavinia – becomes a tool used for marriage purposes. As Saturninus ascends as Emperor, it becomes immediately clear that he needs a wife, and when Lavinia runs away with Bassianus, he happily suggests Tamora as an alternative: "And therefore, lovely Tamora, Queen of Goths,/ That like the stately Phoebe 'mongst her nymphs/ Dost overshadow the gallant'st dames of Rome,/ If thou be pleased with this my sudden choice,/ Behold, I choose thee, Tamora, for my bride/ And will create thee Empress of Rome," (I.i., 318-323). Such a quick change in thought for who should be the wife of the Emperor shows the weight of a woman's value as a bride-to-be.

Tamora, as an available woman (the audience never hears of her former husband or children's father before the war), agrees to the marriage and thus begins her ascent to power. Because the Goths lost the war and now must pay retribution, Tamora must repay her war debts and marriage becomes an option for doing so. Her climb from the lowest rank, a prisoner, to the highest rank, an empress, sets a foreboding precedent with how she will use such a swift rise in command. This marriage fuels her ability to carry out her revenge against Titus; as Empress, she holds Saturninus's support and a status higher than that of the Andronici.

Tamora's lover, Aaron, also sees the marriage as an ascent. Full of vengeance, he hatches the plot to rape Lavinia, murder Bassianus, and frame Titus's sons – but Tamora is the one to carry out this plot. Her ascent to power after marrying Saturninus is shown to audiences primarily in the way she treats Lavinia in the forest and how easily she subjects another woman to rape. Though Lavinia and Bassianus find Tamora and Aaron in the woods together and begin to mock them, Tamora quickly takes this scene into her own hands. After Bassianus chides Tamora for making “your honor of his body's hue,/ Spotted, detested, and abominable,” and Lavinia calls Aaron “her raven-colored love,” one would suppose Tamora to feel embarrassed or subjected to their insults for her love for a Moor (II.iii. 73-74, 83). However, thinking quickly, Tamora tells Demetrius and Chiron as they enter the scene that Bassianus led and mocked her here and that they need to avenge her and attack him. Her sons listen and immediately stab Bassianus in front of Lavinia, thus placing Tamora in a powerful position as she unleashes her rage. Tamora demands that they “Let not this wasp outlive, us both to sting,” referring to Lavinia, establishing her planned course of action (II.iii. 132). She allows Demetrius and Chiron to “use her as you will,” and with two men against one woman, Lavinia holds no hope for escape at this point (II.iii. 166). Aaron's plan for revenge against Titus (as acted out by Tamora) begins

with these demands, as their approval and encouragement of Lavinia's rape instigates it to happen and for Titus to be mentally destroyed as a result.

Tamora then takes exerting her power over Lavinia and thus over the entire Andronici family name a step further when she denies Lavinia any kind of empathy as a fellow woman. Lavinia pleads with her, "O Tamora, thou bearest a woman's face –" and begs her to let her speak – "Sweet lords, entreat her hear me but a word," but Tamora does not listen to her. Lavinia's helpless cries are ineffectual, as no one is there to save her, and Tamora teams up with her two lustful sons to take full advantage of Lavinia's isolation (II.iii. 136, 138). Tamora does not even consider killing Lavinia (as she herself suggests), which could be viewed as another option of revenge against Titus. Tamora wants her sons to "satisfie their lust on thee" and for Lavinia to suffer rape and live with its consequences physically and mentally (II.iii. 180). One might expect moral struggle with Tamora in this scene – that she may empathize with Lavinia because of their shared gender. However, the audience gets no sense of such a moral struggle whatsoever, and Tamora asserts complete power without any regret. This forest scene contributes to her exact act of revenge and leads to the second half of the play where Lavinia is completely mutilated and horrifies her own father.

The height of Tamora's agency comes when Aaron has fled and she herself plans to complete her revenge against the Andronici. Readers see one final episode where she remains in control of the revenge before her downfall. After Lavinia is exposed to Titus, Tamora knows he is emotionally distraught and perhaps even mad due to the shame brought upon their family name. She expresses her confidence in how she can take advantage of such madness to Saturninus at the end of Act IV: "I will enchant the old Andronicus/ With words more sweet, and yet more dangerous,/ Than baits to fish or honey stalks to sheep,/ When as the one is wounded

with the bait,/ The other rotted with delicious feed” (IV.iv. 90-94). She realizes that with Lavinia mutilated, Titus is in a vulnerable position, with both his daughter and family name defeated.

With Saturninus’s encouragement, as he tells Tamora to “go successantly, and plead to him,” the Empress can continue the retribution, this time without Aaron’s help: to dress as Revenge and trick Titus into thinking she will punish his enemies for him (IV.iv. 114).

When Titus opens his door and finds Tamora dressed as Revenge and Demetrius and Chiron as Rape and Murder, he questions their identities but seems to believe their purpose. He asks, “Art thou Revenge? and art thou sent to me/ To be a torment to mine enemies?,” appearing to be inquisitive and almost inviting (V.ii. 41-42). Though the audience later finds out that Titus, in fact, does know it is Tamora and her sons, Tamora at this point believes Titus to be mad and that her disguises are working. When Titus welcomes his guests by saying, “O sweet Revenge, now do I come to thee,/ And, if one arm’s embracement will content thee,/ I will embrace thee in it by and by,” Tamora believes that this “fits his lunacy” and that “he firmly takes me for Revenge” (V.ii. 67-69, 70, 73). She believes that he falls for her trick, and though he has requested that Rape and Murder stay with him, Tamora leaves, triumphant in her mind. Not only has she avenged Alarbus’s death through the mutilation of Lavinia but also through the deception of Titus she has begun the process of trapping his remaining son, Lucius. The Empress has fully taken matters of revenge into her own hands, actively pursuing the downfall of the Andronici, and achieves her status of full female authority despite the number of male leaders surrounding her.

However, this peak of authority and agency for Tamora is also her downfall. She suddenly goes from being the subject of revenge to becoming the object, having made herself and her sons vulnerable to Titus’s terrible retribution. In leaving those two with him, she does

not realize that Titus actually understood their disguises and now plans on tormenting and killing them to avenge Lavinia. Tamora, in stepping away from the Andronici residence, instantly gives up her power as Titus says, aside, “I knew them all, though they supposed me mad” (V.ii. 142). Tamora is now separated from her sons and is not aware that Titus kills them and cooks them in the meal to be served to her. Her naivety is evident when she later sits down at the dinner table and comments to Titus, “We are beholding to you, good Andronicus,” seemingly pleased with his hospitality and thinking that she is about to trick him (V.iii. 33). However, just moments later, Titus reveals his gruesome act of revenge to signal Tamora’s recognition of her loss of authority over him:

Why, there they are, both bakèd in this pie,

Whereof their mother daintily hath fed,

Eating the flesh that she herself hath bred.

‘Tis true, ‘tis true; witness my knife’s sharp point! (V.iii. 60-64)

As Titus speaks these words, one can imagine the look of horror on Tamora’s face as her character’s anagnorisis occurs: she realizes that she has just consumed her murdered sons in the dinner. However, she does not even have time to react; with the stage direction of “*He stabs the Empress*” coming just after Titus’s previous declaration, we know that Tamora is killed instantly without having a second to say anything in rebuttal.

Tamora ends her life in the state she was in exactly when the play started – at the mercy of Titus. She becomes an object to his actions and quickly loses any control she had over the revenge plot, and she physically dies to symbolize the definite finality of her reign as both Empress and revenger. It is ironic that right after the moment in which she had the most power – dressed as Revenge and ready to take advantage of the seemingly insane Titus – she makes her

biggest mistake in leaving Demetrius and Chiron alone with Titus, thus ignoring the possibility of his final revenge upon her. It is this mistake that marks the end of her power just after it peaks at the end of the play. Her surprising confidence and control as a female character, which contrasts greatly to her male counterparts, is subsumed by the restoration of male dominance in the end. This final element of revenge reminds the audience that the whole goal of such action is to restore justice and stability, and with the death of all involved characters – Lavinia, Titus, Demetrius, Chiron, and Tamora – there is hope that this purgation can be achieved.

As one can see, both the characters of Lavinia and Tamora exert an unexpected impact on revenge throughout the play. This impact stems from certain events that happen to these women as a result of their gender – the rape and mutilation of one and the death of another’s son – and helps these characters carry out acts of revenge against one another. These two female characters form the frame of the entire play, and without their active roles, the plot would have no purpose. Lavinia’s rape, which leads to her revealing such information to her father, allows Titus to carry out the final act of revenge upon Tamora for her sons’ actions. Tamora’s revenge against Titus for killing Alarbus – which is carried out through the actions of Demetrius and Chiron – spark the need for Titus’s revenge. It is ironic that when both Lavinia and Tamora are either at their lowest point or peak of power that the play’s peripeteia occurs and the sequence of events then shifts for each respective character. With such active female roles in *Titus Andronicus*, Shakespeare clearly demonstrates certain aspects of revenge tragedies and how women play an integral role in the outcome of such misfortune.

Chapter 2

Desdemona, Emilia, and Bianca of Shakespeare's *Othello*

Introduction

Unlike other female protagonists in revenge tragedies, those of Shakespeare's *Othello* somehow remove themselves from committing acts of revenge upon others. Desdemona, Emilia, and Bianca all play active roles at different points in Othello's revenge (as inspired by Iago) but they hold a certain innocence that makes them very unlike a character like *Titus Andronicus*'s Tamora, for example. Both Desdemona and Emilia are faithful to their husbands, despite Othello's and Iago's inner conflicts, and show that they believe in honesty and justice up until their deaths. They even die at the hands of their beloveds. Their husbands killing them signals just how corrupted these two men become – that they ruthlessly murder their wives for unjustified reasons. Bianca, though unmarried, shows obedience towards Cassio and ironically becomes an integral component of Iago's planned revenge though she is only onstage for short periods of time. All in all, the three female characters in *Othello* surprisingly hold powerful statuses even if it is after their male counterparts have committed dire acts or the revenge plot has already followed through.

Desdemona and her post-mortem agency

Desdemona's agency develops on different levels throughout the play, beginning with Othello's infatuation with her as the two have married and truly fallen in love. One can see how devoted Othello is when he professes his love to Brabantio: "She loved me for the dangers I had

passed,/ And I loved her that she did pity them” (I.iii. 167-168). Othello evidently appreciates Desdemona’s extreme concern for him during his exotic and military past. Though Desdemona’s father rejects the idea of marrying Othello, Othello defends himself and describes how “she gave me for my pains a world of kisses,” showing that Desdemona truly cares for him (I.iii. 159). Othello’s “pains” here are clearly only cured by his wife’s presence. He even notes “How I did thrive in this fair lady’s love,” highlighting the fact that he is at his best self when around Desdemona’s love (I.iii. 125). It is immediately clear that Othello dedicates much intimate emotion to Desdemona.

Though Othello initially seems completely smitten by Desdemona, this soon changes as Iago begins his revenge. Iago warns Othello to “observe her well with Cassio” and that “she did deceive her father, marrying you,” causing him to have doubts about his wife’s loyalty (III.iii. 197, 206). After Iago continues in telling Othello that Cassio dreamt of his wife, Othello cries, “O monstrous! monstrous!..../I’ll tear her all to pieces!” and the audience can see his descent into madness and loss of trust in Desdemona, even if it is without real reason (III.iii. 426, 432). As Othello begins to believe Iago’s lies, he calls her a “lewd minx” and cries “O, damn her! damn her!,” revealing that he now wants to take revenge for her supposed disloyal actions with Cassio (III.iii. 476). It is clear by the end of this scene that Othello’s recognition of Desdemona’s love for him has been completely washed away by Iago’s provocations.

One can note the disconnect between Othello and Desdemona and how little control she has over him in their subsequent discourse. When Othello accuses Desdemona of losing her precious handkerchief, she has no explanation for where it is or what angers Othello so easily. She implores, “Why do you speak so startingly and rash?” when Othello says things like “Is’t lost? Is’t gone? Speak, is’t out o’ th’ way?,” clearly demonstrating his inquisitive rage (III.iv. 79-

80). Desdemona's innocent questioning seems to make Othello even more mad as he repeatedly demands the gift he gave his wife. He repeats "The handkerchief!" three times before leaving and Desdemona innocently states, "I ne'er saw this before./ Sure there's some wonder in this handkerchief;/ I am most unhappy in the loss of it" (III.iv. 99-101). The audience, knowing Iago's plan, understands that Desdemona is being honest and evidently expresses confusion: "My lord is not my lord; nor should I know him" (III.iv. 123). Despite this misunderstanding, Othello is too infected by the idea of revenge to explain himself. Desdemona, unaware of the revenge plot, therefore loses her control over her husband. Othello now treats Desdemona as his object of revenge and will do so until he can complete such action. The murder shows Othello's complete dominance over Desdemona (though for misjudged reasons) and a final example of her helplessness of her husband's condition.

Though Desdemona remains unaware of Iago's revenge with Othello, she stays extremely loyal to her husband, which then affects Othello's reaction after her death. Desdemona pleads with Iago, "What shall I do to win my lord again?/...I know not how I lost him. Here I kneel..." showing just how much she wants her former husband back (IV.ii. 149, 151). She says that "Unkindness may do much,/ And his unkindness may defeat my life,/ But never taint my love" to express her unconditional feelings for Othello even though he now treats her poorly (IV.ii. 159-161). With these statements, the audience understands that Desdemona, though untainted by the acts of evil committed by Iago and Othello, has become the object of revenge. Yet she remains faithful to her husband and devotes herself to questioning his behavior in attempt to help bring him out of despair.

Desdemona also expresses this steadfast commitment to Emilia: "My love doth so approve him/ That even his stubbornness, his checks, his frowns – /Prithee unpin – have grace

and favor” (IV.iii. 19-21). This shows that she honestly does love Othello despite his wrongdoings. She even tells Othello how much she loves him when he says he is going to kill her, and she does not expose him when Emilia walks in the room. Right before she dies, Emilia asks, “O, who hath done this deed?” to which Desdemona replies, “Nobody – I myself. Farewell./ Commend me to my kind lord. O, farewell!” (V.ii. 124-126). Even in her last moments, when Desdemona could have revealed Othello as her murderer, she chooses not to, remaining faithful to her husband. She has clearly forgiven him for his vengeful acts, though she suffers the effects of the revenge as its primary object. Desdemona’s loyalty leads to a final shift in the control and is the reason why in the end, she is restored a certain power over Othello after her death.

Desdemona does not have a turning or point or moment of discovery within the revenge plot. She remains a steadfastly loyal character, one that does not change, despite the surprising evil surrounding her. Perhaps this helps explain why Desdemona does not experience any change of thought, a sudden realization, or inspiration to act against her murderous husband. As the primary object of revenge, Desdemona falls victim to the male characters because of her good nature. She defends Cassio because he is a close friend and because she knows he is innocent, and it is this honesty that inspires Othello to kill her and thus her downfall. Desdemona never realizes that perhaps Othello would interpret this defense as intimate passion for Cassio and remains naïve while speaking to him about this. Though it is not necessarily her fault, Desdemona’s lack of awareness and honest support for her friend ultimately helps fuel Othello’s rage and inspiration to fulfill the act of revenge.

In the final scene, Othello discovers the truth about Iago when Cassio states that the handkerchief was “dropped...for a special purpose/ Which wrought to his desire” (V.ii. 323-

324). He understands Desdemona was wrongly murdered, as it was not her fault for losing the handkerchief. Othello cries, “Oh Desdemon! dead Desdemon! dead! Oh! Oh!” clearly revealing his regret for killing his innocent wife. He recognizes his wrongdoing when Lodovico asks, “Where is this rash and most unfortunate man?” and Othello replies, “That’s he that was Othello. Here I am,” (V.ii. 283-284). Though Othello realizes that Desdemona was innocent, it is too late, and she lays dead right beside him. Othello calls himself, “O fool! fool! fool!” as Cassio explains how Iago provoked the revenge and Othello realizes that he fell for his friend’s tricks. With this realization, Desdemona, though already gone, regains a certain power over Othello. Because he recognizes her eternal loyalty and forgiveness even as she faces death, Othello submits to her love and kills himself. Thus, Desdemona’s faithfulness allows her to remain uncorrupted by the revenge plot and untouched by the entire play’s acts of evil. She stays loyal to her husband despite his corrupted mindset, and eternally free from all blame or sin. The play ends with the audience aware of her elevated morality.

Emilia fighting for justice

The audience sees an interesting twist with Emilia because she unknowingly helps with Iago’s revenge plot throughout the entire play, which thus leads to Desdemona’s death and Emilia’s eventual outrage at the two male protagonists. In Act III of *Othello*, Emilia obeys and respects Iago. When she finds Desdemona’s dropped handkerchief, Emilia remembers how Iago had previously asked her to retrieve it: “My wayward husband hath a hundred times/ Wooed me to steal it...I’ll have the work ta’en out/ And give’t Iago. What he will do with it/ Heaven knows, not I;/ I nothing but to please his fantasy” (III.iii. 292-293, 296-299). She does not even know why her husband fervently wanted her to retrieve the handkerchief, but she takes it anyway

“to please his fantasy”. Emilia is aware of the value the handkerchief for Desdemona, as she states, “This was her first remembrance from the Moor,” just before picking it up (III.iii. 291). Even though Emilia is loyal to Desdemona, she takes the special token to make Iago happy. Her obedient behavior to support what later becomes the act of revenge and not Desdemona shows she is loyal to her husband without even questioning his motives.

Emilia again shows her loyalty to Iago when she speaks to him just after picking up the handkerchief. She tells her husband that Desdemona “let it drop by negligence,/ And to th’ advantage, I, being here, took’t up” to show that she took advantage of Desdemona being distracted to comply with her husband’s wishes (III.iii. 311-312). For a second time, Emilia recognizes how much the handkerchief means to her friend when she tells Iago, “Poor lady, she’ll run mad/ When she shall lack it” (III.iii. 317-318). This shows her devotion to Iago and that she will do whatever he asks of her. Just after she does this favor for him, he says, “Go, leave me” and Emilia leaves without saying a word, further showing her consistent obedient behavior (III.iii. 320). With this action in particular, the audience sees Emilia not necessarily as powerless but as subservient to her husband in her actions and purpose. She is present to comply with Iago’s demands and in the process, she unknowingly ends up being a key character in the revenge plot.

In later speaking with Desdemona, Emilia reveals further evidence of her faithfulness to Iago in telling her friend a small white lie. When Desdemona asks, “Where should I lose the handkerchief, Emilia?” she replies, “I know not, madam” (III.iv. 23-24). This is not true because in the scene directly before, the audience witnesses Emilia picking up the handkerchief. The fact that Emilia is willing to lie to Desdemona for Iago’s sake shows her dedication to her husband over her mistress. Emilia thus becomes the instrument of her husband’s revenge plot against

Othello. Though Emilia is not intentionally trying to hurt Desdemona or Othello in any way, she naively permits the revenge plot to continue in retrieving the token for Iago and then lying to her friend. Because Iago now holds the handkerchief, he can set up Desdemona and trick Othello into thinking she cheated on him with Cassio.

Bella Mirabella highlights the importance of the handkerchief in her critique entitled, “‘A Wording Poet’: Othello Among the Mountebanks.” Mirabella states that “the handkerchief in early modern Europe...in many ways was a contradictory object, particularly in the hands of a woman. It was a love token, an indicator of class, status, refinement and wealth, a piece of intimate linen” (163-164). This explains just how valuable Desdemona’s handkerchief is to both her and Othello, as he remembers it as his first gift to her. Seen as an intimate present, the handkerchief represents the romantic bond between Othello and Desdemona, and when Emilia picks it up for Iago, this bond is broken. Desdemona has no idea what happened to her most prized possession, and this enrages Othello. Mirabella comments on Desdemona and her relation to the handkerchief: “Desdemona, as both wife and commodity, is aligned with her handkerchief, and like her handkerchief, her reputation and her honor...is now public and seemingly bought and sold” (166). Because Desdemona carelessly loses the gift, Emilia can easily pick it up and give to Iago as he wishes. Due to the personal weight of the handkerchief, as Mirabella suggests, this allows the revenge plot to continue.

Emilia continues to recognize her own subservience to Iago when she tells Desdemona what she thinks about men using women as tools for their own pleasure: “They are all but stomachs, and we all but food;/ They eat us hungerly, and when they are full,/ They belch us” (III.iv. 103-105). With this statement, the audience recognizes that Emilia is aware of how Iago and Othello treat both her and Desdemona as wives – or tools to use for whatever they please –

yet she still serves Iago in delivering the handkerchief. The fact that she is aware of her husband's demanding nature but still obeys his wishes further exemplifies Emilia's submissiveness.

However, once Emilia discovers the truth behind Iago's actions after stumbling upon Desdemona's dead body, the peripeteia for her character occurs and she rises in authority both literally and morally. This shift in power allows Emilia to make Othello realize what he has done, reveal Iago's guilt, and die in defense of justice. Once Emilia sees Desdemona lying in the bed, she says, "I must needs report the truth," to Othello, declaring her control over revealing what has happened (V.ii. 129). It becomes evident to the audience that she will be the one to tell everyone that Othello killed his innocent wife, which does happen later in the scene. She then goes on, calling Othello "the blacker devil" and asserting that "thou art rash as fire to say/ That she was false" (V.ii. 133, 136-137). After Othello claims Iago told him of Desdemona's affair with Cassio, Emilia denounces her husband: "If he say so, may his pernicious soul/ Rot half a grain a day! he lies to th'heart" (V.ii. 156-157). Emilia has no sympathy for Othello or Iago and she will proclaim their faults to reveal the truth. It is clear that she stands for justice and is not retaliating for any act of revenge of her own, as the audience can see that she will not personally benefit in any way from this. Emilia also directly accuses Iago when he walks in, saying, "You told a lie, an odious damnèd lie!/ Upon my soul, a lie! a wicked lie!" (V.ii. 181-182). When Iago tells her to "charm her tongue," she bravely replies, "I will not charm my tongue; I am bound to speak:/ My mistress here lies murdered in her bed" – again reinforcing the fact that she must speak and reveal the truth so justice can be achieved (V.ii. 184-186). The audience sees Emilia's vocal power here; she is the one that holds the necessary information to punish the revengers. Her obedience to Iago obviously no longer means anything to her, as she says, "'Tis proper I

obey him, but not now./ Perchance, Iago, I will ne'er go home" (V.ii. 197-198). Emilia wants to expose the truth because it is the right thing to do.

Marguerite Tassi supports the idea of Emilia as active in revealing the truth in *Women and Revenge in Shakespeare: Gender, Genre, and Ethics*. She writes that Emilia "rises to the occasion of justice and appeals to a high good" and "reveals a moral capacity to take a stance in her marriage, in her friendship, and in the political community represented by Venetian males" (266). Tassi explains how Emilia's "ethic of revenge" is different than of Iago or Othello, and that she "refuses to surrender her agency and speech to male authorities". Emilia seeks to tell the truth and avenge Desdemona's death because Desdemona cannot do this herself. This shows Emilia's loyalty as a friend and makes the audience respect her for such a trait. As Tassi states that "her revenge comes not for a personal injury...[it] comes in the verbal defeat of her enemies through the disclosure of the truth." Tassi explains how Emilia's active stance in opposition to Othello and Iago is a "verbal defeat," and this shows just how important this female character's role is in her final scene. She "defeats" Iago by exposing him and "defeats" Othello by making him realize what he has done.

With Emilia's accusations, Othello realizes what he did wrong and that Desdemona, who was innocent, died because of it. Othello says, "It is true indeed," before crying "O! O! O!" and falling on the bed (V.ii. 189, 198). Iago orders Emilia to leave as he becomes angered by the commotion she has caused; he says, "I charge you get you home" but she does not listen (V.ii. 194). Even after Iago pulls a knife on Emilia, she still confesses her own wrongdoing, though unintentionally, to reveal her elevated morality and thus ethical power over the men: "...that handkerchief thou speak'st of/ I found by fortune, and did give my husband;/ For often with a solemn earnestness – /More than indeed belonged to such a trifle – / He begged of me to steal't"

(V.ii. 226-230). Moments before her death, Emilia does what is right and confesses her own involvement with the handkerchief but also reveals the truth about Iago in attempt to restore justice. It is this act – though in the face of death – that makes Emilia reputable and a respected character. Her honesty and awareness of ethical morality, even amongst a group of vengeful men, makes her different than other female characters. She, like Desdemona, remains untouched by the evils that corrupted their husbands and dies innocently and for the sake of justice.

Bianca's role: short-lived but significant

Though the audience does not see much of Bianca in *Othello*, the few times she does appear on stage do account for very significant actions that directly affect Iago's plot of revenge. At first, Bianca is presented as just a courtesan, unmarried but who sleeps with Cassio. Though they are not a married couple, it is assumed that she does not have any other lovers, as none are ever mentioned. In fact, Bianca is introduced to the audience as an obedient woman to Cassio, just as Desdemona and Emilia are to their husbands. When Cassio finds the handkerchief in his room, he decides to give it to Bianca to have her copy the material. He tells her, "I like the work well; ere it be demanded,/ As like enough it will, I would have it copied./ Take it and do't, and leave me for this time" (III.iv. 188-190). Though Bianca questions him, "Leave you? Wherefore?" she eventually does leave with the handkerchief, obeying Cassio's wish for them not to be seen in public together (III.iv. 191). She says, "'Tis very good. I must be circumstanced" to show her compliance (III.iv. 200). As Cassio is a lieutenant and respected figure (before the revenge plot ensues), it is understandable why Bianca, as his lover, would be subservient to such a man.

However, as the play develops the audience sees just how important Bianca's presence becomes. When Othello is speaking to Cassio about Cassio's lover – who is really Bianca, but Othello suspects is Desdemona – Bianca walks in with the handkerchief and expresses her anger:

...What did you mean by that same handkerchief you gave me even now? I was a fine fool to take it. I must take out the work? A likely piece of work that you should find it in your chamber and know not who left it there! This is some minx's token, and I must take out the work? There! Give it your hobbyhorse.

Wheresoever you had it, I'll take out no work on't. (IV.i. 146-153)

Because Cassio and Othello were just discussing Cassio's lover, Bianca's outrage acts as further proof for Othello that Desdemona is sleeping with him. Othello is aware that Bianca is supposed to be Cassio's only lover, so when she thinks there is someone else, then for him it seems true. Bianca's active role in scorning Cassio and also bringing forth the handkerchief goes right along with Iago's plan and enrages Othello even more, just as Iago wanted.

It is because of Bianca's presence in this scene that Othello then claims, "Ay, let her rot, and perish, and be damned/ tonight, for she shall not live" in speaking about Desdemona, foreshadowing the murder (IV.i. 178-179). Though Bianca disappears after this scene for the rest of the play, her actions play a pivotal role in providing proof to inspire Othello's revenge. It is interesting to question if the reason why Bianca is the only female character who survives at the end of *Othello* is because she is not married to Cassio and thus not concretely attached to him. Her character, though a "strumpet," acts as unknowing agent for the revenge plot to ensue, but she herself does not experience any physical or mental harm like Desdemona and Emilia do. She is troubled by Cassio, who she thinks is involved with another women, but when she leaves the scene at that moment she also leaves the revenge plot behind her. She lives at the end, remains

free from blame, and more importantly escapes any further vengeful acts, which all of the other central characters do not.

Evidently, all three female characters in *Othello* play vital roles within the revenge plot: Desdemona as victim, Emilia as unintentional instigator, and Bianca as proof for Othello. As Othello is at first madly in love with Desdemona, he is subservient to her because of his emotions. This adoration soon changes with his suspicions but is again restored after her death. Emilia acts obedient to Iago throughout most of the play but then turns on him upon discovery of the truth and fights for justice until her death. Bianca, though not Cassio's wife, obeys him equally as Desdemona and Emilia do their husbands but ends up revealing supposed physical proof to instigate Othello's revenge – a pivotal moment in the play. Though *Othello* may seem like a male-dominated play, with Iago and Othello taking most of the direct action, the audience can note at the conclusion just how integral Desdemona's, Emilia's, and Bianca's presences and behaviors become.

Chapter 3

The Duchess, Cariola, and Julia of Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*

Introduction

As a play with the title of the female protagonist, *the Duchess of Malfi* embodies feminist concepts that are quite radical for the Malfi court: the Duchess herself conceals her marriage and pregnancy, purposely disobeying her brothers' command to seek her own desires, and dies proudly despite the injustice of her murder. With Cariola, her servant, audiences see a steadfast and faithful friend, who faces death with the expected uncertainty and panic yet still remains removed from the evil world that surrounds her to gain viewers' and critics' respect alike. Julia, though at first independent and confident, ends up being used as a tool by Bosola to fulfill his revenge and also dies as a result, completely at the mercy of male characters. With these three different examples, one can see the different levels of female power that existed within and around the Malfi court. The Duchess, clearly the strongest in both body and mind, exemplifies what it means to marry for honest love and to die unashamed and unregretful, and thus she wins the hearts of everyone except the Cardinal and Ferdinand. Cariola and Julia, though both minor female characters, show what happens when other characters become involved within different layers of the revenge plot and how their actions either affect or don't affect it. Because the Duchess directly inspires the revenge to occur (with the support of Cariola) and Julia allows a shift to occur in enabling Bosola to become a revenge figure, it is obvious just how significant female agency becomes in every act of the play.

The Duchess's moral stature: a steady ascent

Unlike other female characters who experience moments of recognition, the Duchess from John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* remains in a powerful position and even ascends a bit higher in ethical stature as she dies in Act IV. In the beginning, Webster introduces her as the ruler of Malfi, admired for both her regal nature and also her good nature. Antonio also describes how the Duchess is personally appraised right in the beginning of the play: "Whilst she speaks,/ She thows upon a man so sweet a look...but in that look/ There speaketh so divine a continence" (I.i. 206-207, 210-211). He continues to describe her "noble virtue" and that "she stains the time past, lights the time to come" to show just how innocent and inspiring she is as a woman and as Duchess (I.i. 213, 221). It is clear that Antonio is fond of her, but it is also evident that many people regard her in this manner; Antonio adds that "all sweet ladies break their flatt'ring glasses,/ And dress themselves in her" (I.i. 216-217). The first descriptions of the Duchess, even before she speaks, are highly positive. The audience knows to respect the Duchess not only for her beauty but for her recognized stature and grace. This initial portrayal proves that the Duchess has political as well as personal control over others who admire her.

Audiences realize how much power the Duchess holds over a large group of men when Antonio announces her wishes: "'Tis the Duchess' pleasure/ Each officer be locked into his chamber/ Till the sun-rising; and to send the keys of all their chests, and of their outward doors,/ Into her bedchamber. She is very sick" (II.ii. 59-63). Though the audience knows this is because the Duchess does not want anyone to discover her pregnancy, Roderigo speaks for all of the "officers" when he replies, "At her pleasure" (II.ii. 64). It is clear that the Duchess's orders are respected even if she is not physically present to give them and that she holds tight control over her officers and their actions. Considering she is the only politically powerful woman in Malfi, it is impressive that all men respect her orders obediently.

Frances Dolan points out an interesting detail of this order in his critique, ““Can this be certain?”: The Duchess of Malfi’s Secrets.” She notes, with the example of Mary Tudor, that privileged pregnant women of the time often experienced a kind of “domestic imprisonment for a month or more,” so as to not show themselves in an unattractive state (127). This “semi-seclusion” also created the stigma of the female body as opaque, as it further distanced men and male doctors from knowing more about pregnancy and women’s bodily processes in general. Despite this common practice, Dolan notes that in *The Duchess of Malfi*, the Duchess does the exact opposite: “Paradoxically, in keeping her pregnancies secret, the Duchess remains in free circulation before and after the births....the castle’s officers are locked in rather than the Duchess during the birth of her first child” (127). “This reverses the usual practice of confining the mother,” again showing the Duchess’s control over the situation and just how unique it was for a pregnant woman to walk about freely. She takes an active stance in determining that it will be the others who will stay in their rooms, and not her.

As the play’s plot continues, one learns that the Duchess actively defies her brothers’ wishes and marries Antonio for true love even though he is of a lower social class and thus deemed unworthy by the Cardinal and Ferdinand. Before marrying Antonio, however, the Duchess learns and recognizes her brothers’ opinion when Ferdinand claims, “You are a widow:/ You know already what man is, and therefore/ Let not youth, high promotion, eloquence – ” and the Cardinal adds in, “sway your high blood” (I.i. 305-307, 309). It is clear that they honor their family name, or their “high blood,” and wish for no other man to taint that for the Duchess. Despite this, the Duchess states her plans for marrying shortly after they exit: “So I, through frights, and threatenings, will assay/ This dangerous venture. Let old wives report/ I winked and chose a husband” (I.i. 359-361). The Duchess evidently wants to embark on “this dangerous

venture,” or marriage, and will do so without need of her brothers’ approval. Though Ferdinand and the Cardinal are characterized as powerful and menacing, she seems to disregard this and claims her plan of action anyway. Her strong defiance of her brothers shows that the Duchess is not afraid to lead her life how she chooses and that she does not need family acceptance as permission.

Theodora Jankowski highlights the Duchess’s agency in choosing to marry Antonio in her critique, “Defining/Confining the Duchess: Negotiating the Female Body in John Webster’s *The Duchess of Malfi*”. Jankowski notes that “she has violated existing patriarchal conventions of marriage to create her own concept of the state,” reinforcing the idea that the Duchess actively went against social norm, or “patriarchal conventions,” to marry whom she loved (230). It clearly was not usual for aristocratic women to marry for true love, as these women were often paired with men that could raise their wealth or political power. Jankowski also touches on how the Duchess uses her political power to develop personal interests:

In actively choosing her own husband and in marrying him in a way that scorns accepted legal practices, the Duchess reinforces her sense of self as a political person. She is represented as demonstrating her own right to choose a husband and her right to determine how she – as ruler of Malfi – will legitimize her choice.
(234)

With this, one can recognize just how much political power the Duchess exercises for her own benefit. As the Duchess of Malfi, she does what she wants and “reinforces her sense of self” in the process. Because of this, her choice is “legitimized,” as no one would normally question choices made by those in high social and political positions. Jankowski relates how the Duchess’s choice to marry Antonio reflects her administrative dignity and personal pride.

The Duchess's defiance of her brothers, however, is exactly what sparks the Cardinal's and Ferdinand's revenge. It is because the Duchess actively works against her two brothers, and what they claim as their "high blood," that then they then pursue revenge against her. The Ferdinand tells the Cardinal, "Read there, a sister damned; she's loose i'th'hilts/ Grown a notorious strumpet" and that "confusion seize her" to reveal her defiant actions, as discovered by Bosola, his spy (II.iv. 3-4, 8). Ferdinand continues to express how he needs "to purge infected blood such blood as hers," and the audience realizes that he wants to kill the Duchess in order to complete this "purging" (II.v. 25). Though Ferdinand goes above and beyond what is necessary in plotting his revenge – a common action for revenge figures – his reasoning for doing so is that the Duchess deliberately disobeyed his wishes. By the end of Act II, Ferdinand expresses that he "could kill her now" but then states that "till I know who leaps my sister, I'll not stir:/ That known, I'll find scorpions to string my whips,/ And fix her in a general eclipse" to show that he needs more information before carrying out his revenge (II.iv. 64, 80-83). His inspiration for such a gruesome revenge plot is the Duchess herself; it is her direct disobedience that infuriates Ferdinand the most because she was aware of his opinion on the matter.

The Duchess continues to actively change how the revenge is pursued, even when she is imprisoned by her brothers. When she and Cariola hear the madmen coming, the Duchess says "I am not mad yet" and that she appreciates their visit, as "nothing but noise and folly/ Can keep me in my right wits, whereas reason/ And silence make me stark mad" (IV.ii. 24, 5-7). She seems to see the positive aspect of the situation, that the madmen will provide some noise so as to keep her occupied and attentive. The Duchess also says that "To hear of greater grief would lessen mine," referencing that perhaps she is grateful to not have to suffer what the mad lawyer, mad doctor, and other madmen must (IV.ii. 10). This approach to her imprisonment shows the

Duchess as dignified; she accepts what is happening without grieving or complaining or showing any sign of fear. She remains in control of the situation and even welcomes her torture – the madmen that Ferdinand sends to “bring her to despair” (IV.i. 117). Because she embraces her brothers’ decision, the audience views the Duchess as perhaps forgiving or accepting of their violent nature. She is still regarded with respect even though she is completely at their mercy.

The Duchess continues such accepting and proud behavior when Bosola enters the room, declaring, “I am Duchess of Malfi still” when he begins to insult her (IV.ii. 147). She still sees herself as politically powerful and is confident that her title will not be stripped of her. She declares to Cariola that “Peace, it affrights not me” even when she sees the executioners bring a coffin into the room (IV.ii. 178). Her courage in this scene shows that she is not only unafraid of her brothers but that she is also unafraid to die. The Duchess rhetorically asks, “Who would be afraid on’t,/ Knowing to meet such excellent company/ In th’other world?” as she thinks that Antonio is dead and seems to look forward to seeing him “in th’other world” (IV.ii. 217-219). The audience sides with the Duchess as she declares “I forgive them” – meaning the Cardinal, Ferdinand, and Bosola – and sees her as an honest and good hearted character even as a prisoner (IV.ii. 213). Her active stance in defending herself here proves that she does not succumb to her brothers’ tyranny and thus affects how the audience views her after the revenge is carried out.

The Duchess continues to actively participate in the process of revenge just moments before the executioners strangle her. She declares, “heaven’ gates are not so highly arched/ As princes’ palaces; they that enter there/ Must go upon their knees” as she kneels down, ready to embrace death (IV.ii. 238-240). Webster even includes a stage direction, “[*Kneels*]” to show that it is the Duchess herself preparing for her death and not anyone else forcing her down. She expresses her invitation openly to again show her courage: “Come, violent death” (IV.ii. 239).

With this statement, one can see that she is ready to die and no longer wishes to disobey her brothers. Yet, even as she cooperates in her own murder, the audience does not get a sense that the Cardinal, Ferdinand, and Bosola win her over. The Duchess's brave approach to Bosola and the executioners show that she remains morally above all the other characters, still upholding her title as Duchess of Malfi, and dies without losing herself. In a sense, her murder represents an ethical ascent.

The Duchess continues to represent a powerful force even after her death with the way the Echo, which can be compared to her ghost figure, connects with Antonio at the end of the play. When Antonio and Delio hear a voice coming from the Duchess's grave, Antonio notes that "'Tis very like my wife's voice," recognizing the sound immediately (V.iii. 26). The echo repeats several phrases that Antonio and Delio state, seeming to give them a warning about the future. It highlights phrases such as "Like death that we have," "Be mindful of thy safety," and "O, fly your fate" (V.iii. 18, 32, 35). In warning Antonio not to see the Cardinal later, the echo's phrases foreshadow Antonio's death. Even though the act of revenge – the Duchess's murder – has already been completed in Act IV, her presence in Act V shows that she remains powerful even in the afterlife. Antonio even mentions that he sees "a face folded in sorrow," supposedly that of his wife, reinforcing the idea that the Duchess will be ever present (V.iii. 45).

Cariola as loyal servant

As the Duchess's lady-in-waiting, Cariola holds a very close relationship with her and thus must keep her marriage and pregnancy a secret. Though Cariola acts as just a servant, the audience sees a poignant bond between the two female characters that makes one side with Cariola as one does with the Duchess. In the beginning of the play, Cariola shows her loyalty to

the Duchess when she decides to marry to against her brothers' wishes: "Both shall be safe:/ For I'll conceal this secret from the world" (I.i. 363-364). One notices the true friendship that exists between the Duchess and Cariola when the Duchess responds, "Thy protestation/ Is ingenious and heart: I believe it" (I.i. 367-368). Though Cariola supports the Duchess's actions and is, in fact, the only one who knows about it at first, she does exercise her own knowledge in saying, "Whether the spirit of greatness or of woman/ Reign most in her, I know not, but it shows/ A fear madness; I owe her much of pity" (I.i. 515-517). It is clear that Cariola is faithful but also cautionary and uses a balanced judgment in determining how she thinks and acts.

Cariola also shows her own judgment and establishes her own set of morals when she replies to Antonio's question, asking when she will marry: "Never, my lord" (III.ii. 23). She then calls Antonio's romantic stories about married women "vain poetry" and clearly declares her personal opposition to such practice (III.ii. 33). However, through her support of the Duchess, it becomes evident that though Cariola may not personally agree with the act of marrying, she still acts faithful to her mistress and will conceal her secrets. In this sense, Cariola can be viewed as a figure with authority because she responds directly to the Duchess, who is active in inspiring revenge. Cariola supports such action and offers to conceal it.

Cariola can additionally be seen as a figure of authority because she is reason the marriage can be consummated properly – she acts as the witness. When Antonio enters the rooms at the end of Act I.i., Cariola hides behind the arras as the Duchess essentially proposes to him: "I do here put off all vain ceremony,/ And only do appear to you a young widow/ That claims you for her husband" (I.i. 467-469). Antonio replies, "I will remain the constant sanctuary/ Of your good name," and the two are wed (I.i. 471-472). It is not until Cariola removes herself from behind the arras, to Antonio's surprise, that the Duchess declares the

necessity of her servant as a witness: “I have heard lawyers say, a contract in a chamber/ *Per verba de presenti* is absolute marriage” (I.i. 489-490). Thus, the legitimacy of the marriage is confirmed by Cariola’s presence, and without her being there, the marriage would have not been as official as it is with a witness. Cariola witnessing such an event for her mistress again proves her loyalty but also that she is a determining factor in the actuality of the marriage. Though she may personally oppose the practice, she actively permits it to happen for the Duchess and Antonio, which then leads to the brothers’ revenge.

Cariola, though faithful to the Duchess’s mission in defying the Cardinal and Ferdinand throughout the play, does experience a moment of recognition and possibly a change in characterization when she and the Duchess face death at the hands of Bosola. At first, when imprisoned, Cariola defends her mistress to Bosola, saying, “What will you do with my lady?...I will die with her” (IV.ii. 202, 208). While the Duchess acts bravely just as the executioners are about to strangle her, Cariola seems to panic when she realizes that death is inevitable for both women. Cariola complains, “I am not prepared for’t, I will not die;/ I will first come to my answer, and know/ How I have offended” and demands reason for her murder (IV.ii. 250-252). As Bosola and the executioners ignore this request, Cariola continues to show that she is not ready to die by saying, “If you kill me now/ I am damned: I have not been at confession/ This two years” (IV.ii. 257-259). She thinks that she must confess before she dies, as she has not done so, and shows that she will make up any excuse for them not to kill her. She even says, “I am quick with child” as one last attempt to persuade her murderers, which proves to be useless and almost pathetic, as the audience knows she is not pregnant (IV.ii. 259).

Cariola, though once confident in what she believed and supportive of the Duchess’s defiant actions, now acts fearful and submissive to the men around her. With these statements, it

is obvious that she lets them take control over her emotions as she dies at the hands of Bosola because of her association with the Duchess. However, though Cariola may lose her sense of control, she is only lowered to the status she represents: as a servant, she *should* fear those in power and it is expected that she should subject herself to them. Her reaction to being murdered is understandable, though it greatly contrasts the brave stance the Duchess decides to take. With this, it is hard to judge Cariola as a weak figure at the moment of her death, because she acts as any average human being would right before one is killed. Though Cariola dies unwillingly, unlike the Duchess, she still remains separated from the act of revenge, pleading for justice and a moral answer to the evil world that surrounds her.

Julia permitting further revenge

Though the Cardinal's mistress and a minor character, Julia provides an example of what happens after the revenge shifts and Bosola is motivated to seek revenge upon the brothers. At first, however, Julia is depicted as strong-willed and independent when she hears that Castruccio, her husband, is in Rome. When the Cardinal tries to woo her and says, "Come, I'll love you wisely" she replies, "I'll go home to my husband" (II.iv. 24, 27). The Cardinal continues to say, "I pray thee, kiss me" to try and tempt her to not see her husband and instead stay with him (II.iv. 30). However, Julia does not seem willing, and when Delio enters with news of Castruccio's return she ignores the Cardinal's comments as he says, "Let him enter, I'll withdraw" (II.iv. 43). This scene shows that though she is his mistress, Julia holds power over the Cardinal as she is a married woman and rejects his offers to go with her husband. Since the Cardinal holds a high social and political status and Julia does not, this may be a surprising

exchange between the two lovers. It seems with the Cardinal's offer to withdraw that he understands the situation and realizes that Julia does not want to be with him at the moment.

Julia's bold nature is also exemplified in the way she pursues Bosola, demanding him as her new lover towards the end of the play. She enters the room with a pistol, directly asking Bosola "Yes, confess to me/ Which of my women 'twas you hired, to put/ Love-powder into my drink?," referencing that it was perhaps Bosola himself that made her fall in love (V.ii.157-159). Julia then demands, "Put yourself to the charge of courting me,/ Whereas now I woo you" and is evidently leading the conversation (V.ii. 184-185). This exchange seems to occur without any previous indication, thus showing Julia's determination and direct attitude. Her statement, "Whereas now I woo you," however, marks the end of her authority and a turning point for Bosola. He responds to Julia with a proposal that will enable him to complete the final act of revenge – his revenge upon the Cardinal and Ferdinand – and to regain control of his role within the revenge plot.

Bosola tells Julia to do him a favor to show her love for him: to extract the truth from the Cardinal about his involvement with the Duchess's murder. Bosola tells her, "The Cardinal is grown wondrous melancholy;/ Demand the cause; let him not put you off/ With feigned excuse, discover the main ground on't" (V.ii. 204-206). Julia agrees, not knowing that this information will then justify Bosola killing both the Cardinal and Ferdinand as payback for them withholding his reward. Bosola clearly is using Julia, as she is the Cardinal's mistress and knows him well, as a tool for his own benefit. Because she is trying to woo him, she obeys his command and asks the Cardinal, "How now, my lord?/ What ails you?" in many different ways to receive her answer (V.ii. 232). However, Julia changes suddenly after this. She directly obeys the Cardinal when he says, "Come, I will swear you to't upon this book" and she replies, "Most religiously" –

not knowing that the book has poison on it and thus the Cardinal planned to kill her (V.ii. 277-278). Bosola hears the information he needs – the Cardinal’s involvement with the Duchess’s murder – and appears just as Julia dies, when she says, “I go, I know not whither” (V.ii. 290). She is clearly confused by the fact that the Cardinal poisoned her and dies at his mercy, as well as Bosola’s, as she clearly is controlled by both of them.

In attempting to woo both Bosola and the Cardinal, Julia meets her ultimate down fall and relinquishes all of her agency in one swift moment. This then affects the outcome of the story; even though the brothers’ revenge plot is completed, Bosola now has proof that the Cardinal was involved with the death of the Duchess and thus also withheld his reward for participating. Because of Julia actively exposing the Cardinal, Bosola is able to have reason for killing both of the brothers.

Though all three female characters in *The Duchess of Malfi* die by the end of the play, death does not always render the character as defeated. With the Duchess, her pride and steadfast love for Antonio causes her brothers’ revenge, but she meets her death unafraid. This fearlessness makes audiences side with her as she follows what she believes is the right thing to do despite the horror around her. Cariola, her faithful lady-in-waiting, remembers her own opinions on marriage but conceals the Duchess’s secrets nonetheless; she dies in fear but still remains untainted by the acts of revenge. And finally, Julia, at first independent but then used as a tool, plays an active role in inspiring a twist in the revenge plot and allows Bosola to become a second revenge figure. Clearly, these three women are confident in what they believe but act in ways that are necessary for their own situations and stay untouched by the evils of revenge.

Conclusion

As seen with Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*, Shakespeare's *Othello*, and John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*, female characters in revenge tragedies prove their significance with agency and direct action. Their participation within the revenge or outside of it affects not only their own fates but also those of other characters. It becomes clear through these three works that though sometimes unexpected, the active role women play is vital to the plot and outcome of revenge.

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- *What the Freeh Report Means for One Paterno Fellow*, LAUS blog, August 2012 (<http://blogs.la.psu.edu/laus/2012/08/what-the-freeh-report-means-for-one-paterno-fellow.html>)
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Community Service Involvement:

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The Penn State IFC/Panhellenic Dance Marathon

- Fundraised through canning weekends, THONvelopes (written solicitations), and on-campus/community events
- One of two dancers elected to represent Whiplash Dance Team, February 2012

Campus Involvement:

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- Serve as a student government ambassador to the college
- Volunteer at prospective student and alumni events
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Copy Editor, Agora

- Edited two Liberal Arts publications per semester, approximately 15 articles per issue
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Secretary, Alumni Relations Chair, Whiplash Dance Team

- Managed group of 24 student dancers with three other officers for three two-hour practices every week
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