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Making Sense of the Wreckage:

Female Accusers and Storytellers in *Othello*, *Macbeth*, and *Cymbeline*

Throughout his many works, Shakespeare draws upon an ancient tradition, using a variety of stock characters to help populate his plays. The most vital of these set characters in a Shakespearean tragedy is the tragic hero, “a protagonist of high estate...who falls from prosperity to misery...as a result of a ‘tragic flaw’” (Schwartz, “Shakespeare’s Plays: Tragedy”). Readers know that tragic heroes are inherently doomed and that tragedies are “essentially [tales] of suffering and calamity...[ending in] death,” with only a handful of characters left after the climax to make sense of the wreckage (Bradley 7). In contrast, in Shakespeare’s late romances, sometimes referred to as “tragi-comedies,” the love of a virtuous hero and heroine is a central focus of the play (Schwartz, “Shakespeare’s Four Final Plays”). Because the form of a tragedy or a romance is so well known, the focus shifts from the plot itself to the role that the construction of characters plays in furthering that plot.

Two such constructs, the “accuser” and the “storyteller,” often appear in the final scenes of Shakespeare’s tragedies and romances. The accuser pushes the plot forward by indicting the villain, while the storyteller is tasked with retelling the play’s story to the world, so that its lessons are not lost. Interestingly, these roles of accuser and storyteller appear to change based on gender. First and foremost, there are very few female accusers

and storytellers in Shakespeare's works. Although female characters do take on the role of accuser in two of Shakespeare's tragedies, *Othello* and *Macbeth*, and in one of his romances, *Cymbeline*, they are glaringly absent from other plays, and in particular from the storyteller role.

In addition to the general lack of female accusers and storytellers, the level of power and autonomy that these characters possess is decidedly less than that of their male counterparts. As Russ McDonald writes in *The Bedford Companion to Shakespeare*, the fact "that women occupied a position subordinate to men in the early modern period is beyond dispute; that this was the "natural" state of affairs was almost beyond dispute" (McDonald 252). This subordination was a fact of life in Shakespearean England, and it seems to translate directly to the roles that women are allowed to occupy in Shakespeare's plays. Consequently, male storytellers are given the power and authority to end a play, and to decide how its events will be represented to posterity, but female characters are not deemed worthy of this role. For example, in *Hamlet* Horatio is tasked by Hamlet with retelling his story. Horatio recognizes that there may be a political lesson for Fortinbras within Hamlet's story, and he states that he "has cause to speak" about Fortinbras' "rights of memory in [the Danish] kingdom" (*Hamlet* 5.2.389). As a male storyteller, Horatio is given the power to interpret what has transpired, ensuring that its lessons are heard and understood as he sees fit. The fact that there are no true female storytellers in Shakespeare's tragedies seems to state that women are not to be trusted with this role; women do not have the power to end a play, regardless of their role in it, and they do not have the authority to decide how the story will be interpreted.

There is a similar discrepancy between the power and autonomy of male and female accusers. Male accusers are generally fully aware of the villains' plots and when they become accusers they act in a strong, almost heroic manner to overthrow the villain and restore rightful order to the world of the play. A classic example of this male accuser character construct can be seen in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*; the male accuser, Laertes, is fully aware of the plot against Hamlet, and at the last second he is overcome by his own guilt and exclaims, "I am justly killed with mine own treachery" (*Hamlet* 5.2.308). Despite his involvement in the villain's scheme, Laertes is portrayed as a heroic character, who acts autonomously to expose King Claudius and restore order to the world of *Hamlet*. In contrast, the few female accusers in Shakespeare's plays—Lady Macbeth in *Macbeth*, Emilia in *Othello*, and Imogen in *Cymbeline*—are not given this same level of power and autonomy when making their accusations.

Although Lady Macbeth is an active participant in her husband's villainous schemes she is only able to take on the role of accuser after going mad, completely depriving her of any strength and control. In *Othello* Emilia is not aware of her husband's treacherous scheme, and she is only able to piece together her accusation bit by bit. Emilia's accusation is emotional, lacking the calm, heroic strength of many of her male counterparts. Imogen, the accuser in *Cymbeline*, is able to make her accusation more calmly than Emilia, but she is forced into her role as accuser because of false accusations against her chastity and loyalty; this accusation seems uniquely feminine, and stands in stark contrast to the way male accusers step into their roles.

Lady Macbeth: An Active Accuser and a Descent into Madness

At the beginning of *Macbeth*, Lady Macbeth stands out from other female Shakespearean characters, taking an incredibly active role in the plot of the play. As the play progresses, however, she loses that power and autonomy, and descends into madness, effectively removing herself from the play's plot. Her final actions, enacted in a state of madness, are to quietly betray herself and Macbeth, and although she does not seem to act consciously as an accuser, her actions and ramblings plant the seed of doubt in Macbeth's men, and ultimately help lead to the discovery of Macbeth's actions. Although Lady Macbeth's actions and ramblings betray her husband's plan, she is not able to behave as an active accuser, and is only able to passively reveal Macbeth's terrible plot after she has gone mad. The fact that Lady Macbeth has to forfeit her mental prowess and power before she can betray Macbeth's villainous plot separates her from male accusers, and robs her of much of her autonomy.

In the initial scenes of *Macbeth*, Lady Macbeth is strong willed and determined, an equal partner in her husband's scheming. If anything, Lady Macbeth is more in control than Macbeth, and her dreams of power are grand and ambitious. She is thrilled to receive a letter from her husband, detailing his rise as "Thane of Cawdor," but she knows that her husband is not as courageous or determined as she is. She bemoans the fact that Macbeth is ambitious but "too full o' th' milk of human kindness" to take the necessary actions to reach the throne (1.5.17). Lady Macbeth recognizes that she will have to use her own power and autonomy to set her husband on the throne, and she begins to plot on her own, determined to "pour [her] spirits in [his] ear, And chastise with the valor of [her] tongue . . . to have [Macbeth] crown'd withal" (1.5.25-26). This level of ambition is unique for female Shakespearean characters, and when female characters in

Shakespearean plays plot on their own it is generally for romantic reasons—this makes Lady Macbeth's instigation of a political plot especially noteworthy.

Lady Macbeth's involvement in the plot grows throughout Act I, as she welcomes King Duncan and his men to her home. Lady Macbeth has met with her husband, and she has outlined how Macbeth will “bear welcome in [his] eye, [his] hand, [his] tongue; look like th' innocent flower,” as he welcomes the guests, all the while being “the serpent under't” (1.5.64-66). Unlike other female accusers, Lady Macbeth is fully aware of the plan, and she has taken an extremely active role in its preparation. When Duncan and his men arrive, Lady Macbeth welcomes them as the perfect hostess, setting her guests at ease and exclaiming that “all [her] service[s] . . . [are] poor and single business to contend/ Against those honors deep and broad” that Duncan's presence places upon her home (1.6.14-15). Duncan is entirely taken in by Lady Macbeth's welcoming female presence, and he does not doubt for a second that he will be safe in Macbeth's castle.

Although Duncan is “here in double trust,” Macbeth is desperate to kill him to satisfy his own “Vaulting ambition, which o'erleaps itself, and falls on th' other” (1.7.12, 27-28). Lady Macbeth enters at this instant, and Macbeth's ambition falters as he turns to face his wife and proposes that they “proceed no further in this business” (1.7.32). Lady Macbeth, however, will not have this. This plan is her brainchild, and she will see it through to fruition, her husband elevated as king of Scotland, and herself as its queen. The enraged Lady Macbeth turns on her husband, calling him weak and questioning his manhood:

What beast was't then

That made you break this enterprise to me?

When you durst do it, then you were a man;
 And to be more than what you were, you would
 Be so much more the man.

(1.7.47-51)

It is interesting to note that Lady Macbeth's main argument against her husband's lack of action is that this lack of action makes him less of a man. Lady Macbeth's equation of manliness with violence and ambition is a fairly common one, but in *Macbeth* Lady Macbeth is, arguably, more violent and ambitious than her husband. This sets up an interesting dichotomy between Macbeth and his wife—Macbeth is viewed as not entirely manly and must work to overcome his “weakness” and rise up to preconceived ideas of manhood. Lady Macbeth, in contrast, fulfills many feminine roles—being the perfect hostess, being a wife and mother, appearing not to know anything about the plot against Duncan—while simultaneously plotting Duncan's death and ensuring that her violent and ambitious desires are carried out.

At this point in the play, Lady Macbeth is still very much in control of her and Macbeth's plot. She has concocted a foolproof plan, in which she will, “with wine and wassail,” incapacitate two of Duncan's chamberlains; while they sleep, she and Macbeth will use the chamberlains' “very daggers” to kill Duncan (1.7.64, 76). Lady Macbeth is so certain of her plan's success that she is ready to kill Duncan herself if Macbeth fails (2.2.13). Lady Macbeth is seemingly in complete control; despite the fact that she is female, she is wielding intense power over the world of *Macbeth*.

Lady Macbeth's control over the situation, however, is beginning to slip. Macbeth is worried someone will find out what they have done, and Lady Macbeth advises him to

put his actions behind him: "These deeds must not be thought/After these ways; so, it will make us mad" (*Macbeth* 2.2.30-31). Lady Macbeth appears shaken for the first time, chastising Macbeth for bringing the daggers with him and exclaiming, "Infirm of purpose!" (2.2.49-50). She then advises her husband to return to his bed, stating that "A little water clears us of this deed;/How easy it is then!" (2.2.64-65). Unfortunately for Lady Macbeth, her plot has begun to spiral out of her control, and "a little water" will not be enough to keep her from going mad.

When the castle discovers that Duncan has been murdered, Lady Macbeth's grip on her situation begins to unravel. The castle is in an uproar, but Macduff does not want to tell Lady Macbeth about the murder: "Oh gentle lady,/ 'Tis not for you to hear what I speak:/The repetition in a woman's ear/Would murther as it fell" (2.3.83-86). This moment clearly sets up women as gentle, sensitive creatures who will be horrified by violence—an idea that stands in stark opposition to Lady Macbeth, who has been violent, determined, and ambitious up until this point in the play.

Upon hearing about the murder Lady Macbeth faints, seemingly aligning herself with this preconceived idea of sensitive womanhood—is this a ruse, or has she actually been overcome? At first reading it seems as though Lady Macbeth is acting, fainting to avoid suspicion and divert attention away from the murder, but if this is read as a premonition of her descent into madness, an argument can also be made for her being truly overcome at the retelling of the murder. Perhaps she is acting, or perhaps Lady Macbeth has begun to regret her treacherous plot.

Whether her fainting is a clever ruse or not, this moment marks a turning point in how power is divided in *Macbeth*. Up until this point Lady Macbeth held most of the

power in her relationship with her husband, and it was she who plotted and planned and nudged him on to greatness. In Act III, however, Lady Macbeth begins to show weakness. She comments that "'Tis safer to be that which we destroy/Than by destruction dwell in doubtful joy;" Lady Macbeth feels anxious about her actions, and her grasp on her situation has begun to slip (3.2.6-7). Although she recovers some of her power in the coming scenes, Lady Macbeth's downfall has begun.

Lady Macbeth quickly recovers her power somewhat, protecting Macbeth when he sees the ghost of Banquo in the banquet hall. She is able to take charge of this situation, explaining to their guests that her husband often has fits and "has...from his youth" (3.4.53). Lady Macbeth is still in control enough to chastise her husband for almost betraying their secret and, interestingly, she once again couches her disdain in gendered terms:

O, these flaws and starts
 (Imposters to true fear) would well become
 A woman's story at a winter's fire,
 Authoriz'd by her grandam. Shame itself,
 Why do you make such faces?

(3.4.62-66)

Lady Macbeth has once again equated her husband's emotion and "weakness" as being feminine traits, more applicable to a woman and her grandmother than to a future king of Scotland. Macbeth seems to take this chastisement to heart, and he responds to his wife and to the crowd, saying "What man dare, I dare" (3.4.98). As the scene ends, Madbeth comments that "I am in blood/Stepp'd in so far that, should I wade no more,/ Returning

were as tedious as go o'er" (3.4.135-137). Macbeth has reached a turning point, and he now sees that his future is steeped in blood. Macbeth seems to gain power from this realization, and in doing so he becomes the more powerful person in his relationship with his wife, and Lady Macbeth's grasp on her situation unravels quickly.

By Act V, the power shift is complete; Macbeth is in control, having enacted his own plan to murder Macduff, while Lady Macbeth has descended into madness. She wanders the castle, trying to wash the blood from her hands and raving: "Yet who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him?...The Thane of Fife had a wife; where is she now?/What, will these hands ne'er be clean?" (5.1.39-43). Her doctor and gentlewoman listen to her ravings, and begin to pick up on the fact that Lady Macbeth was an accomplice in the plot against Duncan; the Doctor even goes so far as to recognize that "infected minds/To their deaf pillows will discharge their secrets," (5.1.72-73). Ironically, although she was, in many ways, the mastermind of Macbeth's murders, Lady Macbeth is only able to take on the role of accuser after becoming mad. This state of madness robs Lady Macbeth of the power and autonomy she once held, which stands in stark contrast to the authority that male accusers generally possess.

Additionally, Lady Macbeth stands out as separate from other male accusers in that her accidental accusation comes when she is in the emotional throes of madness. Male accusers generally take on an air of quiet heroism when they make their accusations and thereafter, but Lady Macbeth is mad, and cannot. This madness seems to also be tinged with the feminine—what does it mean that the one female character in *Macbeth* is the only character to go mad? Macbeth suffers because of his actions, but only Lady Macbeth becomes crazy and outwardly emotional, raving as she wanders the castle. How

do we reconcile Lady Macbeth at the beginning of the play—strong, violent, ambitious, in control—with the mad Lady Macbeth—hysterical, unintelligent, and raving?

When Lady Macbeth dies, she is not even allowed to die on stage. Instead, Macbeth receives word of her death in a letter, delivered by messenger to him as he prepares for battle. Despite Lady Macbeth's initial prowess, her life and her ambition is utterly demolished in the wake of her treacherous plot. Other villains, Macbeth included, are able to die on stage, in powerful, albeit tumultuous, final scenes, but Lady Macbeth is not given this ending. Macbeth delivers his infamous sound and the fury soliloquy on her behalf, but her death is otherwise unmarked. This quiet, unambitious death reiterates once again that although Lady Macbeth was powerful and ambitious in her treachery, her femininity was the ultimate determining factor in her worth as an accuser. Although she was implicit in every step of her husband's plot, Lady Macbeth is neither recognized nor condemned for this, and instead dies offstage, devoid of the power and authority she once possessed.

Emilia: An Active, Albeit Uninformed, Accuser

In contrast to Lady Macbeth, Emilia takes an active role as accuser in *Othello*, and does not go mad, even in her most desperate moments. Like Lady Macbeth, however, Emilia is portrayed as somewhat hysterical, which stands in stark contrast to other male accusers who are stoic, almost heroic, in their accusing. Additionally, Emilia is not aware of her husband's schemes; this robs her of much of the power usually given to an accuser, and she is only able to accuse her husband bit by bit as she pieces together his story. This lack of knowledge marks Emilia as different from male accusers, and she is subsequently unable to make a calm and heroic accusation against Iago.

Like Lady Macbeth, Emilia is closely connected to the villain of her play. She is Iago's wife and Desdemona's handmaiden, and although she knows that her husband is a conniving man she does not realize the implications of his actions until it is too late. Emilia recognizes that Iago is trouble, but he is also her husband and the trust she puts in him places Emilia in a dangerous position. Because of her proximity to the play's villain, Emilia is easily manipulated, and she becomes a part of the play's villainous undercurrents without realizing the full ramifications of her actions. Iago recognizes Emilia's trust when he demands that she give him Desdemona's handkerchief, and Iago continues to manipulate and prey upon that trust throughout the play.

Emilia and Iago are clearly at odds throughout much of the play, and Desdemona even goes so far as to warn Emilia "not [to] learn of him...though he be thy husband," but despite this conflict Emilia still wants to please Iago (2.1.160). Iago understands the power that he wields over Emilia and draws her into his treacherous scheme without ever informing her of his true intentions. When Emilia discovers the handkerchief, "[Desdemona's] first remembrance from the Moor," she exclaims that she is "glad [to] have found [it]" because her "wayward husband hath a hundred times / Wooed [her] to steal it" (3.3.289-292). Emilia admits that she is not sure what Iago will do with the handkerchief, but she decides to bring it to him because she wants "nothing but to please his fantasy" (3.3.297). Iago knows that Emilia wants to please him, and continues to manipulate her, making Emilia an essential part of his villainous scheme.

This proximity to Iago and the resulting implication of Emilia in her story's villainous plots puts her in a unique position of power within her story. She has been manipulated and quietly coerced into the villain's scheme, but Emilia is also the only

character capable of exposing the villainous plot. Emilia is the only character (other than Iago) that understands the significance and backstory of how Cassio came to possess Desdemona's handkerchief. Unfortunately, Emilia does not realize that "that handkerchief...[she] found by fortune" and gave to Iago will mean the demise of her mistress until it is too late and Desdemona is already dead, smothered by Othello as part of Iago's cruel plan (5.2.223).

In the culminating moments of the plays, when Emilia realizes the destruction her actions have helped achieve, she cries out in guilt, "O God! O heavenly God!" (5.2.215). At this pivotal moment, Emilia realizes that she has been used, and that her actions have allowed the villain to carry out his treacherous plots. Instead of continuing to follow Iago, Emilia chooses to stand against him publicly. At this incredible turning point Emilia, finally armed with the facts to refute and punish Iago, is able to take on the role of accuser.

In contrast to other Shakespearean tragedies, the accusatory scene in *Othello* is not so quickly completed. Instead of a straightforward speech, such as male accusers like Laertes give, the accusatory scene in *Othello* is played out as a conversation, with sparring on both the sides of the accuser, Emilia and the villain, Iago. This sparring is very different from Lady Macbeth's mad ramblings and Laertes' forceful accusation against king Claudius, and it illustrates Emilia's comparative lack of power in the final moments of *Othello*. Emilia has not been a full partner in Iago's scheme, and because of that lack of power she cannot make a simple, straightforward accusation.

Instead of wrapping up within a handful of lines, Emilia's allegation of Iago takes place over the course of a conversation with Othello, Iago, and the statesmen. Emilia is

not well informed about Iago's plan, and as a result she is continually piecing together the plot as she goes, accusing Iago with greater and greater force as she realizes just how much he has manipulated her. Initially, Emilia is confused as to what Iago could have had to do with Desdemona's death, and she asks again and again "My husband?" until Iago confirms that he did in fact tell Othello that "[Desdemona] was false" (5.2.139, 5.2.175). From there, Emilia strikes out with greater strength, proclaiming "Villainy, villainy, villainy!" and daring to challenge Iago until the statesmen have heard the entire story (5.2.188). Othello knows most of Iago's treacherous plan, but it is Emilia's persistence that ensures that the statesmen hear the true story in full, and Emilia's revelation that she found the handkerchief and gave it to Iago, who then planted it in Cassio's chamber, is pivotal in determining Desdemona's innocence.

Although Emilia still has to piece the story together bit by bit she chooses to do this out loud, and in her final moments she will not back down. Even as Iago threatens her with death, Emilia stands, exclaiming that even if "heaven and men and devils...all...cry shame against me, yet I'll speak" (5.2.218). Emilia's brave and forceful turn as accuser stands in stark contrast to that of other, better-informed male accusers, but she is still able to bring light to Iago's villainous plot, ensuring that he will pay for what he has done, even if it means her own destruction. Like Lady Macbeth and other accusers before her, Emilia cannot live after she has made her accusation. Iago kills her in one last act of desperation, but Emilia maintains her status as accuser to the very end. Her last words are "So come my soul to bliss, as I speak true;/So speaking as I think, alas, I die" (5.2.250-251). Even in her moment of death Emilia speaks her mind, ensuring that Iago's crimes are revealed so that he can be prosecuted.

By explaining the entirety of the villain's plots and refusing to keep quiet, Emilia has given the play's remaining characters a direct path to justice, and simultaneously absolved herself in the eyes of the reader. It is obvious that Iago was treacherous, and that the accuser was coerced into her role, and as a result of Emilia's accusation, Iago meets his just end, led off to his presumable demise at the hands of the Venetian statesmen. By exposing the villain's schemes and proposing a path to justice Emilia is, in effect, absolved of her responsibility for what has taken place.

Although Emilia is a key player in the destruction of Othello, the play's tragic hero, Shakespeare does not make the audience feel angry with the accuser. Instead, the audience is able to recognize that the accuser was manipulated, unable to recognize the true consequences of her actions until the destruction had unfolded in front of her. When Emilia refuses to back down until the Venetian statesmen understand that Iago is behind Othello's murder of Desdemona she asserts herself as a female accuser, and simultaneously ensures that the Venetian statesmen will be able to carry out justice against Iago, even after Emilia's death.

Imogen: Accuser and Accused

Much like Emilia in *Othello*, at the end of *Cymbeline* Imogen takes her place as an animated accuser, revealing the villain's plot before a crowd and forcing the play toward its denouement. This active role initially seems to circumvent the trend of less powerful female accusers, but Imogen has become an accuser for very different reasons than Lady Macbeth and Emilia. Imogen is forced into her role as accuser because of false accusations against her chastity and fidelity, accusations that seem to be uniquely directed toward her sex and the idea of "feminine honor."

Much of the story of *Cymbeline* focuses on Imogen's chastity: early on in the play, Jachimo, the play's villain, challenges Imogen's lover, Posthumus, to a bet that he, Jachimo, can seduce Imogen. Jachimo states, "If I bring you no sufficient testimony that I have enjoy'd the dearest bodily part of your mistress, my ten thousand ducats are yours, so is your diamond too" (1.4.147-151). If, however, he "[come[s] off and leave[s] her in such honor as [Posthumus] has trust in, [Imogen] and [Posthumus's] jewel...and [Jachimo's] gold" will all be won by Posthumus (1.4.151-154). In addition, Posthumus raises the stakes of this bizarre bet, stating that if Jachimo wins Posthumus will "no further [be] [his] enemy," and that if Posthumus wins Jachimo "shall answer [him] with [his] sword" (1.4.159-163). This sets up an interesting dynamic from the beginning, and ensures that Imogen will have to defend her chastity, and her feminine honor, throughout the play.

This feminine honor is intrinsically linked to chastity and fidelity in the world of Shakespeare's play, making feminine honor incredibly different from the masculine honor that other male accusers exhibit. Masculine honor, such as the honor Laertes exhibits in his accusation of King Claudius, is active, and is tied to the villainous plot and his ability to overthrow it. Imogen's feminine honor, on the other hand, is tied to sex, and this threat to her honor could doom Imogen to a life without marriage, and thereby a life without power and authority.

When Jachimo arrives in Britain he is utterly unable to seduce Imogen, who defends her feminine honor and chastity, stating "Thou wrong'st a gentleman, who is as far/From thy report as thou from honor, and/.Solicits here a lady that disdains/Thee and the devil alike" (1.6.147-148). The villainous Jachimo speaks kindly to Imogen's face,

saying that Posthumus has sent him "To try your taking of a false report, which hath/Honor'd with confirmation your great judgment" (1.6.173-174). Despite these kind words, however, Jachimo has no intention of stopping his attack on Imogen's feminine honor. When night falls he sneaks into Imogen's chamber, steals the bracelet Posthumus gave her, and uses this knowledge to destroy Imogen's honor and fidelity in the eyes of Posthumus. Posthumus is distraught at this supposed knowledge, and in his rage he cries out that "The vows of women/Of no more bondage be to where they are made/Than they are to their virtues, which is nothing./O, above measure false!" (2.4.110-113).

Imogen must spend the rest of the play attempting to defend this feminine honor and prove to Posthumus and the other men in the play that she is innocent and that Jachimo is the true villain. Luckily for Imogen, part way through the play Posthumus's servant, Pisano, reveals Posthumus's intention to murder Imogen and helps Imogen to disguise herself as a boy named Fidele. This disguise allows Imogen to move more freely through the play since she is now considered to be male and as such possesses a higher level of autonomy and power. Her disguise allows Imogen to travel to Milford Haven, where Posthumus resides, and it also allows her to interact with the majority of the male characters in the play. As Fidele, Imogen is able to enter Lucius's court, and it is here that she is able to take on her role as accuser.

In the final scenes of the play, Imogen, still disguised as Fidele, serves Lucius, the commander of the Roman forces that are opposing her father, King Cymbeline of Britain. Lucius does not realize that Fidele is truly Imogen, and Imogen is, in her disguise, able to serve Lucius as a page. In return for this service, Lucius grants Imogen a favor, which she quickly uses to question Jachimo. Imogen has noticed that Jachimo is

wearing her ring on his finger, and she uses the power she has accrued as Fidele to ask Jachimo about it: “My boon is, that this gentleman may render/Of whom he had this ring” (*Cymbeline* 5.5.134-135). A guilty Jachimo quickly admits to his plot, stating, “Your daughter’s chastity—there it begins” to King Cymbelline (5.5.179). Even in this moment, after Imogen’s accusation of him, Jachimo must address the King, not Imogen, whose life is the one he is truly affecting. Imogen, despite her role as accuser, does not have the power and authority to demand the Jachimo address her instead of her father.

The simple fact that Imogen has to defend her feminine honor immediately puts her in a separate class from other male accusers. While most male (and even female) accusers are involved in some way with the villain’s schemes, Imogen has not been an accomplice in Jachimo’s plot. When he attempted to seduce her she refused, and she was not an active participant in his tricking Posthumus. Imogen is not acting as an accuser because she feels guilty for her part in the villain’s schemes; instead, she is forced into her role as accuser to save herself, and to defend her feminine honor in front of a male audience.

Despite her supposed authority as an accuser, the majority of Imogen’s power in these final scenes appears to be derived from her being disguised as a boy. Even as Imogen is standing in defense of her feminine honor, her chastity and her fidelity, she is only able to enter the space where she can make this accusation if she is dressed as a boy. Without her disguise Lucius probably would not have granted her a favor, and she would have been unable to make Jachimo confess. Without this male disguise Imogen is seemingly powerless, unable to defend her own honor and unable to uncover Jachimo’s villainous plot.

This moment in *Cymbeline*'s plot illustrates the huge discrepancy in power and autonomy given to male and female characters in Shakespeare's plays. The fact that Imogen is only able to defend herself if she is disguised as a man, coupled with the fact that her husband Posthumus believed Jachimo's story even though Imogen had always been faithful, seems to show that women are inherently distrustful in this world. Imogen is lucky in that she is able to uncover Jachimo's plot, but she is only able to do so by hiding her true, feminine identity. Additionally, Imogen's defense of her honor and fidelity is, in the context of Shakespeare's *Cymbeline*, an inherently feminine and emotional task, although it is not emotional in the same way that Lady Macbeth's mad ravings or Emilia's emotional accusation of Iago are. Imogen must defend her feminine honor or risk losing her ability to marry, and any chance at exerting power over her own life. As a modern reader, it is impossible not to wonder—could Imogen have exposed Jachimo's plot against her if she had been dressed as herself? Would the other male characters, who are in possession of true power, have listened to her if she had not first proven her point as a man?

The Few Female Accusers

The men in Shakespeare's plays exist within a sphere of influence that women are generally unable to penetrate, and Emilia, Lady Macbeth, and Imogen are some of the few female character to make any headway in this realm. Although Emilia and Lady Macbeth are ultimately destroyed, they first play integral parts in their stories. By becoming *Othello*'s accuser, Emilia separates herself from the other female characters in *Othello* and ensures that Iago will be rightfully accused of his crimes, while Lady Macbeth's descent into madness and the details she relinquishes during that time help to

bring about the end of Macbeth. Imogen is one of the few accusers to emerge from her story unscathed, largely because she exists in the world of romance, not the world of tragedy. Before her happy ending with Posthumous, however, Imogen is able to expose Jachimo's plot and absolve herself of any wrongdoing.

It seems as though these female accusers hold a position of great power in their respective plays—after all, they bring about the denouement of their plots, and are some of the only female characters to do so. But do these women hold the same power and authority as a male accuser would?

Based on the analysis of Lady Macbeth, Emilia, and Imogen, the answer appears to be no. Unlike Lady Macbeth and Emilia, Imogen is quite separate from Jachimo's treacherous plot. Nevertheless, she is forced into her role as accuser after false accusations against her chastity and loyalty. These accusations are uniquely feminine, and they put Imogen at a disadvantage. Although she is eventually able to accuse Jachimo, the accusations against Imogen, and the fact that she could only accuse Jachimo while she was disguised, show that Imogen does not possess the same levels of authority and autonomy as male accusers. Lady Macbeth, once the most ambitious and powerful character in her story, can only act as an accuser after she has fallen from power, and even then her autonomy is further destroyed because she goes mad. Emilia, though a sane and active accuser of her husband, was used by Iago and, as a result, she is robbed of much of her power and autonomy. Additionally, both Lady Macbeth's and Emilia's accusations are wild and emotional, devoid of the calm, heroic strength that male accusers generally possess, and which is considered to be a sign of true power and authority.

Shakespeare's treatment of these few female accusers acts as an insight into conventional gender roles. Women like Imogen, Emilia, and Lady Macbeth were meant to be chaste and loyal, well-behaved mothers and wives and servants. Very few female characters possess enough authority to step outside of this box, and even the few on Shakespeare's stage who do—Imogen, Emilia, and Lady Macbeth—do so without the same levels of power and autonomy that their male counterparts provide.

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