WOMAN, THE ROOT OF MAN'S SELF-DESTRUCTION IN
FOUR SHAKESPEAREAN PLAYS

APPROVED:

[Signatures]

Major Professor

Minor Professor

Director of the Department of English

Dean of the Graduate School
WOMAN, THE ROOT OF MAN'S SELF-DESTRUCTION IN
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Barbara Love Brown, B. S.
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The fall of man as caused by woman is as old as Adam and Eve. It is a theme which Shakespeare used in many of his greatest plays. This fall does not necessarily imply that the man must die; what is required is a moral decline or a weakening in his character. The deterioration is not always due to a woman's being corrupt or sinful; indeed, her great virtue may serve as the catalyst in bringing about the man's downfall. But there are distinctive qualities in each woman which interact with and add intensity to the character faults in the man she brings to self-destruction. The fall of each man, though motivated by a woman he loves, occurs in the end through his own inherent weakness. The adroit matching of the male and female characters as the basis of man's moral degradation is one of Shakespeare's greatest artistic achievements.

The destruction of a man is tragic only if he is grand and elevated enough to fall, but as his virtues are great, so are his weaknesses. It appears paradoxical for a man of heroic stature to fall at the hands of a woman, but each man's greatness is counteracted by a woman's traits to which he alone is vulnerable.
This theme is significant in at least sixteen of Shakespeare's plays. Although categories sometimes overlap, it is possible to divide the plays according to the woman's relationship to the man she is instrumental in bringing to self-destruction, for they are either the mothers, daughters, wives, or lovers of these men.

The mothers who exert disastrous influence on their sons are Gertrude in *Hamlet*, Elinor in *King John*, Margaret in the *Henry VI* plays, and Volumnia in *Coriolanus*. *Coriolanus* has been chosen for analysis in this thesis because more than any of the other three it emphasizes the indoctrination of the son as a child by his mother which results in his tragic decline.

Daughters responsible for their fathers' downfall are Lavinia in *Titus Andronicus* and Cordelia, Goneril, and Regan in *King Lear*. The character delineation and artistic worth of *King Lear* so greatly exceeds that of *Titus Andronicus* as to make the choice of it as a play for examination obvious. The universality of the themes of youth's obligation to old age and the child's obligation to the parent also heighten its value in this study.

The injurious effect of a wife on her husband may be seen in Desdemona in *Othello*, Hermione in *The Winter's Tale*, Lady Macbeth in *Macbeth*, Helena in *All's Well That Ends Well*, and Imogen in *Cymbeline*. *Cymbeline* has been analyzed for
contrast, for unlike the women in the other three plays selected, Imogen brings a man to moral dissolution through her great virtue rather than through her character faults.

The lovers who are not bound either by blood or legal ties to the men they motivate are Cleopatra in Antony and Cleopatra, Isabella in Measure for Measure, Silvia in The Two Gentlemen of Verona, Ann Bullen in Henry VIII, and Helen of Troy and Cressida in Troilus and Cressida. As a problem play and tragi-comedy, Troilus and Cressida provides a glimpse into the darker and less frequently investigated recesses of Shakespeare's psychological insight, and for this reason it is important in this study.

Although each of the plays listed is unique in its revelation of the interaction of male and female characters and therefore cannot be accurately represented by one of the four plays chosen for analysis, it is hoped that such a study will emphasize the significance of a theme prevalent in many of Shakespeare's finest plays.
CHAPTER II

CORIOLANUS

Coriolanus is not a "lovable" man or a "sympathetic character." For every virtue one critic discovers in his make-up, another critic finds at least one glaring fault. Often opinions conflict greatly. This disparity of opinion can be explained, partially at least, by the fact that Coriolanus is revealed primarily from without, for there is little internal struggle in the play save that over Coriolanus's proposed destruction of Rome.

Enigmatic as Coriolanus may be, on one point almost all critics appear to agree--"The relations between mother and son and the likeness and differences between them are the core of the play." Volumnia is the source of the values and attitudes which have inspired Coriolanus, and in many

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2Harley Granville-Barker, Prefaces to Shakespeare (Princeton, New Jersey, 1947), II, 156.
3Ibid., p. 164.
5Granville-Barker, II, 164.
6Derek Traversi, Shakespeare: The Roman Plays (Stanford, California, 1963), p. 248.
respects, she is responsible for both his life and death. She has placed supreme emphasis in his education on honor as won on the field of battle, training him from the first "to despise pain . . . to forget that he ever heard the name of death, to strive constantly to surpass himself." She taught him to exult in the "blood and sweat of war," for she "so rejoiced in battle and military glory that she pushed her son into bloodshed almost before he had ceased to be a child." A "machine-like ruthlessness" and "Wehrmacht mentality" resulting from such perverted training develops in Coriolanus a "terrible joyous uplift in the fact of killing."

Evidence of the "monstrously perverted" training Coriolanus has received from his mother is most clearly revealed by Volumnia herself in Act I, Scene iii. Chiding Virgilia, Coriolanus's tender-hearted wife, for her despondency


9 Bradley, pp. 233-234.


during her husband's absence due to war with the Volscians, Volumnia says:

If my son were my husband, I should freelier rejoice in that absence wherein he won honor than in the embraces of his bed where he would show most love. When yet he was but tender-bodied, and the only son of my womb; when youth and comeliness plucked all gaze his way; when, for a day of kings' entreaties, a mother should not sell him an hour from her beholding--I, considering how honor would become such a person, . . . was pleased to let him seek danger where he was like to find fame. To a cruel war I sent him, from whence he returned, his brows bound with oak.14

To Virgilia's question of how she would have felt if Coriolanus had died in the business, Volumnia answers, "Then his good report should have been my son," for she would rather have eleven sons die nobly than for one to "Voluptuously surfeit out of action" (I, iii, 20-28). She fairly feasts on blood, wounds, and scars15 as can be seen in her statement that blood "more becomes a man/Than gilt his trophy. The breasts of Hecuba/When she did suckle Hector, looked not lovelier/Than Hector's forehead when it spit forth blood/At Grecian sword, contemning" (I, iii, 42-46). Her fear in Act II, Scene i that Coriolanus might return from the battle without a wound to show the populace and her "grotesque inventory"16 of the

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14William Shakespeare, "Coriolanus," Shakespeare, The Complete Works, edited by G. B. Harrison (New York, 1952), I, iii, 2-15. All further citations will be from this edition and will be included in parentheses following the quotation.

15Goddard, II, 212.

16Traversi, p. 229.
scars he has already received are further evidence of the
delight she takes in bloodshed. She rejoices in her grandson,
who would "rather see the swords and hear a drum than look
upon his schoolmaster" (I, iii, 60-61). On hearing he has
chased a butterfly, caught and torn it to pieces, she comments
with obvious pride, "One on's father's moods" (I, iii, 72).
This scene reveals so lucidly the distorted values by which
"Juno-like" Volumnia has conscientiously molded the "Mars-
like" Coriolanus that his tenderness and solicitude toward
his family become the traits at which to wonder rather than
his violence and brutality toward the plebians and the enemies
of Rome.

Unfortunately, Volumnia's false idea of what constitutes
greatness and her "wayward ideal of honour" extend beyond
military distinction only far enough to encompass caste
prejudices which she also inculcates in her son. His
"inhuman disdain" for the populace is but an echo of his

17 Mathew Proser, The Heroic Image in Five Shakespearean
18 Ibid.
19 Agnes MacKenzie, Women in Shakespeare's Plays (Garden
City, New York, 1924), p. 347.
20 Chambers, p. 264.
21 Clara L. de Chambrun, Shakespeare: A Portrait
22 Bradley, p. 234.
mother's convictions, for "of sympathy or of any ethics save those of the camp, she has taught him nothing."  

Her aristocratic separation from the populace, magnified in Coriolanus, creates a "super-snob" whose ability to relate to the rest of mankind is permanently impaired. She has taught him inflexible opposition to his enemies, an attitude which dominates his treatment of the tribunes. From her he learned that to be true to Rome was to be true to his aristocratic code, but because "the state of Rome was a republic, very nearly a democracy, in which the plebians, through their tribunes, had real power and interest," the aristocratic code was only partially valid. Therefore Coriolanus was bound to come into conflict with plebian interests if he remained faithful to his mother's teachings. He asserts the most extreme form of unlimited patrician authority, for he believes the only tolerable constitution is one by which the patricians are the state, and the people are merely an instrument to feed it and fight for it.

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23 Chambers, p. 264.
25 Proser, pp. 145, 147.
27 Traversi, p. 214.
28 Bradley, p. 227.
The most unappealing of Coriolanus's traits, his intolerance, brutality, inhumanity, and uncontrolled rage, are best exemplified in his encounters with the plebians. He punctuates addresses to them with "Hang ye!" calling them "dissentious rogues" who rub the itch of their self-esteem until they become "scabs" (I, i, 184, 168-169). He craves to use his sword on them quartering them and heaping up their slaughtered bodies, or so he tells them (I, i, 202-203). His rancor reaches its highest pitch following his ill-advised attempt to secure the votes of the citizens for the consulship. Although Bradley believes that Coriolanus has "no more introspection in him than a tiger," he does know his own nature well enough to try to dissuade Volumnia from her insistence that he become consul saying, "Know, Good Mother,/I had rather be their servant in my way/Than sway with them in theirs" (II, ii, 218-219). His mother prevails, however, and Coriolanus dons the cloak of humility and with only slightly concealed scorn and aloofness, secures the votes of the citizens.

On reviewing their treatment from Coriolanus with their tribunes Sicinius and Brutus, the plebians are goaded by their leaders into revoking their "ignorant election" on the grounds that Coriolanus mocked them as he requested their votes, that he opposed the dispersal of free corn among them,

29Ibid., p. 229.
and that he is a confirmed aristocrat who wishes to repudiate
the newly acquired rights of the common people, representation
through their tribunes. When informed of their vacillation
and the annulment of his right to become consul, Coriolanus's
choler surges beyond his control. He reiterates his opposition
to the distribution of free grain, calling the plebians the
"mutable, rank-scented many" who have become the "cockle of
rebellion, insolence, sedition" as a result of the patricians' concessions to them (III, 1, 70). The tribunes are but the
"horn and noise" of a monstrous Hydra composed of plebians
too cowardly to fight for Rome but eager to join in mutiny
and revolt against her government. He commands the patricians
to throw the power of the plebians in the dust in order to
save Rome from ruin. The tribunes immediately label him a
"traitor," a charge which incenses Coriolanus, Rome's greatest
soldier, beyond all bounds of self-control. Calling one
tribune "old goat!" and "rotten thing!" he draws his sword
and lashes out at both the tribunes and plebians who are
crying that he should be cast down from the Tarpeian rock to
his death. After beating them back, he is cajoled by his
mother into begging the pardon of the multitude he has
inflamed. When once again Sicinius indicts him as a "traitor
to the people," all Coriolanus's promises to his mother and
the patricians to speak "mildly" and show temperance are
forgotten as he wildly explodes: "The fires i' lowest Hell
fold in the people! Call me their traitor! Thou injurious Tribune! . . . 'Thou liest!'” (III, iii, 68-69, 73). To the sentence of banishment he cries to the gathered plebians: "You common cry of curs! Whose breath I hate/As the reek o' rotten fens, whose loves I prize/As the carcasses of unburied men/That corrupt my air, I banish you . . ." (III, iii, 119-123).

No one can deny the contemptibility of the plebians as Shakespeare portrays them, for they are cowardly, ignorant, inconstant, and most likely rank-smelling. Nor should one forget "that ancient Rome had never heard our new doctrine of freedom and equality of men." But neither can it be denied that Coriolanus is arrogant, inhuman, and brutal in his attitude toward the commoners. Such intolerance did not arise accidently in "Rome's greatest man" in whose very faults there is "nobleness of nature" which surpasses all around him. His mother has instilled into him the sense of patrician superiority by which he now stands. It is she who taught Coriolanus that the plebians are "woollen vassals, things created/To buy and sell with groats . . ." (III, ii, 9-10). Responsibility for Coriolanus's vicious reaction to the populace, expressed by "Let them hang," is obvious in

30 MacCracken et al., p. 192.
31 Bradley, p. 226.
32 Traversi, p. 248.
Volumnia's vehement retort: "Aye and burn too." Meeting the tribunes responsible for her son's banishment, she cries, "the hoarded plague o' the gods/Requite your love!" (IV, i, 11-12). Sicinius comments on her masculinity as her towering rage unsexes her. Her greatest wish is that Coriolanus might meet the plebians and tribunes where there were no hiding place so that he might slaughter them and end their posterity, "Bastards and all" (IV, i, 27). Alone with Menenius, Cominius, and Virgilia, she declaims: "I would the gods had nothing else to do/But to confirm my curses!" (IV, iii, 45-46). She refuses to sup with Menenius saying, "Anger's my meat, I sup upon myself" (IV, iii, 50). The cause for her fury is grievous, but beneath her understandable pain and outrage is the very thinly veiled intolerance and inhumanity which lie at the root of Coriolanus's break with the common people.

Her hardness is mirrored in Coriolanus's typical solution for the problems he faces: "destruction, be it verbal or real, for his adversaries." His bond with his mother "instead of representing the kind of human interconnection applicable finally to mankind at large, restricts the two in a tight relationship that will acknowledge no connection with the common herd." Coriolanus, a "man of convictions and passionate impulses," mirrors the "deficiency of sympathy

33 Proser, p. 147.  
34 Ibid., p. 148.  
35 Granville-Barker, II, 156.
and deficiency of self-control" only slightly concealed in his mother, whose brain leads her "use of anger to better vantage" (III, ii, 30-31).

Coriolanus is considered a dominated "boy" by many critics such as A. C. Bradley, Harley Granville-Barker, Arnold Kettle, and Oscar Campbell. Harry Leven states that in submitting to his mother's plea that he not destroy Rome, he is "the strong man who becomes again a child," but Hardin Craig disagrees with this judgment, for he believes that Coriolanus is yielding to "patriotism as a force of nature" and that putting him "to shame as a grown man and soldier still tied to his mother's apron strings ... is to rob him of his rights as a hero." Robert Hellman, in an unconvincing article which paints Volumnia as a "strong attractive individual" and a "mother with a rich, flexible personality," finds Coriolanus "immature and naive" despite his mother's attempts to "wean" him. Although some critics

36 Chambers, p. 266. 37 Bradley, p. 228.
38 Granville-Barker, II, 151.
39 Kettle, p. 77.
40 Campbell, p. 373.
42 Hardin Craig, An Interpretation of Shakespeare (Columbia, Missouri, 1948), p. 300.
contend that his change of heart regarding his plan to destroy Rome is infantile submission to a domineering woman, almost all see his concessions to his mother to seek the consulship and later to assuage the anger of the populace he has enraged as unmanly acts which indicate not "filial respect" but a "perversion of relationship between mother and son." Mathew Proser even labels their interdependency "political and spiritual incest." The irresistible influence of Volumnia upon her son determines the course of the tragedy. Coriolanus is a "puppet" in his mother's hands at least partially because "while she is present he always feels himself, by comparison with this great mother, inferior and unimportant." In all likelihood Volumnia would wish to hold sway over her son throughout his life, but as Harold Goddard's astute analysis of the play reveals, Coriolanus is never again the slave to his mother after he declaims to her and the plebians he refuses to placate:

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44 Campbell, p. 373.  
46 Proser, p. 150.  
48 Campbell, p. 363.  
49 Traversi, p. 218.  
50 Campbell, p. 372.  
Let them pronounce the steep Tarpeian death, 
Vagabond exile, flaying, pent to linger 
But with a grain a day, I would not buy 
Their mercy at the price of one fair word; 
Nor check my courage for what they can give, 
To have't with saying "Good morrow" (III, iii, 88-93).

It is indeed ironic that Volumnia, the woman who so largely shaped the nature of Coriolanus, should understand that nature so little as to require him to be false to the very ideals she has instilled within him. With unabashed policy she would have him humble himself before the plebeians first to implore their votes and later, on hearing the vote has been rescinded and that Coriolanus has incensed the mob during his furious verbal retaliation, to "recant his word and cheat them in the recanting." Coriolanus's sense of honor excels that of his mother in this regard, for he cannot dissemble and make false promises with a view toward political gain. Though his ideals are narrow and in many ways repellant, he is magnificently true to them, never more so than when he tries to be false. By defying both Volumnia and the plebeians, with no regard for the suffering it will cause him, he rises to tragic stature.

Few critics exclude the mention of pride in their analysis of Coriolanus, for in the minds of many this is the

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52 Wilson, p. 107.
53 Granville-Barker, II, 164.
54 Bradley, p. 228.
"tragic flaw" which brings about his downfall. But this "pride" is puzzling in view of the many passages which demonstrate Coriolanus's embarrassment on hearing lavish praise of his heroic deeds. Bradley explains this by saying that although he is "the proudest man in Shakespeare," his modesty is genuine because he never dreams that he has attained his ideal and because his is the type of pride that needs no recognition. Also praise of his achievements would imply limits to his power. Granville-Barker believes Coriolanus's modesty is "inverted pride." Pride is also mentioned in the criticism of Hazlitt, Chambers, and Kettle, and in the play itself pride is the constant charge against Coriolanus by the tribunes and plebians. At one time even Volumnia mentions his pride saying, "But owe thy pride thyself," but she probably means intractability in this context (III, 11, 130).

As to the source of this pride, it "may not derive completely from his mother, but she is certainly involved in it." It "proceeds from the strange mixture of solicitude and ruthlessness, possession and renunciation in Volumnia's

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55 Spenser, p. 349. 56 Bradley, pp. 228, 229.
59 Chambers, pp. 260, 262. 60 Kettle, p. 77.
... nature" evident in her desire to create in her son the greatest military hero of Rome. This she accomplishes, in part at least, by praising his most audacious acts at a time when praise was as fatal as blame would have been to his character. Her boastfulness concerning his heroism permeates the play and probably underlies Coriolanus's aversion to flamboyant verbal homage. It is to satisfy his mother that Coriolanus seeks to become consul, for her visionary portrait of her son incorporates the idea of reputation. This emphasis on renown is symptomatic of her pride. Aristocratic pride, which has already been discussed, likewise has its source in Volumnia.

Coriolanus's tender regard for his family seems almost inexplicable considering his fierce, warlike nature and contemptuous intolerance for the common people. Particularly in his addresses to his wife does he reveal a depth of feeling quite incongruous with his bellicose spirit:

My gracious silence, hail! Wouldst thou have laughed had I come coffined home, That weep'st to see me triumph? Ah, my dear, Such eyes the widows in Corioli wear, The mothers that lack sons (II, i, 192-196).

Best of my flesh, Forgive my tyranny; but do not say, For that "Forgive our Romans." Oh a kiss Long as my exile, sweet as my revenge!

63Traversi, p. 218. 64Goddard, II, 213.
65Proser, p. 148. 66Ibid.
Now, by the jealous Queen of Heaven, that kiss
I carried from thee, dear, and my true lip
Hath virgined it e'er since (V, iii, 42-48).

To Valeria he says: “The noble sister of Publicola,/The
moon of Rome, chaste as the icicle/That's curdied by the frost
from purest snow/And hangs on Dian's temple--Dear Valeria!”
(V, iii, 64-67). The beauty of the language and the obvious emotion which underlies it lend undeniable support to Goddard's and Bradley's contentions that Coriolanus is innately of a delicate and poetic nature. By grinding her ax on his finer instincts Volumnia has defiled what might have been a man of greater compassion and benevolence. His military career is founded on a lie; therefore, "his physical courage with its frenzied intensity is revenge for his failure in moral courage in not being himself." His arrogance is his tenderness turned inside out. Truly Volumnia's responsibility for the traits in Coriolanus which result in his tragic banishment, subsequent unnatural revenge, and ultimate death, is due to her blindness to his sensitive nature and her inability to appreciate such a nature if she had perceived it.

Volumnia is perhaps more responsible for the destruction of the man to whom she is proudly and courageously devoted.

67 Goddard, II, 213; Bradley, p. 237.
68 Goddard, II, 213.
69 Ibid., p. 216.
70 Ibid.
71 MacKenzie, p. 347.
than any other woman in Shakespeare because she began sowing the seeds of Coriolanus's moral decay long before he was old enough to rebel. Her tragedy is probably greater than that of her son. Volumnia might well have lived for many years without the son who was her life's breath. A woman capable of sacrificing her son is probably capable of introspection in the years which follow such a sacrifice. Volumnia's tragic loss might well have opened the well-springs of her heart and have allowed her to comprehend the incalculable damage she had done her son through her brutal and inhuman indoctrination. If she ever understood how responsible she had been for her son's destruction, her tragedy would have been to continue to live with such knowledge gnawing her heart and conscience.

Whether Coriolanus submits to his mother or his wife before the gates of Rome is unimportant here. What is important is that he submits to his humane and gentle instincts which have been all but obliterated during a lifetime dedicated to martial values and caste prejudice. Volumnia, in pleading with Coriolanus to submit, is not merely seeking self-preservation or freedom from the shame of her son's ignominious revenge. She too is surrendering to the humane strain in her nature which lies deeply buried beneath her "hardness."

Within the sacrifice of both mother and son lies redemption. Through his death Coriolanus is exonerated; Volumnia's redemption lies within her ability to gain compassion and to
accept the guilt of having nurtured the moral weakness which brought Coriolanus into a confrontation which could only be reconciled through his death.
CHAPTER III

KING LEAR

King Lear is an excellent example of woman's role in bringing man to self-destruction. In Coriolanus the mother is the devastating influence on her son; in King Lear it is the daughters who bring about their father's downfall. King Lear is a man of greater grandeur than Coriolanus, for his estrangement from his kingdom and family due to the cruelty of his two older daughters results in his gaining insight and compassion, whereas Coriolanus's banishment leads only to his unquenchable desire for revenge. King Lear is seen as he develops in tragic stature through all of the last three acts of the play. Coriolanus, after submitting to his humane instincts by refusing to destroy Rome, is seen in his true nobility in only three of the concluding scenes of Act V; his further development as a tragic hero is cut short by the conspirators' swords. This explains, in part at least, why most readers feel the tragedy of King Lear more profoundly than that of Coriolanus.

The character faults of King Lear are all too clear before the end of Act I. To "gratify his love of absolute power and his hunger for assurances of devotion"\(^1\) King Lear

"invites his three daughters to bid through public professions of their love for portions of his kingdom." "When Goneril and Regan reply to his fatuous question with patent insincerity, they are behaving in accordance with a game in which Lear has himself played the first turn." He does not understand the nature of any of his children, or he would never have made such an impossible demand of Cordelia or have left himself so completely open to the deception of Goneril and Regan. The "oily" rhetoric of her sisters incenses the proud Cordelia, as does the idea that her father is bribing all of his daughters to make a public display of their affections.

It is the clash of Cordelia's pride with that of her father that is fundamental to the course of the tragedy. Cordelia, despite her sweetness and her youth, is both as proud and obstinate as her father, for, as Granville-Barker expresses it, they are "twin spirits." Nicoll, Chambrun,

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2Frank Ernest Hill, To Meet Will Shakespeare (New York, 1949), p. 357.
8Chambrun, p. 316.
and MacKenzie⁹ agree that it is from her father that Cordelia inherits her pride. The tragedy lies in the fact that in both Lear and Cordelia pride is blind. Neither is perceptive enough to see the position into which he has locked the other.

Lear's affection for Cordelia is all too obvious in his words "Now, our joy,/Although the last, not least!; but he follows this with the extortionate words, "what can you say to draw/A third more opulent than your sisters?" To her answer of "Nothing, my lord." he declares, "Mend your speech a little,/Lest it may mar your fortunes," words which only heighten the indignation of a daughter whose affections cannot be bought or sold. Lear must realize his daughter's true worth or he would never have declaimed before both the court and his other two daughters, "I loved her most." Undoubtedly his affection results from the lovable qualities she possesses and the devotion she has shown him in the past. Had Lear been more perceptive he would have sensed that the beauty of the love that Cordelia felt for him transcended her ability to express it in expansive speech. He would have further realized that his equating so much land with so much love¹⁰ would have antagonized a daughter who viewed her integrity as her true wealth. She has been asked to do what is impossible for her;


her self-respect will not allow her to descend to her sisters' level in the "arena of wordy oratory." The King feels he has been humiliated before the entire court. Blinded by wounded pride, he disinherits and disowns the daughter who was the "joy" of his life.

But Lear's foolish pride is triggered by Cordelia's obstinate pride. Her inflexible sense of honor makes it impossible for her to give the foolish old king her assurances of fond love publicly without feeling that she, like her sisters, is competing for reward. Other Shakespearean heroines could have done so without losing self-respect or appearing to submit to a bribe. But for Cordelia the situation casts shame not only on herself, but on her father as well. She is too angered and self-righteous to comprehend that it is her father's age and lessening strength, both mentally and physically, which impel him to seek a conspicuous display of his worth in the eyes of his daughters. She is blind to the humiliation and heartbreak she is causing him.

In his foolish and doting mind, Lear had felt that the division of his kingdom among his daughters after their declarations of love for him would be the final grand act of

11 Nicoll, p. 150.
14 Ibid., p. 287.
his rule. Instead he is made to feel ridiculous and snubbed by the daughter with whom he planned to spend his remaining days. Cordelia must not even vaguely understand the mortification she is causing the father she later proves to love beyond all measure or else she would have "mended" her speech a little not to secure her dowry, but to supply her father's desperate need for affection.

Bradley points out that "truth is not the only good in the world; nor is the obligation to tell truth the only obligation." Cordelia did not have to violate truth to preserve her father. Her speech actually tells much less than truth about the love she feels for him.

The words "I love your Majesty according to my bond, no more nor less" are hardly calculated to warm the heart of a doting father (I, i, 94-95). She follows this with "Good my lord,/You have begot me, bred me, loved me. I/Return those duties back as are right fit,/Obey you, love you, and most honor you," words which might not have offended Lear so deeply (I, i, 97-100) if she had not insisted on continuing:

\begin{quote}
Why have my sisters husbands if they say
They love you all? Haply, when I shall wed,
That lord whose hand must take my plight shall carry
Half my love with him, half my care and duty.
Sure, I shall never marry like my sisters,
To love my father all (I, i, 101-106).
\end{quote}

\begin{footnotes}
15Ibid.
16Bradley, Shakespearean Tragedy, pp. 320-321.
\end{footnotes}
These lines indicate a short-sightedness on the part of Cordelia, for she apparently believes that to give love to a husband is to take it from a father. Bradley writes: "There surely never was a more unhappy speech."

No one will deny the courage and integrity of Cordelia, one of Shakespeare's greatest conceptions of a heroine, but to most readers the speeches cited from Act I, Scene indicate a stiff-necked obstinancy which blinds Cordelia to any point of view but her own. That she knows her own worth and is proud in it is evident in her defiant words to her father following France's inquiry as to what heinous crime she has committed to be so detested by her father:

I yet beseech your Majesty—
If for I want that glib and oily art,
To speak and purpose not, since what I well intend
I'll do't before I speak—that you make known
It is no vicious blot, murder, or foulness,
No unchaste action or dishonored step,
That hath deprived me of your grace and favor,
But even for want of that for which I am richer,
A still-soliciting eye, and such a tongue
As I am glad I have not, though not to have it
Hath lost me in your liking (I, 1, 226-236).

It is the interaction of Cordelia's proud, defiant nature with Lear's proud, foolish, and wrathful nature which results in Cordelia's being dis inherited and Lear's being abandoned to the mercy of Goneril and Regan. This is not to say that Cordelia "deserved her fate"; it is understandable

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17Ibid., p. 321.  
18Ibid.  
that Lear would have been disappointed and perhaps angered by Cordelia's cold dutiful response, but that his fond love for her should turn to bitter hate is almost inconceivable. Harbage argues that punishing an ungrateful child has the appearance of justice, but other critics state that by disowning Cordelia the old king reveals "stupidity," lack of judgment, and "naked folly" because of his "ferocious egotism." But deeply wronged though Cordelia is and as intimately intermingled as her imperfections and virtues are, her chilling response to her father's request for a public espousal of her love lays the foundation for both his tragedy and hers.

Cordelia seems fully aware of the possible harm which may come to Lear while in her sisters' hands, for she says to them before parting:

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I know you what you are,  
And, like a sister, am most loath to call  
Your faults as they are named. Use well our father.  
To your professed bosoms I commit him.  
But yet, alas, stood I within his grace,  
I would prefer him to a better place (I, i, 272-277).  

She certainly does not soften any possible malice in the  
hearts of Goneril and Regan by continuing: "Time shall  
unfold what plaited cunning hides./Who cover faults, at last  
shame them derides./Well may you prosper!" (I, i, 83-85).  
Cordelia more than redeems any guilt which may be hers in  
regard to her father's fate by her selfless attempts to  
relieve his misery. But had her character been more like  
that of Viola or Desdemona, perhaps the tragedy would never  
have occurred.  

If Lear's pride is evident in the character of Cordelia,  
his malevolent traits are grossly magnified in his fiendish  
older daughters. Because these two daughters excite so much  
detestation, Lear's own violence is often underestimated.  
He is the first of Shakespeare's heroes to be choleric in  
temperament. His "hideous rashness" is evident not only  
in the words he uses to disown Cordelia, but also in his  
words describing her as "new adopted to our hate,/Dowered  
with our curse" and "a wretch whom Nature is ashamed/Almost to  

28 Bradley, Shakespearean Tragedy, p. 282.  
29 Ibid.
acknowledge her" (I, 1, 206-207, 215-216). L. C. Knights writes that Lear's "commands are threats, and his threats are curses."\(^{30}\) The banishment of Kent indicates the truth of his statement: "If on the tenth day following/Thy banished trunk be found in our dominions,/The moment is thy death. Away! By Jupiter,/This shall not be revoked" (I, 1, 179-182). Granville-Barker points to the violence evident even in his words to his petted fool: "Take heed, sirrah, the whip!"\(^{31}\) Hazlitt and Goddard both speak of the violence basic to Lear's character.\(^{32}\) Coe believes that the inhumanity and violent rages of Lear provide "some motivation and some degree of plausibility for the villainy of Regan and Goneril." He further states that the devotion of Kent and Cordelia is more difficult to account for than the first examples of ingratitude shown by Goneril and Regan.\(^{33}\)

It is in Lear's blood-curdling curse of Goneril that his meanest and most vicious traits become clear. Although Goneril's manner is hateful and very likely her charges against Lear's knights are false,\(^{34}\) the curse is frightful

\(^{30}\)Knights, p. 271. \(^{31}\)Granville-Barker, II, 286.


\(^{34}\)Bradley, Shakespearean Tragedy, p. 283.
and unnatural from a father who places so much value on the
duty one has to those of his own blood. After calling her
"Degenerate bastard!" and "Detested kite!" he cries:

Hear, Nature, hear, dear goddess, hear!
Suspend thy purpose if thou didst intend
To make this creature fruitful.
Into her womb convey sterility.
Dry up in her the organs of increase,
And from her derogate body never spring
A babe to honor her! If she must teem,
Create her child of spleen, that it may live
And be a thwart disnatured torment to her.
Let it stamp wrinkles in her brow of youth,
With cadent tears fret channels in her cheeks,
Turn all her mother's pains and benefits
To laughter and contempt, that she may feel
How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is
To have a thankless child! Away, away! (I, iv, 297-311).

Bradley believes that Lear realizes by the time of this
encounter with Goneril how unjust he has been to Cordelia,
but though he is mentally castigating himself for his guilt,
the basic nature from which his injustice arose is still
unchanged.35

Foolhardy and cruel as Lear is in banishing Cordelia and
Kent, most of his malevolence is verbal rather than actual.
In Goneril and Regan monstrous evil is both verbal and actual,
but, ironically, their bestial actions almost defy description.
Perhaps one motivation for their villainy is the fact that
Cordelia has been her father's darling throughout her life-
time,36 a fact which might well gall all but the most
magnanimous of sisters. Goneril says of Lear after Cordelia

36 Coe, p. 54.
has been disinherited. "He has always loved our sister most" (I, i, 293). As Goneril and Regan continue to discuss their father, one learns that Lear has "ever but slenderly known himself" and that "The best and soundest of his time hath been but rash." Admittedly, both daughters are unnaturally antagonistic towards their father, but in view of Lear's behavior in the earlier part of the same scene, the judgment does not appear unfair. The daughters may well expect "infirm and choleric years" after Lear's abdication of his throne.

But here Shakespeare poses the question which in great measure accounts for the undying acclaim King Lear has received—What is the moral obligation of children to parents, of youth to age? Stampfer writes:

All men, in all societies, make, as it were, a covenant with society in their earliest infancy. By this covenant, the dawning human consciousness accepts society's deepest ordinances, beliefs, and moral standards in exchange for a promise of whatever rewards and blessings society offers.37

Is not the obligation of child to parent one of "society's deepest ordinances"? Wilson writes that this duty is not abrogated by time and that it "cannot reason or make conditions; it has nothing to do with justice or anyone's deserving; it is simply a law of human nature, the way things are."38


38 Wilson, p. 196.
Because few people in any generation have not been touched by such considerations in regard to their own relatives, this theme in King Lear has almost universal relevance.

The fact that Lear is old and frail contributes to his rashness and lack of judgment. What Goneril and Regan lack is the love which would ease the burden of his old age by smiling at his follies and bearing with his humors. The fact that Lear is old and frail contributes to his rashness and lack of judgment.

Towards him they are "loveless, passionless, and cold"; for them he has ceased to exist. Wilson believes that because of this their crime is far greater than if they harmed their father in a fit of passion; passion, at least, would have indicated some feeling for him and might possibly have led to remorse. But it is with calm, deliberate calculation that Goneril and Regan reject their father.

To analyze Regan and Goneril is to analyze the "mystery of evil." It is true that Lear's generosity in dividing his kingdom is tinged with self-interest in that he gives much to his daughters with the intention of endearing himself to them, believing that his munificence will guarantee their love and care for him in his old age. This reasoning is clear in his frequent charge of "ingratitude" when these daughters

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40 Wilson, p. 193.
41 Ibid., pp. 193-194.
42 Ibid., pp. 193-194, 192.
43 Speaight, p. 100.
44 Chambers, p. 243.
have spurned him. It is also true that his outrageous temper and his obvious favoring of Cordelia might well have served to alienate Goneril and Regan, but in reality there can be no valid motivation for the brutal treatment of an aging father by two daughters to whom he has given his love and his kingdom. Although psychology may reveal in part the impulses which dictate their monstrous acts, it cannot explain why readers find them monstrous. Man is not a puppet, and for this reason is held responsible for such acts even if adequate motivation can be found.

It is difficult to find terms extreme enough to describe Lear's two older daughters. Bradley points to the bestial imagery used to portray them:

Goneril is a kite: her ingratitude has a serpent's tooth: she has struck her father most serpent-like upon the very heart: her visage is wolvish: she has tied sharp-tooth unkindness like a vulture on her father's breast: . . . to Gloster her cruelty seems to have the fangs of a boar. She and Regan are dog-hearted; they are tigers, not daughters: each is an adder to the other: the flesh of each is covered with the fell of a beast.

Goneril's very name has unpleasant connotations suggesting "gonorrhoea and venereal disease." This hardly seems accidental considering her lust for Edmund which drives her

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45 Speaight, p. 100.  
46 Ibid.  
47 Bradley, Shakespearean Tragedy, p. 267.  
to murder her sister and plot the murder of her husband. She is described as the "calm wielder of pitiless force, the resolute initiator of cruelty"" deprived of tear ducts and a human heart. Spencer finds her "brazen," and MacKenzie writes that she is ponderously contemptuous, absolutely sure of her power, and "quite stupid--of all types the most distressing for the sensitive to deal with." G. Wilson Knight contends that Goneril dies "in the cause of love--love of Edmund," but Stampfer differs radically, writing, "Goneril slew Regan for his /Edmund's/ sake, but it was out of lust and ambition; she was incapable of that love which brings to self-transcendence." She kills herself only after her villainy has been condemned and she fears she will be tried for treason. Her heinous crimes include her command that Gloucester's eye be gouged out, her probable adultery with Oswald and Edmund, her plot to have her husband killed, the murder of her sister, and the joint order with Edmund for the execution of Cordelia and Lear. But horrible as she is there is an almost awful, deadly power about her.

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49 Dowden, p. 235. 50 Harbage, p. 72.
51 Spencer, p. 331.
54 Stampfer, p. 155.
55 Bradley, Shakespearean Tragedy, p. 299.
The language does not seem vast enough to express the
vehement reaction of critics to Regan. Bradley admits that
she commits fewer crimes than Goneril, but he claims that
this means only that she has "much less force, courage and
initiative than her sister, and for that reason is less
formidable and more loathsome." He further believes there
is nothing to set against her inferiority in power; "she is
superior only in the venomous meanness which is almost as
hateful as her cruelty." He and MacKenzie both write that
she is the most hideous human being that Shakespeare ever
drew.  
MacKenzie also points out her cowardliness when she
cringes at her father's curse. She believes that Regan
does not have the backbone to stand up to violence. Regan
is more viciously petty than Goneril and readier to excuse
her behavior with "specious moralism."  

With ruthless speed Goneril and Regan prove that their
professions of love for Lear are, in truth, the mask for their
hatred. They use the pride and imperviousness of Lear as
pretexts to coldly strip the old man of his followers, although to secure their halves of the kingdom they had agreed

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59 Wilson, pp. 194-195.
61 Speaight, p. 95.  
62 Hill, p. 357.
to provide shelter for his hundred knights as well as for him. As if this in itself were not enough, they also strip him of every vestige of dignity\textsuperscript{63} and self-respect with their contemptuous arrogance and condescending hostility. In telling Lear he must "disquantity" his train, Goneril reproaches her father for being old but not wise. She charges that his knights have turned her palace into a "riotous inn" and "brothel." Her true motivation for wishing to see his train reduced is evident in her words to Oswald: "He may enguard his dotage with their powers/And hold our lives in mercy" (I, iv, 349-350). She wishes to have Lear completely helpless and at her mercy as if already envisioning the crimes she will perpetrate and what Lear's reaction to them would be. To Lear's explosive and infamous curse, Goneril is aloof and calm as she states, "Let his disposition have that scope/That dotage gives it" (I, iv, 314-315). Her disdain for both him and his curse serves only to enrage Lear more, and hot, angry tears course down his cheeks as he tries with more savage curses to break through Goneril's complacent hardness. But Goneril knows that Lear is only an impotent and futile old man and that words are only words. She is quite satisfied when he leaves outraged, and she resolutely sends a letter to Regan telling her of Lear's impending arrival.

\textsuperscript{63}Harbage, p. 119.
She instructs her sister that she, too, should reject Lear's train of knights.

The first real evidence of Lear's approaching mental and physical breakdown is apparent when he finds that his servant Kent has been confined by Regan and Cornwall to the stocks outside Gloucester's castle. Lear cries out: "Oh, how this mother swells up in my heart! / Hysterica passio, down, thou climbing sorrow, / Thy element's below!" (II, iv, 56-58). As if his suffering were not acute enough, Regan and Cornwall, forewarned of his arrival by Goneril, at first refuse to receive him on the pretext that they are ill. Lear's anger almost overwhelms him, but he seeks to control himself until their belated arrival.

Lear begins to tell Regan of the disgraceful way Goneril has treated him only to find that Regan is siding with her sister. With many flimsy excuses she tells him she will not receive him until he has returned to Goneril and has begged her forgiveness. Lear can hardly believe that this daughter, too, is turning on him. Goneril then arrives, and both daughters degrade Lear with references to his dotage, weakness, and lack of wisdom. They reduce his train of knights first to fifty men, then to twenty-five, and finally to none, saying that their own servants will care for him. Lear's pitiful condition is expressed in the words, "I prithee, Daughter, do not make me mad." and later, as he goes
forth into the storm, much to the relief of his daughters, who bolt the door behind him:

You Heavens, give me that patience, patience I need!
You see me here, you gods, a poor old man,
As full of grief as age, wretched in both.
If it be you that stirs these daughters' hearts
Against their father, fool me not so much
To bear it tamely. Touch me with noble anger,
And let not women's weapons, water drops
Stain my man's cheeks! No, you unnatural hags,
I will have such revenges on you both
That all the world shall--I will do such things--
What they are, yet I know not, but they shall be
The terrors of the earth. You think I'll weep.
No, I'll not weep.
I have full cause of weeping, but this heart
Shall break into a hundred thousand flaws
Or ere I'll weep. O fool, I shall go mad! (II, iv, 274-289).

Having divested himself of his material wealth by dividing his kingdom between his daughters and no longer having his knights to support him and failing as he is both mentally and physically, Lear can only supply the grandeur of his spirit for the
"impotence of his body as he opposes to evil all that is left him to oppose--his molten indignation, his huge invective, his capacity for feeling pain."\textsuperscript{64}

Lear then enters the darkness of the storm and insanity. His true greatness is not realized until he is lashed by the elements and his own tortured mind. His sympathies are widened and his affections are deepened,\textsuperscript{65} so that spiritually he is a man redeemed. His redemption is made whole when he

\textsuperscript{64}Ibid., p. 121.

\textsuperscript{65}Elmer Stoll, Art and Artifice in Shakespeare (New York, 1934), p. 140.
is restored to the love of Cordelia. He would have been content to spend his remaining days in prison if assured of her love. But the transformed Lear is soon destroyed by the death of Cordelia. She is hanged on the order of Goneril and Edmund, who wish to stifle any possible challenge she may bring to their planned domination of all of Lear’s former kingdom. Lear prior to this disaster was a horribly strong man who could not die, but the catastrophic loss of the child he had so deeply wronged, but whose love and devotion transcended and endured her father’s injustice, is more than his great soul can withstand. He holds his daughter’s lifeless body in his arms and cries out:

And my poor fool is hanged! No, no, no life! Why should a dog, a horse, a rat, have life And thou no breath at all? Thou’lt come no more, Never, never, never, never, never! (V, iii, 305-308).

As he hopefully and pathetically claims to see signs of life in her motionless form, he exclaims: "Do you see this? Look on her, look, her lips, Look there, look there!" (V, iii, 310-311). With these words he surrenders to death, unquestionably a victim to Cordelia, who unintentionally initiated the tragedy through her inflexible pride, but more directly to Goneril and Regan, who consummated it through their depraved cruelty.

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66 Masefield, p. 127.
CHAPTER IV

CYMBELINE

Volumnia is a mother whose wayward code of ethics results in the destruction of her son; Goneril and Regan, through cruel, calculating wickedness, and Cordelia, inadvertently through blind pride, have destroyed their father. Although Volumnia would never have knowingly brought her son to harm and though fault in Cordelia appears as virtue when she is compared with Goneril and Regan, nonetheless, the destruction of both Coriolanus and Lear must be attributed in great part to character flaws in these four women. Cymbeline differs greatly in this regard, for it is the matchless virtues of the "divine" Imogen which bring her husband, Posthumus, to temporary moral dissolution. Cymbeline is a tragicomedy, and therefore, Imogen and Posthumus cannot be brought to tragic death as are Othello and Desdemona in the play of jealous love which Cymbeline parallels in many respects. The destruction of the noble Othello occurs long before he stabs himself. It begins when he first believes that Desdemona is unfaithful, and it is culminated when he murders his innocent wife. His suicide is but a footnote to his moral decay. Posthumus proceeds through these same steps, but instead of murdering Imogen himself, he orders his servant
to do it, an act which marks him as more cowardly than Othello. Posthumus does not take his own life and in the end is reunited with Imogen, whom his servant could not bring himself to kill. In the physical sense he has not been brought to destruction, but in the moral sense his downfall is more ignominious than that of Othello.

Cymbeline, the aged king who possesses all the irascibility of Lear but none of his tenderness,\(^1\) is also a victim to his wife, but unlike Posthumus, who falls because of Imogen's virtues, Cymbeline is blinded by the crafty, evil queen who bends her husband easily to her own wicked wiles. Both the King and Queen are too superficially drawn to deserve much attention; however, their relationship does underline the theme of this chapter: the wife as the root of her husband's self-destruction.

It does seem paradoxical that a wife's great virtue could bring her husband to moral dissolution, but if Imogen had been less beautiful, less intelligent, less honorable, less pure, or less faithful, her husband would never have boasted of her great merit, nor would he have consented to a wager concerning her honor if he had not felt that by refusing it, he would have indicated doubt in Imogen's ability to withstand temptation. Although Spencer describes Imogen as uninteresting and "a clumsily or carelessly executed Snow-White,"\(^2\) most

\(^1\)MacCracken et al., p. 200.  \(^2\)Spencer, p. 362.
other critics find her to be ideal in almost every respect. Hazlitt believes that of all Shakespeare's women she is the most tender and artless.³ Quiller-Couch agrees, writing that of all Shakespeare's gallery of good women, Imogen "bears the bell."⁴ He quotes Swinburne as writing "Imogen is the most adorable woman ever created by God or man,"⁵ praise which admittedly is extravagant for anyone less than a deity. Dowden admires Imogen for her "exquisite vivacity of feeling and fancy" and her "quick, pure, and ardent" heart.⁶ One critic states that she is the highest type of woman delineated.⁷ Giles believes that in Imogen "purity and strength of character, sweetness and grandeur of nature" attain a perfect union.⁸ Indeed, the language of the play itself seems to confirm these lavish words of praise. Posthumus believes that she is "more fair, virtuous, wise, chaste, constant-qualified, and less attemptable" than any of the rarest ladies of France, or for that matter, of the world. He describes her love as "not a thing for sale, . . . only the gift of the gods." Iachimo, the villain who seeks

³Hazlitt, p. 12.
⁵Ibid.
⁶Dowden, p. 367.
⁷MacCracken et al., p. 201.
⁸Henry Giles, Human Life in Shakespeare (Boston, 1868), p. 137.
to seduce her, senses her virtue on first meeting her and says to himself: "All of her that is out of door most rich!/If she be furnished with a mind so rare,/She is alone the Arabian bird, and I/Have lost the wager" (I, vi, 15-18). Having stolen his way into her bedchamber in the trunk he has asked her to keep under her protection, Iachimo seems momentarily overcome by Imogen's beauty and purity as he gazes upon her sleeping form and says:

    Cythera,
    How bravely thou becomest thy bed! Fresh lily!
    And whiter than the sheets! That I might touch
    But one kiss; one kiss! Rubies unparagoned,
    How dearly they do't! 'Tis her breathing that
    Perfumes the chamber thus. The flame o' the taper
    Bows toward her and would underpeep her lids
    To see the enclosed lights, now canopied
    Under these windows, white and azure, laced
    With blue of heaven's own tinct (II, 11, 14-23).

Pisanio, the faithful servant to both Posthumus and Imogen, is similarly impressed by his mistress, for when Posthumus directs him to murder Imogen for her adultery with Iachimo, Pisanio refuses to believe the accusation, avowing that Imogen is "More goddesslike than wifelike." In the character of Imogen are combined "the virtues of at least three of Shakespeare's feminine types: the naive girl (in boy's costume part of the time), the queenly woman, and the tragic victim." Although her part is far longer than any other of Shakespeare's heroines, there is very little in her action or speech which

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9 Goddard, II, 249. 10 MacCracken et al., p. 201.
can in anyway detract from the exalted portrait of womanhood that Shakespeare wished to convey.

Nonetheless, the faults found in Imogen must be taken into consideration. Shaw finds that one side of Imogen is an unspeakable person with whom "virtuous indignation is chronic," whose "object in life is to vindicate her own propriety and to suspect everybody else's" and whose "fertility and spontaneity in nasty ideas is not to be described," but he also finds tied to this Imogen with ropes of blank verse . . . the Imogen of Shakespeare's genius, an enchanting person of the most delicate sensitiveness, full of sudden transitions from ecstacies of tenderness to transports of childish rage and reckless to consequences in both, instantly hurt and instantly appeased, and of the highest breeding and courage.11 Chambers describes her as a "puppet,"12 and Tillyard believes that judged "by the standards of her most lifelike self, her cheerful readiness to dress up as a boy is nothing short of frivolous."13 Granville-Barker points to her relationship with her father as grounds for proving that she is not without fault. He states that she has some ability at deception as indicated by her clandestine marriage to which her father is vehemently opposed and that she certainly does not yield her father much respect before his courtiers when she states "with


12Chambers, p. 290.

something uncomfortably near to condescending irony, an invidious weapon wielded by the young against the old, 'I beseech you, sir,/Ham not yourself with your vexation./I am senseless of your wrath.'" Granville-Barker concludes that from a parent's point of view she could not have been an easy young lady to manage.  

Most criticism of Imogen springs from Posthumus's righteously indignant remark when convinced by Iachimo that his wife has been unfaithful: "Me of my lawful pleasure she restrained,/And prayed me oft with forbearance, did it with/A pudency so rosy, the sweet view on't/Might well have warmed old Saturn, that I thought her/As chaste as unsunned snow" (II, v, 9-13). Hazlitt admires this relationship as an "inimitable picture of modesty and self-denial," but Spencer writes that Imogen "loves her odd spouse very much, though with a 'pudency so rosy' that it more enkindles him than recommends her to this day and generation." Tillyard believes that there is a discrepancy between her occasional warm-hearted humanity and the cold and conventional chastity which Posthumus describes. Traversi finds that Posthumus's description of Imogen's modesty is touched with sensuality by the choice of the epithets "rosy" and "sweet" which accompany it, for it has the power to "warm" the unnatural instincts of the aged Saturn. He believes that

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14 Granville-Barker, I, 530-531.  
15 Hazlitt, p. 16.  
16 Spencer, p. 362.  
17 Tillyard, p. 31.
such a description indicates that Posthumus's relations with Imogen have been corrupted by court sophistication and cynicism, and that both husband and wife "will have to be taken out of that context and exposed to the natural simplicities before any true process of recovery can be initiated." But indeed, all of the criticism of Imogen is not sufficient to negate the great appeal she holds for most readers and critics.

Admittedly, portraying a suitable mate for a woman of such excellent qualities would be an extremely difficult task, but few would believe that it was beyond Shakespeare's poetic ability or psychological insight to do so if he had not been bound by a conventional plot with which his audience was quite familiar. Most of what is noble in Posthumus has to be revealed in what others say of him, for the plot requires some quite shameful behavior on his part. His history and stature are disclosed in Act I, Scene 1, in an expository conversation between a lord who is very well informed and another who is conveniently ignorant. The first lord states that Posthumus is a "poor but worthy gentleman." Since he was orphaned at birth, King Cymbeline decided to take the infant under his protection and rear him in court as a son. Under such tutelage Posthumus became

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"most praised, most loved,/A sample to the youngest, to the more mature/A glass that feated them, and to the graver/A child than guided dotards" (I, 1, 47-50). Here the lord implies that Posthumus’s worth must be considered in relation to the woman who has chosen him as her husband: "To his mistress,/For whom he now is banished, her own pride/Proclaims how she esteemed him and his virtue./By her election can be truly read/What kind of man he is" (I, 1, 50-54). Iachimo notes the tendency of people to elevate the character of Posthumus by citing Imogen’s regard for him, for he says, "This matter of marrying his King’s daughter, wherein he must be weighed rather by her value than his own, words him, I doubt not, a great deal from the matter" (I, iv, 14-17). Undoubtedly, Shakespeare did intend that Posthumus be regarded as a noble man, for as Schoff has pointed out, "Shakespeare nowhere causes a good person to be thus devoted to an unworthy one . . . ."19 In the closing scene of Act V when the image of Posthumus as a husband worthy of Imogen is in desperate need of restoration, Iachimo proclaims "a nobler sir ne’er lived/Twixt sky and ground" (V, v, 145-146). Regrettably, this is not convincing although Shakespeare clearly intended that Posthumus be equal to Imogen in noble nature, although not in noble birth. The plot of Cymbeline

dictates that Posthumus enter into a wager which permits an Italian villain to attempt the seduction of Imogen. It likewise dictates that Posthumus, having been convinced that his wife has been false, should write a love letter to her directing her to the spot where he has contrived to have her murdered. Thus Posthumus becomes the source of the suffering and grief to which Imogen is subjected. There are few, if any, words or actions which could completely exonerate a man from guilt for such transgressions. Small wonder that even Shakespeare could not make such a man a convincing hero.

The wager itself, however, was viewed differently by Elizabethans than by readers today. Modern minds would believe that Posthumus was "under no obligation so strong as to hold his peace, and keep his wife's honour from being bandied about" in the company of a man such as Iachimo, who boasts of his female conquests, but Elizabethans were still affected by the old code of chivalry which compelled Posthumus to vindicate the integrity of his wife following Iachimo's charge: "... I have not seen the most precious diamond that is, nor you the lady" (I, iv, 80-82). Posthumus feels inexorably trapped into a position where he must either admit doubt in Imogen's honor or accept Iachimo's wager that

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Imogen will yield to him. Although contemporary readers may believe as Hunter that Posthumus has offended against true love which feels no necessity for a test and would reject the suggestion of one as degrading, such considerations probably never occurred to Posthumus, who believes his is "the only conduct possible for the perfect knight and lover." Spencer states sardonically that the wager in Cymbeline "is no harder to swallow than the love test thought up by King Lear," and Giles contends that readers are almost content with a plot that would otherwise disgust them for the splendor and dignity of virtue in Imogen which it is instrumental in revealing.

But even if a lenient view of the wager is taken, one is repelled by the fact that a villain of Iachimo's proportions should gain access to Imogen through Posthumus's letter describing Iachimo as "one of the noblest note, to whose kindnesses I am most infinitely tied." Posthumus's lack of insight and wisdom is laid bare when Iachimo returns from England and convinces the husband that his wife has been unfaithful. Othello had no reason to suspect that Iago was anything but his most trusted companion and one who could gain little by calumniating against Desdemona and Cassio.


\[24\] Spencer, p. 363.

\[25\] Giles, p. 137.
Posthumus, on the contrary, knows Iachimo is dishonorable in that he brags of his ability to make women adulterous and he is eager to embark for England with this purpose in mind. In addition to being unscrupulous sexually, he stands to lose ten thousand ducats, the diamond ring that Posthumus has wagered, and possibly his life if Posthumus fulfills his promise to make Iachimo answer with his sword if his slanderous indictment of Imogen proves false. Even the most naive man should have recognized that a scoundrel as devious as Iachimo, with so much at stake, would almost inevitably conspire against Imogen and slander her if his attempted seduction should fail. But in the only successful "seduction" of the play, Posthumus proves unable to maintain his peace of mind in spite of Iachimo's assaults on his faith. He is absurdly quick to think the worst of the virtuous woman he professes to adore when an obvious rogue vilifies her. As his "brittle faith collapses," Posthumus relinquishes to Iachimo the ring given him by Imogen and castigates all womanhood as he does so:

For there's no motion
That tends to vice in man but I affirm
It is the woman's part. Be it lying, note it
The woman's; flattering, hers; deceiving, hers;
Lust and rank thoughts, hers, hers; revenges, hers;

26 Hunter, p. 152.  27 Sherman, pp. 92-93.
28 MacCracken et al., p. 200.
29 Granville-Barker, II, 522.
Ambitions, covetings, change of prides, disdain
Nice longings, slander, mutability,
All faults that may be named, nay, that Hell knows,
Why, hers, in part or all, but rather all.

I'll write against them,
Detest them, curse them (III, 1, 20-28, 32-33).

As always in Shakespearean romantic comedy, it is the man's love which fails to meet the test, but this is not the worst of Posthumus's moral failure. Having proved very easy quarry for Iachimo, Posthumus is transformed from a decent human being into a murderous, deluded fool. He is weak and impulsive in ordering Pisanio to murder Imogen. Certainly the delicacy, modesty, and devotion of Imogen he now believes to have been feigned are heartbreaking to Posthumus. Although his motivation is not revealed, perhaps he feels that she has wronged society and that she will wreck other lives if permitted to live. But it is only his lack of vision and wisdom which have masked the villainy of Iachimo and have brought him to such conclusions. He is a victim to the plot and its plan of telling in that he cannot encounter any of the principal characters of the play without "prejudicing the elaborate revelations saved up for the last scene." Therefore, he cannot come back "Othello-like" to do his own murdering. But whatever excuses are made dramatically for

30 Hunter, p. 153.
31 Granville-Barker, II, 513.
32 Hunter, p. 152.
33 MacCracken et al., p. 200.
34 Sherman, p. 57.
36 Granville-Barker, II, 527.
37 Ibid.
38 Ibid.
his behavior, it is, nonetheless, despicable psychologically and morally. His letter to Imogen luring her to the site where he has planned to have her murdered reads:

Justice, and your father's wrath, should he take me in his dominion, could not be so cruel to me, as you, 0 the dearest of creatures, would even renew me with your eyes. Take notice that I am in Cambria, at Milford Haven. What your own love will out of this advise you, follow. So he wishes you all happiness, that remains loyal to his vow, and your, increasing in love.

Leonatus Posthumus (III, ii, 40-49).

Imogen is pathetically overjoyed by his protestation of love and the proposed reunion with the husband she loves so dearly. Her joy is quickly turned to bitter disillusionment, however. Pisanio, evidencing considerably more wisdom than his master, refuses to believe the charge against Imogen, saying: "What false Italian,/As poisonous-tongued as handed, hath prevailed/On thy too ready hearing? Disloyal! No./She's punished for her truth . . ." (III, ii, 4-7). He cannot fulfill Posthumus's command that he murder Imogen but instead reveals to her the letter ordering him to do so with its explanation that she "hath played the strumpet" in Posthumus's bed.

Posthumus has still further to fall in the reader's eyes. Having been duped by Iachimo into believing that Imogen has been false, he is just as easily fooled by the bloody handkerchief sent by Pisanio into believing that she has been murdered. As the first wave of penitence overcomes him, he tries to shift some of the intolerable blame for the murder
to his servant: "O Pisanio! Every good servant does not
all commands! No bond but to do just ones" (V, i, 5-7). This
feeble attempt to place the guilt on Pisanio not only reveals
his inability to bear the responsibility for the murder he
has ordered, but also his realization that such a command was
sinful. With this recognition his moral regeneration begins,
but indeed he has fallen far below the level of the wife,
whose very goodness has contributed to his downfall.

Despite the character flaws in Posthumus, he does possess
virtue as well. He is appealing in his humility of heart
which tells him that compared to Imogen he is "coarse clay"
as well as in his boyish innocence which causes him to boast
of Imogen's virtues. His magnanimity far surpasses that of
Othello and Leontes, "those other exemplars of the jealous
heart repentant," for he is remorseful over the murder of
Imogen before he realizes that she is not guilty of adultery:

He says:

"... You married ones,
If each of you should take this course, how many
Must murder wives much better than themselves
For wryng but a little! ...
... Gods, if you
Should have ta'en vengeance on my faults, I never
Had lived to put on this. So had you saved
The noble Imogen to repent, and struck
Me, wretch more worth your vengeance (V, i, 2-5, 7-11).

Magnanimity is also apparent in Posthumus's decision to spare

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39 Hunter, p. 162.
40 Granville-Barker, II, 527. 41 Ibid.
Iachimo when he encounters him in battle. Hunter explains that Posthumus has given verbal evidence that he has forgiven Imogen though he continues to believe she has trespassed against him, but he cannot demonstrate his charity in action since he believes her to be dead. He is convinced that Iachimo has been a party to her adultery. By sparing Iachimo's life, he demonstrates that "since he is capable of forgiving others, he deserves the pardon of the gods." Both Posthumus's modesty and forgiving spirit are demonstrated in the closing scene of the play when Iachimo kneels and offers his life in retribution for his evil. Posthumus says: "Kneel not to me. The power that I have on you is to spare you. The malice towards you to forgive you. Live. And deal with others better" (V, v, 417-420). Shakespeare offers Posthumus's gallant fight in defense of Britain as partial atonement for his guilt, but the effect is only slightly better than the misguided attempt to restore interest in him by making him the unconscious center of the pageant of his deceased relatives. In the end he is but "half a hero."
If there is fault in Imogen which is in part responsible for the downfall of Posthumus, perhaps it lies in the fact that she has seen her husband "through the illusion of her own hallowed imagination," arraying him with the glory of her own wealth, and loving him for a worth which is primarily within herself.\(^{47}\) He does not possess her strength, calm integrity, or wisdom. By marrying a man below her station, Imogen placed on Posthumus the burden of proving himself more heroic and virtuous than all the men she might have had. He is incapable of bearing such a burden. If Posthumus had not been so overwhelmed by Imogen's great merit and if he had not felt his own inferiority so acutely, perhaps he would not have believed that Imogen could have been false to him. Although Chambrun finds the over-rapid reconciliation between Posthumus and Imogen "shocking" because it constrains "Imogen to live the rest of her life with a husband who, when put to the test, has shown himself incapable of understanding her essential character,"\(^{48}\) Shakespeare probably wished to demonstrate the true nobility of Imogen in that her love is great enough to transcend any weakness or transgression on the part of Posthumus. She realizes that he has suffered more as the offender than she as the victim.\(^{49}\) In forgiving him so readily because she pities him and realizes his need for her,\(^{50}\)

\(^{47}\)Giles, p. 137.  
\(^{48}\)Chambrun, p. 350.  
\(^{49}\)Sherman, p. 105.  
\(^{50}\)Giles, p. 138.
Imogen demonstrates the very nobility of spirit which has interacted with Posthumus's sense of unworthiness to culminate in his moral disintegration.
CHAPTER V

TROILUS AND CRESSIDA

It is more difficult in Troilus and Cressida than in Coriolanus and King Lear to discern the interworking of male and female characters which results in tragedy, but none-theless, it is the structure around which the play is built. Cressida and Helen, the women responsible for the moral dissolution of Troilus and Paris in the play, have neither legal or blood ties with these men. The link is that of passion, for Cressida is the lover of Troilus, and Helen is the lover of Paris.

Although not classified as a tragedy, Troilus and Cressida certainly contains many tragic elements. Many critics have analyzed the play, and their opinions as to its basic theme are quite varied. Goddard writes, "The end of both military and sexual fury, this play says over and over, is self-annihilation."¹ Bryant finds that the basic story is of a young man's disillusionment,² while Chambers feels the problem of the play is "Love of woman and honour of man; do they really exist or are they but thin veils which poetic sentiment has chosen to throw over the grinning realities of

¹Goddard, II, 6.  ²Bryant, p. 72.
wantonness and egoism?" Danby points to the conflict between the Trojan chivalrous idealism and the Greek practical realism. John Masefield declares, "As it stands, it has little life and no meaning; it is formless and gloomy." The significance of the play, in the opinion of D. A. Traversi, is in time and mutability which destroy personal values and make them invalid. According to Boas, Hector's statement, "'Tis mad idolatry/To make the service greater than the god," strikes the keynote of the play and knits together the two themes of love on the personal and war on the national scale. Bethell finds in "the sumptuous armour" with its "putrefied core" the symbol of the play's theme of "fair without, and foul within" which is applicable almost everywhere in the Troy and Troilus stories as Shakespeare re-writes them. But it is Tillyard perhaps who states the theme most clearly by writing.

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3 Chambers, p. 193.


Everyone would agree that in *Troilus and Cressida* Shakespeare set himself a double theme, that of the Trojan War and that of the loves of the title characters. They would further agree that the two themes are approximated through having as motives a woman, each bad in her own way. . . . Troilus himself as the link between the themes, . . . is both lover in the one story and knight in the other . . . .

The Prologue states the cause of the Trojan War: "The ravished Helen, Menelaus' Queen/With wanton Paris sleeps, and that's the quarrel," but to the cynical Thersites it is the argument of "a cuckold and a whore." There is much in the play to verify his opinion, and the majority of critics find little in Helen's character which is "edifying." Although Spencer does not feel her scene with Paris is degrading, and Professor Wilson Knight feels her a worthy object of Trojan idealism, the majority of critics treat her much more severely. Of Menelaus and Helen, Brandes writes, "what a ridiculous couple!" In the eyes of J. A. Bryant, Helen is at best an "unusually glamorous whore who recognizes her own value as that of fleshy merchandise."

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11 Spencer, p. 288.
14 Bryant, p. 70.
David Kaula refers to her as "the promiscuous queen of the court of love,"\textsuperscript{15} and William Lawrence speaks of the "dreary, futile strife" caused by the "frail lady, Helen of Troy."\textsuperscript{16} S. L. Bethell writes that the woman "whose face launched a thousand Malvolian ships is subjected to a remorseless Shakespearean 'debunking,'" for she is a "worthless strumpet" whose only characteristic is a "weak and silly sex-obsession."\textsuperscript{17}

But this is the woman for whom hundreds of Greek and Trojan soldiers died.

Paris's feeling for her is indeed the most understandable, for he has "the honey still," while the Trojan soldiers have only the "gall." He contends that the return of the "ransacked Queen" after the "soil of her fair rape" would be a disgrace to Troy, and that all Trojans will be eager to sacrifice their lives to avoid it. But Paris's love for Helen is never idealized or valued at any level other than the sensual. In Helen's presence Paris states that love is compounded of hot blood, hot thoughts, and hot deeds, remarks which prompt Pandarus to question, "Is love a generation of vipers?" (III, ii, 146). The Menelaus, Paris, Helen triangle is subjected to constant derision. On hearing Paris has been wounded by


\textsuperscript{17}Bethell, "Troilus and Cressida," pp. 261-262.
Menelaus, Troilus quips, "Paris is gored with Menelaus' horn" (I, i, 114). Troilus crudely jokes with Helen that the forked hair on his chin represents Paris as a cuckold. Ulysses complains that the abduction of Helen is the "deadly gall, and theme of all our scorns! For which we lose our heads to gild his horns" (IV, v, 30-31). Thersites is continually reminding the audience that "lechery" has caused the war. But it is Diomed who paints the triangle in its most lurid light by answering Paris's question as to whether he or Menelaus deserves Helen most:

Both alike
He merits well to have her that doth seek her
Not making any scruple of her solire,
With such a Hell of pain and world of charge.
And you as well to keep her that defend her
Not palating the taste of her dishonor
With such a costly loss of wealth and friends.
He, like a puling cuckold, would drink up
The lees and dregs of a flat tamed piece.
You, like a lecher, out of whorish loins
Are pleased to breed out your inheritors.
Both merits poised, each weighs nor less nor more,
But he as he, the heavier for a whore . . .
She's bitter to her country. Hear me, Paris,
For every false drop in her bawdy veins
A Grecian's life hath sunk; for every scruple
Of her contaminated carrion weight
A Trojan hath been slain. Since she could speak,
She hath not given so many good words breath
As for her Greeks and Trojans suffered death (IV, i, 55-74).

It is difficult to imagine a more scathing denunciation of the cuckold, Menelaus, perfidious Helen, and lecherous Paris. Paris, for personal gratification in love, and Menelaus, for revenge, are willing to allow the sacrifice of hundreds of innocent lives. It is, indeed, a dishonorable cause which
allows society to suffer for the private quarrels of a few. Helen is certainly the root of moral dissolution in both Paris and Menelaus.

The language of tradesmen is significant throughout the play. Paris answers Diomed's accusations with the "cant of merchants." "Fair Diomed, you do as chapmen do, Dispraise the thing that you desire to buy." Troilus argues that Helen cannot be returned to the Greeks because "We turn not back the silks upon the merchant" (II, ii, 68). He contends that Helen is a pearl whose price has "turned crowned kings to merchants." In love with Cressida, Troilus imagines himself a "merchant" and Pandar a bark conveying him to Cressida, his pearl. As Cressida prepares to leave Troy he says, "We two, that with so many thousand sighs/Did buy each other, must poorly sell ourselves," (IV, iv, 41-42). Perhaps this is Shakespeare's method of revealing the disparity between priceless spiritual love and that which can be bought and sold.

Troilus is a naive and idealistic young man, who refuses to let reason guide his judgment in the question of returning Helen to her husband, a measure which would end the futile war. He argues with Hector that reason will destroy "manhood and honor," making "livers pale and lusthhood deject." He will not look on Helen as a woman unlawfully separated from

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18 Tillyard, *Shakespeare's Problem Plays*, p. 36.
19 Bryant, p. 72.
her husband. To him "She is a theme of honor and renown,/A spur to valiant and magnanimous deeds" (II, ii, 199-200). Oblivious to the injustice which robs Menelaus of his wife, Troilus ironically finds himself in Menelaus's place in regard to Diomed and Cressida as the play ends.  

The actual guilt in the continued possession of Helen lies primarily with Hector, however, for as the noblest Trojan he is a man of wisdom and judgment. He does not have Paris's excuse of love or Troilus's youthful idealism to cloud his insight. Hector has admitted he fears "bad success in a bad cause" (II, ii, 117). He has stated that Helen "is not worth what she doth cost/The holding," and that "Tis mad idolatry/To make the service greater than the god" (II, ii, 51-52, 56-57). Hector knows full well that he is transgressing moral law by withholding Helen from her husband; "Yet nevertheless" he yields to his brothers' supplications. His consent to continue the fight for an unjust cause is the undoing of himself and of Troy. The shameful murder of Hector at the hands of Achilles and his Myrmidons and the heinous treatment of his corpse are certainly more than just retribution for his moral indiscretion. He is, however, but the noblest of many hundreds of men whom Helen of Troy has brought to destruction.

Shakespeare did not attempt to portray Helen as a fully realized human being whose character traits interplay with the weaknesses in the men she brings to destruction. She is a theme, not an individual. But on a national scale she is to Troy what Cressida on a personal level is to Troilus. The critical opinion as to the character of Cressida is as varied as that on Helen, with some critics treating her more harshly than others. Spencer states that though she is a coquette with charm, she is "more whore than coquette and more wanton than charming." Her yielding to Troilus and Diomedes is not that "of innocence or of headlong passion—or even generosity; it is a thoroughly sensual surrender." Brandes finds Cressida a shallow, frivolous, pleasure-loving coquette, who is sensually attractive but spiritually repulsive and unclean. Campbell states that both Troilus and Cressida are "sated sensualists," while Bryant writes that Cressida "is a pearl who will glow brightly for any merchant-lover who happens to possess her." Mark Van Doren finds Cressida crude and gross, and Robert Ornstein writes that she is sold like merchandise and becomes

21Spencer, p. 289.  
22Brandes, pp. 504, 524.  
24Bryant, p. 72.  
a "Grecian drab." Traversi is much more lenient, contending that her "falseness does not spring from a deep-seated perversity or even a strong attraction for Diomed, but from the mere process of events, from a flaw inherent in the human situation." Craig believes that she "is a mere puppet, the impersonalized voice of tradition." A. S. Knowland agrees with Kenneth Muir that Cressida loves Troilus while she is with him to the limit of her shallow nature, but that she is weak and her weakness cannot support the span of absence.

It is probably E. K. Chambers who comes closest to understanding Shakespeare's Cressida, however. He writes:

To set her down as a professional wanton who deliberately angles for the soul of her lover were to mistake the play. It is in her humanity that the bitterness of it lies. She was not made of the stuff of heroines, but her vows and protestations were real enough when they were uttered. She was but a light woman.

There should be little doubt as to Cressida's character after Act I, Scene 11, for in her dialogue with Pandarus she understands and bandies the most libertine jests in a manner unimaginable in Viola, Desdemona, or Imogen.

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27 Traversi, An Approach to Shakespeare, p. 68.
28 Craig, p. 240.
30 Chambers, p. 196.
31 Brandes, p. 524.
Although her reference to Troilus as a "sneaking fellow" as he returns from war is only good-natured wit, the dialogue quickly becomes that of a loose woman and a bawd when she says her positions of defense are:

Upon my back to defend my belly; upon my wit, to defend my wiles; upon my secrecy, to defend mine honesty (I, i, 284-286)

I cannot ward what I would not have hit, I can watch you for telling how I took the blow—unless it swell past hiding, and then it’s past watching (I, i, 292-295).

When Pandarus says he will bring her a token from Troilus, she replies, "By the same token, you are a bawd" (I, i, 307). In her soliloquy she states, "Men prize the thing ungained more than it is," and "Things won are done, joy’s soul lies in the doing" (I, i, 313, 315). They are significant words because they reveal the kind of love relationships she has experienced and the only kind that she can understand—love whose only end is in sensual gratification. Once the fruits are tasted they quickly satiate and sicken. Cressida will take Troilus only when his passion reaches "white heat," for love is ephemeral and must be seized and savored at its emotional peak. Shakespeare subtly reveals Cressida’s character and attitude toward love in this scene so as to foreshadow the betrayal of Troilus.

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When the lovers meet at the house of Pandarus, there is further foreshadowing in Cressida's lack of ease which prompts Troilus to ask, "What too curious dreg espies my sweet lady in the fountain of our love?" to which she replies, "More dregs than water, if my fears have eyes" (III, ii, 70-72). Cressida must sense the worth of Troilus and the depth of feeling he has for her, but she has enough knowledge of her own nature to fear the outcome of such a one-sided passion. She is too shallow ever to be constant, but she is astute enough to see the beauty of a relationship she can never fully share. It is ironic that she says that "all lovers swear more performance than they are able . . . . They have the voice of lions and the act of hares, are they not monsters?" (III, ii, 91-96). By her vows of constancy and subsequent infidelity, Cressida becomes a monster of her own definition. Her dedication of what folly she may commit to Pandarus is further preparation for the betrayal.

In the actual exchange of love vows Cressida is sincere in saying she has held her love secret for "many weary months," but it is a sensual love made feverish by denial. Her passion can be easily extinguished through sexual gratification. That she is a woman adept in the art of love, either through experience or instinct, is evident in her words, "Stop my mouth," and following Troilus's kiss, "My lord, I do beseech you pardon me,/'Twas not my purpose thus to beg a kiss,/I am
ashamed" (III, ii, 141-146). Cressida has greater knowledge of her own character than many women, however, for she says, "I have a kind of self resides with you/But an unkind self that itself/will leave/To be another's fool" (III, ii, 155-157). But stifling her doubts she vows fidelity with the ironic words, "If I be false, . . . /'Yea,' let them say to stick the heart of falsehood,/'As false as Cressid!" (III, ii, 191, 202-203). But having glimpsed at the beauty and fervor of Troilus's devotion, who is to say she is not sincere in her vow of constancy? She knows her inherent weakness and ambivalent nature, but is she not like the lovers of whom Troilus says that "the will is infinite and the execution confined . . . the desire is boundless" but "a slave to limit"? (III, ii, 39-90).

As Troilus prepares to leave her the following morning, Cressida further discloses with her petulant words that her previous experience in love has been that which ends with sexual gratification: "Prithe tarry./You men will never tarry./O foolish Cressid! I might have still held off,/And then you would have tarried" (IV, ii, 15-18). Clearly she has no comprehension of a spiritual love in which physical consummation is but one of many manifestations of devotion. Pandarus destroys any remaining illusion of romance from the love scene with his vulgar remarks, but Troilus also contributes to the dissolution of romance by laughing insinuatingly when Cressida
asks him to return to her chamber upon hearing the knocks at the door. As the lovers part, Pandarus feels infinitely more pity for Troilus than for his niece. "'Twill be his death, 'twill be his bane, he cannot bear it" (IV, ii, 98-99). His only words to Cressida when she declares she will not leave Troy are "Thou must" (IV, ii, 101). Pandarus, who knows Cressida best, apparently realizes that the depth of love resides with Troilus, for he makes no attempt to comfort his niece.

Tillyard finds in Cressida's words at parting "A woeful Cressid 'mongst the merry Greeks,'" a hint that she hopes to find recompense for her suffering. Troilus's innumerable admonitions that Cressida be true and not tempt her frail powers "presuming on their changeful potency" leave little doubt as to the outcome of the love story. Diomed confirms this with his vow to prize her only at "her own worth." In the very next scene her worth is made evident in her free and easy kissing of the assembled Greek soldiers. But it is Ulysses who removes any remaining veil of respectability:

Fie, Fie upon her!
There's language in her eye, her cheek, her lip--
Nay, her foot speaks, her wanton spirits look out
At every joint and motive of her body.
Oh, these encounterers, so glib of tongue,
That give accosting welcome ere it comes,
And wide unclasp the tables of their thoughts
To every ticklish reader! Set them down

33Tillyard, Shakespeare's Problem Plays, p. 74.
For sluttish spoils of opportunity,
And daughters of the game (IV, v, 54-63).

Goddard entitles the betrayal scene "Sensuality wooed by Brutality."\(^34\) By alternately thrusting herself forward and then holding back, Cressida uses the same technique with Diomed that she has used with Troilus. On this rough and experienced soldier such nuances are wasted, for he takes her at her word and starts to withdraw bored with such "fooling." Cressida calls him back each time he starts to leave and finally promises her favor, and for a pledge gives him the sleeve she had received from Troilus. All of this transpires before the disillusioned eyes of her former lover. Cressida is remorseful in her surrender to her "unkind self," for she realizes Troilus loves her more than Diomed ever will. Her sensuality succumbs to the lusty Greek who is a cynic without romantic ideals to which she must try to conform.\(^35\)

Critical opinion of Troilus is much more favorable than that of Helen and Cressida with the exception of Oscar Campbell, who describes him as a "slave of passion" and a "sexual gourmet."\(^36\) Tillyard contradicts this, saying that "to turn Troilus into an adept at lechery is to wreck one of Shakespeare's masterpieces of characterization and to go flat

\(^{34}\) Goddard, II, 8. \(^{35}\) Campbell, p. 115.  
\(^{36}\) Ibid., pp. 111-112.
against what his poetry is telling us." He believes Troilus is the proverbial faithful lover, Troy's second Hector, the furious fighter and fiery politician, although he is young, changeable, and takes himself with terrible seriousness. Danby claims Troilus is the "supreme example" of the Trojans, and Arthos writes that Troilus "possesses qualities that are at the heart of Shakespeare's conception of nobility--truth, generosity, love." Brandes calls Troilus "the honest soul, the honorable fool, who was simple enough to believe in woman's constancy." Troilus's "love of honor, of glory, and of Cressida," according to Bryant, is the raw, selfish love of all adolescence; and that, if it can be preserved through the last storms of the possessor's growing up, may blossom into something good and lasting .

Troilus is certainly not of the heroic stature of an Othello or Hamlet, but he does possess many noble characteristics. Of him Ulysses says:

The youngest son of Priam, a true knight, Not yet mature, yet matchless, firm of word, Speaking in deeds and deedless in his tongue, Not soon provoked nor being provoked soon calmed; For what he has he gives, what thinks he shows.

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37 Tillyard, Shakespeare's Problem Plays, p. 47.
38 Ibid., pp. 49, 52, 79.
40 Arthos, p. 131.
41 Brandes, p. 503.
42 Bryant, p. 79.
Yet gives he not till judgment guide his bounty,  
Manly as Hector, but more dangerous,  
For Hector in his blaze of wrath subscribes  
To tender objects, but he in heat of action  
is more vindictive than jealous love.  
They call him Troilus, and on him erect  
a second hope, as fairly built as Hector (IV, v, 96-109).

Ulysses credits Troilus with more judgment than he  
deserves when one recalls his protest against reason in  
defense of keeping Helen. The selection of Cressida for his  
love idol is certainly no tribute to his judgment, and the  
fact that he lacks Hector's mercy is a dubious attribute.  
But his firmness, generosity, openness, and modesty are  
indeed the qualities of a knight. His pursuit of love,  
glory, and honor, although gravely misdirected, is evidence  
of a magnanimity of spirit which elevates him from the common man.

Troilus, like Don Quixote, is unable to love his idol  
for what she really is. In all his protestations of love he  
refers only to Cressida's external beauty and the intensity  
of his own passion. Because he will not recognize the  
lascivious woman beneath the beautiful facade, he is free to  
imagine she possesses all the ideal feminine attributes of  
which he dreams. As with Helen, Troilus woefully misestimates  
Cressida's real worth, but even if their love had been ideal,  
it could not have satisfied him, for "he seeks with a fury,  
through medium of the beloved, something beyond, and since he  
finds it not he despairs."\(^{43}\) This "something beyond" is

\[^{43}\]Kaula, p. 279.
expressed by Troilus as he awaits Cressida at Pandarus's house:

What will it be
When the watery palates taste indeed
Love's thriced repuréd nectar? Death, I fear me,
Swounding destruction or some joy too fine,
Too subtle-potent, tuned too sharp in sweetness,
For the capacity of my ruder powers (III, 11, 21-26).

It is suggested that the experience of love is so fine,
"subtle-potent," and that it surpasses the "ruder powers" of the body and remains an incorporeal aspiration which the senses strive vainly to attain. 44

Yet, by a strange contradiction, it is precisely because fulfillment in love is sought by Troilus exclusively on the sensual level that it proves unattainable . . . . He seeks to extract from the refinement of the sensual a substitute for spiritual experience. 45

Another example of the "something beyond" is his statement to Cressida that "the will is infinite and the execution confined, that/the desire is boundless and the act a slave to limit" (III, 11, 89-90). The infinity sought by the will is Troilus's idealistic love, which can only be redeemed from abstraction by adequate integration of both spiritual and physical aspects if it is to endure the erosion of time and the inability of passion to substitute for the ideals of love and honor. 46

Troilus places an insupportable burden on

44 Traversi, An Approach to Shakespeare, p. 70.
45 Ibid.
46 Kaula, p. 279.
any finite being. But it is both ironic and tragic that he should choose a woman whose standards are so far below the minimum human expectations.

The final act of the play is satisfying to few readers or critics. The heartbroken Troilus, betrayed by Cressida, transforms his love for her to hatred for Diomed. His vengeance is as blind as his love, however, for had it not been Diomed, Cressida would have found another man for whom she would have betrayed Troilus. The futile conflict between Diomed and Troilus is made intolerable with the Greek's presentation to Cressida of Troilus' horse. Dissatisfying as the climax to the love story may be, it is not as disillusioning as the ignominious murder of Hector and the shameful treatment of his corpse. Ideal love and the ideal Trojan are both desecrated in the final act—Troilus, for ignoring the shallow character of the woman to whom he is passionately devoted; Hector, for disregarding his better judgment which tells him that the war to keep Helen from her husband is unjust. But perhaps the most offensive aspect of the last act is the vulgar mock lament of Pandarus over the wretched rewards of a bawd, for it is out of keeping with the morality one has learned to expect from Shakespeare.

Critical opinion as to the meaning of the frustrating inconclusion of Troilus and Cressida is relatively uniform.

47 Ibid.
Troilus is brought to a "state of equilibrium in which he repudiates the two great ideals of his life, love and soldier-ship, betrayed in one by Cressida's perfidy and in the other by the murder of Hector," according to Una Ellis-Fermor. Bryant writes, "Troilus's fate is to go on living with nothing left to live for, and that fate is so disquietingly common that most of us derive little satisfaction from thinking about it." He also believes that the representation of human folly has as much right to literary respectability as the representation of human dignity or human idealism, folly being both more common than the other two and more likely to be genuine. "Troilus's action in the play is folly and his fate disillusionment; one is compelled to recognize that Shakespeare's representation of him is more immediately meaningful to the reader than his representation of larger heroes like Hamlet or Macbeth." Ornstein says that out of the sordidness of Cressida's infidelity, a new romantic cause is born. Another soiled woman becomes the theme of chivalric honor and the cause of senseless struggle... But the total impression of Troilus is hardly nihilistic. It is a depressing play, not because it establishes the futility of man's search for ideal values, but because it is a sociological and psychological analysis of decadent values. Like Ulysses, Shakespeare is concerned here only with the nature of man's illusion, not with the essential worth of his ideals.

49 Bryant, p. 68. 50 Ibid. 51 Ornstein, p. 34.
Campbell writes that Troilus's catastrophe is of a more profound and less tangible sort than the obvious solution of Cressida being punished for her infidelity and Diomed being slain before the eyes of the audience in single combat with Troilus. In Campbell's opinion, such poetic justice would have given each of the lovers the dignity of a tragic figure in spite of the fact that nowhere during the action had they attained such stature. He believes futility is the proper end for such characters. Lawrence writes that the ending of the tale is in accord with the fact of human experience; life often settles nothing, it leaves the innocent to suffer, and the guilty to prevail. But Harbage feels that though there is no final significance in the sorrow of Troilus or the gaiety of Cressida in the tent of Diomed, there is justice in all Shakespeare's plays in the largest sense, for unhappiness is never the product of good, and happiness never the product of evil. E. M. Tillyard writes that it cannot be asserted too strongly that Shakespeare in writing *Troilus and Cressida* did not alter his moral standards. The old interpretation of the play as an outburst of unrestrained bitterness against life, to be overcome later, is fantastically false. Hector is honourable and generous and he fails to apply his virtues to real life, but that does not mean that

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52 Campbell, pp. 118-119.
Shakespeare temporarily despised honour and generosity. Cressida is shallow, hard, and lascivious. Had Shakespeare been really bitter, he would have been glad to see her making Troilus suffer. But he is not in the least glad. The same ethical standards prevail as in the rest of Shakespeare. . . . 55

Troilus is indeed a master of self-deceit, using his own idealism to gild an unworthy woman. Cressida magnifies this fault in him by her own desire and attempt to measure up to his expectations. Troilus imagines that honor is more real than being honorable 56 in regard to returning Helen to her husband and thus ending the Trojan War. Through his refusal to recognize true worth and true honor and his inability to come to terms with reality, he has allowed Cressida and Helen to bring him to disillusionment in love and war. But he is not alone, for because of Helen, Paris and Menelaus become morally dissolute, and Hector dies a shameful death. Helen and Cressida are basically the same woman, and they are undeniably the root of man's self-destruction in Shakespeare's Troilus and Cressida.

55Tillyard, Shakespeare's Problem Plays, p. 90.
56Bryant, p. 79.
CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

Although Shakespeare portrays vastly different demeanor and character in Volumnia, Cordelia, Goneril, Regan, Imogen, Helen, and Cressida, within these women lie the roots of self-destruction for five men of noble character. The distinct characteristics of each woman play upon the weakness in the man who loves her to bring about his moral dissolution.

If Volumnia had been a more tender and less bigoted mother, she might not have instilled the rigid and narrow code of ethics in Coriolanus which results in his supreme emphasis on military values and his intolerance of the common people, but his more humane instincts are repressed and perverted from his earliest childhood by her teachings. Every scene with his wife demonstrates the tenderness of which Coriolanus is capable but which has been subverted by his mother's indoctrination. With training so contrary to his nature, Coriolanus would inevitably be torn between his instinctive humanity and the prejudice and brutality nurtured in him by his mother. His life could hardly have been anything but tragic in view of such inner turmoil.

King Lear's affection for his daughters is the basis for his tragedy. Because he loves them greatly and because his
confidence in his ability to secure their love is fading as his strength and mental power begin to fail, he seeks assurances of their regard for him. If Cordelia could have been touched in the first and vital scene of the play by the compassion which later characterizes her, she might have realized that her father's need for a demonstration of her devotion warranted some bending of her defiant pride. She is true to her convictions, but like Coriolanus she is blind to any point of view but her own. The tragedy commences with Cordelia's outraged lack of tolerance for her aging father's lapse of judgment. She is responsible for his violence and intemperance in the first scene, for it is in response to her cold defiance that Lear's lower instincts are unleashed.

But without the unnatural evil of Goneril and Regan, there could be no tragedy other than the estrangement of Lear from his favorite daughter. Enigmatically corrupt and unprincipled, Goneril and Regan goad their father to fury and impetuosity by divesting him of his train of knights and by chiding him for his "dotage" and inefficacy. Having been cast into the storm by daughters eager to be free of him, Lear is engulfed by raging emotions which extinguish his mental and physical powers. But when restored to the love of Cordelia, Lear is capable of transcending all of the evil and brutality of his other two daughters. His great spirit succumbs only when Cordelia is executed in compliance with the order of Goneril and Edmund.
Posthumus's moral decline results from his feeling of insecurity. He knows his background is undistinguished, and though he is lauded profusely by members of court, he mistrusts his all too human shortcomings. One of his greatest sources of assurance, the King's regard for him, has been destroyed because of his clandestine marriage to Imogen. Knowing Imogen to be unparalleled in beauty, nobility, and virtue and believing that he is but weak and commonplace, Posthumus cannot feel secure in the devotion Imogen professes for him. He probably expects that one day she will see him for what he thinks he is and regret her decision to marry a man so far beneath her. With such misgivings gnawing him, Posthumus is unusually susceptible to the suggestion that Imogen has been unfaithful to him. He believes she has come to realize what he has feared so long: he is inferior to her in every respect and unworthy of her love. Believing he is without Imogen's love and realizing he is without Cymbeline's deference to support his tottering self-esteem, Posthumus yields to his lesser self and plots the murder of his wife. Had Imogen been a woman more nearly his equal or perhaps slightly beneath him in intelligence and nobility, Posthumus might not have doubted his ability to fulfill her expectations or to live up to his own image of what her husband should be. Indeed, Imogen's virtue has overwhelmed and smothered the noble characteristics in Posthumus which initially won her love.
Helen, who surrenders all too easily to Paris, has afforded the excuse for the bloody contention between Troy and Greece. In supporting the Trojan cause which keeps Helen from her rightful husband, Troilus, Hector, and all the Trojans are wrong, but Paris is the principal offender, for it is he who enjoys sexual gratification while thousands die in the war. Menelaus is guilty also in allowing so many to suffer in order that he may retrieve his weak and lascivious wife. Helen, perhaps more than any other woman in history, is responsible for man's moral corruption.

What Helen is on a grand scale to Greece and Troy, Cressida is on a smaller scale to Troilus, for like Helen she is weak and sensual. Her affection cannot sustain the absence of her lover. In succumbing to the lustful instincts which Cressida enkindles in him, Troilus begins his moral descent. He is blinded by passion to the real woman beneath the beautiful facade. Troilus resembles Imogen in that he gilds his lover in worth which is entirely within himself, but the object of his love is far inferior to Imogen's. He refuses to see Cressida's true character, in part at least, to rationalize his own salacious desire for her. His moral offence is two-fold, for he chooses to support Paris's claim to the unworthy Helen and to give his love to the unworthy Cressida.

1Giles, p. 137.
Perhaps no one but Shakespeare could have drawn women so individual and yet so devastating to the men they bring to moral self-destruction. Daughters of Imogen's temperament might well have tenderly loved Lear and have given him affectionate but sincere responses to his request for a public espousal of devotion. A lover of Cressida's character is too far below Posthumus, undoubtedly, and he might well expect that she would be unfaithful to him, but because he would not have felt debilitated by her great merit, as he did with Imogen, he might have maintained his integrity in spite of her. Troilus, on the other hand, might have found pure and uplifting love in Imogen, a woman worthy of his devotion. If Volumnia had had the weak and vacillating character of Helen or the tenderness of Cordelia or Imogen, Coriolanus could never have been so opinionated and warlike. Indeed, it is Shakespeare's matching of the specific traits in the women with distinct weaknesses in the men who love them that results in man's moral decay. In the four plays analyzed, as well as in twelve others, this theme is clearly discernible. Certainly the concept of woman as the root of man's self-destruction is one of the most significant in Shakespeare's plays.
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