

Master Mistress:  
Gendered Relations in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*,  
*Cymbeline*, and the *Sonnets*

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Both *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (*Dream*) and *Cymbeline* explore patriarchal societies in which both male and female characters negotiate masculine control. This reading posits that each play is characterized by an attempt by men to master women, but that there remains a discrepancy between men and the masculine form of social organization. Valerie Traub neatly clarifies this division between biological sex and gendered behavior: Sex refers to the . . . biological distinctions between male and female bodies. Gender refers to those meanings derived from the division of male and female . . . the attributes considered appropriate to each: 'masculine' and 'feminine.'"<sup>1</sup> Patriarchy implicitly reverses this derivation of meaning with male rulers justifying their command through their own exemplification of necessary masculine attributes. However, this reasoning requires a strict control over the ascription of appropriate behavior for each sex, suggesting that gendered meanings "exist primarily as constructions of particular societies."<sup>2</sup> One manifestation of this control within each play is the marshalling of female sexuality, a category differentiated from gender as relating specifically to "erotic desires and activities."<sup>3</sup> Margreta de Grazia argues that "nothing threatens a patriarchal and hierarchic social formation more than a promiscuous womb,"<sup>4</sup> and indeed, each play explores the perceived threat of unbridled

<sup>1</sup> Valerie Traub, "Gender and Sexuality in Shakespeare," in *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare*, ed. Margreta de Grazia and Stanley Wells (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 129.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.

<sup>4</sup> Margreta de Grazia, "The Scandal of Shakespeare's Sonnets," in *Shakespeare's Sonnets: Critical Essays*,

female desire. Similarly, the sexual interrelationships present in the *Sonnets* can be seen to destabilize conventional gender assumptions established in the early poems of the sequence. In turn, the alluring androgyny of the speaker's master-mistress challenges the view that masculine and feminine attributes are necessarily oppositional, a view held in *Cymbeline* by both Posthumus and the king. Finally, the presence of foreign "otherness" within each work can be seen as a further attempt to challenge the assumed stability of gender as controlled by specific patriarchal societies. Bringing these broad observations together, it becomes possible to see the themes of procreation, androgyny, and foreignness weave and blend together throughout these diverse texts to suggest a reformulation of gendered relations.

The opening scenes in both *Dream* and *Cymbeline* are set in the courts of ruling men, establishing the patriarchal context of subsequent action and exemplifying the view that familial relations in renaissance literature "were habitually politicized: [where] the household was a microcosm of the state."<sup>5</sup> Egeus' command over Hermia is suggested by his thorough inventory of Lysander's love tokens and through his repeated insistence that "she is mine."<sup>6</sup> Legitimized by the state, he is able to assert that her disobedience must lead to swift execution by invoking "the ancient privilege of Athens" (*Dream* 1.1.41). Theseus affirms the law, although he describes to Hermia an alternative punishment whereby she must:

. . . be in shady cloister mew'd,  
To live a barren sister all your life  
Chanting faint hymns to the cold fruitless moon.  
Thrice blessed they that master so their blood,  
To undergo such maiden pilgrimage  
(*Dream* 1.1.71–5)

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ed. James Schiffer (New York: Garland Publishing Inc, 1994, 1999), 106.

<sup>5</sup> Louis Montrose, *The Purpose of Playing: Shakespeare and the Cultural Politics of the Elizabethan Theatre* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 176.

<sup>6</sup> William Shakespeare, "A Midsummer Night's Dream," in *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt et al., 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 2008), Act 1, Scene 1, 42, 97. [subsequent references to this work will be cited within the text as *Dream*, followed by act, scene and line number]

Impatient for his own nuptial hour, Theseus' sonorous tone evokes what he himself might consider a fate worse than death. He implicitly contrasts his own erotic drive with a chaste pilgrimage which he genders female through the adjective "maiden." However, the masculine mastery over the blood necessary to achieve this end mirrors the masculine authority to enforce female chastity, an authority which in turn controls the right to procreate. Theseus' assertion that the chaste are "[t]hrice blessed" contextualizes this cessation in terms evoking the Christian trinity—mirroring the way in which religious doctrine is easily appropriated by the state to enforce patriarchy. In turn, plosive alliteration links "blessed" with "blood" to emphasize the metonymic association of blood with both the erotic drive and familial relations. These links recall Theseus' earlier assertion to Hermia that, "To you your father should be as a god; / One that composed your beauties" (*Dream* 1.1.47–8), and while not explicitly erasing maternal influence, this statement implicitly claims for men control over both procreation and parentage.

Despite the representation of Athenian patriarchy in the opening scene, there remain moments of tension which serve to undermine those values. While Egeus is credited for Hermia's beauties, he does not seem to consider that his severity might be the cause of her own "stubborn harshness" (*Dream* 1.1.38). In turn, Theseus responds to Hermia's wish that "my father looked but with my eyes" by reversing her grammar: "Rather your eyes must with his judgment look" (*Dream* 1.1.56–7). This syntactic face-off conveys how Hermia's desire conflicts with the patriarchal expectation that transgressive emotion must be controlled by masculine reason, a stricture implicit in Theseus' fricative warning that she must "fit your fancies to your father's will" (*Dream* 1.1.118). Similarly, although Lysander defends his own desire in the language of patriarchal confrontation by reasoning that he is as well derived as

Demetrius, he ultimately convinces Hermia to escape the phallic “sharp Athenian Law” (*Dream* 1.1.162) through the agency of an independent woman—his “widow aunt, a dowager” (*Dream* 1.1.157). The reference echoes Theseus’ earlier comparison of the moon to a dowager during his complaint that its presence on the nights before his nuptial hour “lingers my desires” (*Dream* 1.1.4). Peter Holland observes that, “The moon, a female deity, emblemizes inconstancy as its principle,”<sup>7</sup> and while Theseus’ impatience with the moon conveys his inability to control nature, it also suggests fear of an inconstant femininity threatening his reason. Moon imagery is consequently used throughout the play to suggest a feminine realm beyond the daylight patriarchy of Athens.

While Athenian Law asserts masculine values, fairyland in many respects dispenses with patriarchal norms, and instead suggests that “Titania is an independent monarch with her own court . . . [that is] not subservient, to her husband’s.”<sup>8</sup> In contrast to Theseus, Titania is swift to take control of her own marital sexuality, revealing to her fairies in the presence of Oberon that she has “forsworn his bed and company” (*Dream* 2.1.62). Yet despite the fairy monarchs’ open relationship, it is Oberon alone who is accused of sexual conquest, with Titania noting pointedly his playing “pipes of corn . . . / To amorous Phillida” (*Dream* 2.1.67–8). In contrast, Titania is not challenged for indulging her lusts, but is instead accused of enabling Theseus to indulge his own with Ariadne and Antiopa. This discrepancy foreshadows the fairy monarchs’ later power relations, where Oberon is able to overturn Titania’s refusal to relinquish the changeling boy by orchestrating her desire with Cupid’s flower. His blackmail of the drugged queen challenges the ideal of fairyland equality, as

<sup>7</sup> Peter Holland, “Introduction” to *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, by William Shakespeare (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 63.

<sup>8</sup> Penny Rixon, “A Midsummer Night’s Dream,” in *Shakespeare: Texts and Contexts*, ed. Kiernan Ryan (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), 23.

Oberon boasts to Puck how he “taunted her / And she in mild terms begged my patience”

(*Dream* 4.1.54–5). Yet despite Oberon's manipulation of the antidotal Dian's bud, it is Titania who earlier invokes the feminine power of the moon:

... the moon, the governess of floods,  
Pale in her anger washes all the air  
...  
And thorough this distemperature we see  
The seasons alter ...  
(*Dream* 2.1.103–4,106–7)

Peter Holland interprets the play's moon imagery as representing Diana's transformation from “the goddess of the ‘cold fruitless moon’ . . . into the goddess of married chastity,”<sup>9</sup> a transformation enacted through the dissolution of the effects of Cupid's flower by Dian's bud, and in turn, mirroring Hermia and Helena's passage toward chaste marriage and motherhood. However, Titania's angered moon figuratively enacts Theseus' earlier fear of an uncontrollable femininity, a reading emphasized in productions such as that by Peter Brook (1970) which cast the same actors in the roles of Theseus/Oberon and Hippolyta/Titania to suggest “repressed emotional turbulence” in the Athenian relationship.<sup>10</sup>

The unstable relationship between chastity and unrestrained desire as expressed through lunar imagery infuses the representation of the young Athenians' night. Before the influence of Oberon's flower, the threat of Athenian stricture remains. Demetrius chastises the pursuing Helena for leaving the city and committing “[to] one that loves you not . . . / . . . the rich worth of your virginity” (*Dream* 2.1.215, 219). However, the altered state of the men is foreshadowed in Helena's response that, “the story shall be changed: / Apollo flies, and Daphne holds the chase” (*Dream* 2.1.231). Some critics argue that the role of male lover

<sup>9</sup> Holland, “Introduction” to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 33.

<sup>10</sup> Rixon, “A Midsummer Night's Dream,” 38.

constitutes “a ‘feminized’ position insofar as it separates men from . . . military pursuits,”<sup>11</sup> and indeed Helena sees their behavior as wanting masculinity, declaring that, “If you were men, as men you are in show, / You would not use a gentle lady so” (*Dream* 3.2.152–3). In contrast, others hold that the effect of the drug exaggerates the “normal male practice . . . of inconstancy that is ironically displaced from its conventional place as an attribute of women.”<sup>12</sup> This irony emphasizes a double standard in patriarchal ideology; while Theseus, in the opening scene, threatens Hermia for desiring the wrong man, he offers schooling to Demetrius for his broken vows to Helena. In turn, the drug appears to engender masculine traits in Titania, with her insistence that Bottom “shalt remain here, whether thou wilt or no” (*Dream* 3.1.135) echoing Theseus’ earlier attempt to control Hermia’s transgression. Nevertheless, if an indirect result of the drug is to transform Helena’s gentle evocation of school-day companionship into the spiteful claim that Hermia “was a vixen when she went to school” (*Dream* 3.2.325), then her earlier claim that the friends are “with two seeming bodies but one heart” (*Dream* 3.2.213) reaffirms a female affinity present under normal circumstances. That such affinity is negotiated in different terms for the male characters is established early through Theseus’ instruction to Egeus and Demetrius that, “I have some private schooling for you both” (*Dream* 1.1.116), confirming that even under patriarchy there remains a masculine hierarchy.

Although both *Dream* and *Cymbeline* commence in the courts of ruling men to establish the patriarchal context of subsequent action, *Cymbeline*’s opening scene presents a more explicit illustration of female transgression. While Hermia is threatened with incarceration for desiring the wrong man, Innogen is already imprisoned for proceeding with a forbidden

<sup>11</sup> Traub, “Gender and Sexuality in Shakespeare,” 137.

<sup>12</sup> Holland, “Introduction” to *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, 63.

marriage. Furthermore, while Hermia relies on Lysander to question Theseus' reasoning, Innogen herself interrogates her father's decree, arguing that, "It is your fault that I have loved Posthumus: / You bred him as my playfellow."<sup>13</sup> Cymbeline's response is to assert alternative familial ties by lamenting that she "mightst have had the sole son of my queen!" (*Cym.* 1.1.139), and reveals a further issue that she "took'st a beggar; wouldst have made my throne / A seat for baseness" (*Cym.* 1.1.142–3). The class-based condemnation of Posthumus combines with the sexual inflection of "baseness" to reveal Cymbeline's concern with royal lineage. However, he negates Innogen's ability to procreate by insisting that she "languish / A drop of blood a day; and . . . / Die of this folly" (*Cym.* 1.1.157–9). While the blood drops may symbolize decreasing fertility, they also suggest the bloodline that Cymbeline is eager to maintain—emphasized through his earlier claim that Innogen is "poison to my blood" (*Cym.* 1.1.129). By incarcerating his daughter, Cymbeline sabotages his own lineage, a concern implicit in Innogen's plea: "Harm not yourself with your vexation" (*Cym.* 1.1.135). In more general terms, the conflict illustrates figuratively how patriarchal control can be as constricting to men as to women.

The consequent degree of control which Innogen retains over Cymbeline's lineage is mirrored by the perception in the world of the play that she herself defines her husband's character. During the opening dialogue, a courtier asserts that Posthumus' virtue "[by] her election may be truly read" (*Cym.* 1.1.54). The insight foreshadows that which Giacomo shrewdly exploits to undermine Posthumus' masculinity, asserting to Philario and the Frenchman that by "marrying his king's daughter . . . / [Posthumus] must be weighed rather by her value than his own" (*Cym.* 1.4.11–12). Posthumus seems aware of this general

<sup>13</sup> William Shakespeare, "Cymbeline," in *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt et al., 2nd ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 2008), Act 1, Scene 1, 145–6. [subsequent references to this work will be cited within the text as *Cym.*, followed by act, scene and line number]

perception of his precarious masculinity, imploring Innogen on their separation:

O lady, weep no more, lest I give cause  
To be suspected of more tenderness  
Than doth become a man.

(*Cym.* 1.1.94–6)

In turn, it is Innogen who instigates the lover's exchange of jewelry by offering Posthumus her mother's diamond, mirroring Lysander's masculine role as the giver of gauds. Posthumus responds by giving Innogen a bracelet that he terms "a manacle of love" to be placed upon "this fairest prisoner" (*Cym.* 1.1.123–4) which, although relating to her incarceration, evokes the patriarchal bondage rhetoric of wedlock that Cymbeline's decree has denied to him. Posthumus' helpless passivity in relation to Cymbeline contrasts sharply with the Queen's response to their predicament. She confidently informs the young couple that, "I can win the offended king, / I will be known your advocate" (*Cym.* 1.1.76–7). In turn, her condescending remark that her aid will "incur I know not / How much of his displeasure" (*Cym.* 1.1.103–4) suggests the limitations on Cymbeline's control over her, who is reduced to barking that she behaves "Not after our command" (*Cym.* 1.1.153). Overall, while the scene contrasts Innogen's virtuous control over Posthumus with the Queen's duplicitous control over Cymbeline, each female character nevertheless exemplifies a feminine response to patriarchy.

Although the opening of *Cymbeline* establishes versions of female transgression, the various plot lines throughout the remainder of the play are primarily concerned with "the recuperation of male power over the female."<sup>14</sup> Posthumus' wager on Innogen's chastity stems partially from insecure masculinity, and during the increasingly fraught exchange with Giacomo, he insists, "She holds her virtue still, and I my mind" (*Cym.* 1.4.61). The word "still" relates to her continuous virtue, but also to stability, and conveys Posthumus' need for

<sup>14</sup> Janet Adelman, *Suffocating Mothers: Fantasies of Maternal Origin in Shakespeare's Plays, Hamlet to The Tempest* (London: Routledge, Chapman and Hall, 1992), 211.



Innogen to possess a steady femininity against which he can safely measure his own masculine “mind.” However, because he doubts his own masculinity, he therefore doubts her virtue, and as a consequence, is more susceptible to the belief that she has been unfaithful than that her bracelet has been lost or stolen (*Cym.* 2.4.123–5). The furious soliloquy which follows is seen by Janet Adelman to encapsulate the play’s “anxieties about male identity and female power to define the male,”<sup>15</sup> and associates both themes with “the mother’s capacity to unmake the son’s identity through her sexual fault.”<sup>16</sup> This “fault” is ultimately conceived as participation in procreation, and in a speech which echoes Cymbeline’s concerns about Innogen’s influence over his royal lineage, Posthumus wonders, “Is there no way for men to be, but women / Must be half-workers?” (*Cym.* 2.4.1–2). Furthermore, Posthumus’ rumination upon masculinity reveals an evasion of responsibility and self-recognition that is necessary to all manifestations of misogyny:

. . . 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 . . .  
All faults that may be named, nay, that hell knows,  
Why, hers, in part or all; but rather, all  
(*Cym.* 2.5.20–8)

While Posthumus presupposes an essentialism concerning fixed gender attributes, he also laments that such attributes are an unavoidable part of being male, given the regrettable necessity of female involvement in procreation. Overall, the play reveals the circular reasoning implicit in patriarchal ideology, namely the *a priori* assumption that negative attributes are essentially feminine, irrespective of the sex of the person exemplifying those character traits. The celebration of androgyny present in the *Sonnets* can be read as a response to this fallacy.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 208.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 211.

While it might be easy to explain Posthumus' misogyny as the outcome of anger and heartache, patriarchy also ensures that gendered essentialism is manifest in amicable relationships. The loyal Pisanio confidently distinguishes the traits of each sex as he helps Innogen evade her husband's wrath by persuading her to dress as a page-boy. In addition to transforming her physical appearance, the disguise necessitates a change of behavior, and he insists that she must

... forget to be a woman; change  
Command into obedience: fear and niceness—  
The handmaids of all women, or, more truly,  
Woman its pretty self- into a waggish courage  
(*Cym.* 3.4.154–7)

While it is ambiguous whether Pisanio's reference to "woman" relates to Innogen's sex or to gender, his argument nevertheless illustrates an expectation that each sex conforms to its apposite gendered category. However, his synecdochic view that "fear" and "niceness" are in fact "Woman its pretty self" suggests both the impossibility for Innogen to wholly "forget to be a woman," and also, the solecism of uncourageous men who exemplify these traits. The argument is clarified by Pisanio's view that Innogen's shift from princess to page requires the behavioral shift from "[c]ommand into obedience". This view implies that character traits are determined by the organization of social class, but that the "command" of such organization is distinct from the sex of the commander. However, if gendered expectations are ultimately seen as a superstructural symptom of a patriarchal power base, then Cymbeline's inability to recognize Innogen as Fidele suggests that androgyny may contain the seeds of political threat.

Both Posthumus and Cymbeline fail in the course of the play to address the patriarchal fallacy of fixed gender attributes. It is fitting that Posthumus, who wishes to be rid of the feminine infection of his character, is for most of the play incapable of correctly interpreting his own wife's character, whom Giacomo correctly esteems as "whiter than the sheets" (*Cym.*

2.2.16). Similarly, while Innogen recognizes the Queen's "[d]issembling courtesy" (*Cym.* 1.1.85), Cymbeline himself appears almost entirely trusting of his wife, learning only after her death that she abhorred his person (*Cym.* 5.6.40). The king's journey through the play is to "learn to distrust—and hence to separate himself from—his wife,"<sup>17</sup> and while her death engenders the recuperation of his masculine control, it is also enacted figuratively through reunion with his sons. Janet Adelman argues that the two princes "are an experiment in male parthenogenesis, a portion of Cymbeline's own masculinity split off and preserved from the taint of women."<sup>18</sup> Yet despite this "taint," Cymbeline frames himself, not as a father, but as a mother, wondering "am I / A mother to the birth of three?" (*Cym.* 5.6.369–1). Having received confirmation from Belarius that the princes are "blood of your begetting" (*Cym.* 5.6.332), Cymbeline regains from Innogen full control over his lineage, telling her she "hast lost by this a kingdom" (*Cym.* 5.6.373–4). However, her unconscious anger is expressed through violent imagery in his innocent observation that:

. . . she, like harmless lightning, throws her eye  
 On him, her brother, me, her master, hitting  
 Each object with a joy.  
(*Cym.* 5.6.395–7)

Furthermore, Belarius' observation that Guiderius was in a "most curious mantle, wrought by the hand / Of his queen mother" (*Cym.* 5.6.361–3) reintroduces Cymbeline's first wife into the play, destabilising Adelman's male parthenogenesis fantasy and reaffirming a "women's part" which neither son feels inclined to deny. Once again, the categorization of metaphysical traits is revealed as a strategy in patriarchy to retain masculine authority.

While the representation of gender relations in *Dream* and *Cymbeline* is conveyed by the formal and thematic aspects of Shakespeare's poetry, it is clarified dramatically through the

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 208.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 205.

narrative, and theatrically through the sex of actors. In contrast, the *Sonnets* have language alone, and feature neither named subjects nor a clear dramatic narrative. Nevertheless, most critics treat sonnets 1–126 as concerning a desired male youth, and sonnets 127–152 the mistress of the speaker. Although some have noted that, of this first group, only twenty “on the evidence of forms of address and masculine pronouns, [are] addressed to, or concern, a male,”<sup>19</sup> these two groupings are conventionally used to determine the sex of the subject of a particular poem, with the speaker assumed to be male. With this in mind, the representation of gender relations in the *Sonnets* is combined with the representation of sexuality, with unorthodox sexual interrelationships offering “profound . . . critiques of the ideas of heterosexual desire, chastity . . . [and] marital fidelity.”<sup>20</sup> Although some formalist criticism stresses the need to interpret each sonnet as a self-contained unit of meaning, a comparison between sonnets over the range of the sequence reveals a sustained questioning of these themes.

As with the opening scenes of *Dream* and *Cymbeline*, the opening sonnets (1–19) establish patriarchal orthodoxies which are disrupted in the later sonnets of the sequence. In one sense, “[what] ‘ought to be’ in the way of gender relations . . . is represented [here] as an ideal.”<sup>21</sup> The speaker in these early sonnets encourages the youth to preserve his beauty through marriage and procreation, insisting “your sweet semblance to some other give,”<sup>22</sup> and that through heterosexual marriage “sire and child and happy mother, / . . . one pleasing note do sing” (*Son.* 8.11–12). Furthermore, the speaker’s assertion that the youth “art thy mother’s glass” (*Son.* 3.9) contrasts with Theseus’ patriarchal view that Egeus alone composed Hermia’s

<sup>19</sup> Paul Edmondson and Stanley Wells, *Shakespeare’s Sonnets* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 31.

<sup>20</sup> Helen Vendler, *The Art of Shakespeare’s Sonnets* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1997), 20.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> William Shakespeare, “The Sonnets and ‘A Lover’s Complaint’,” in *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt et al., 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 2008), Sonnet 13, line 4. [subsequent references to this work will be cited within the text as *Son.*, followed by sonnet number and line number]

beauties, and in turn, celebrates in physical form the “woman’s part” lamented by Posthumus.

However, Sonnet 3 conveys subtle misogyny as the speaker criticizes the youth’s seeming reluctance to procreate:

Thou dost beguile the world, unbless some mother.  
For where is she so fair whose unneared womb  
Disdains the tillage of thy husbandry?

(Son. 3.4–6)

The implication that “woman” is synonymous with “mother” leaves women without children alienated from their biological sex, while implying a metonymic link between “woman” and “womb” suggests a view of women as simply a source of children, subject to the “tillage” of men. Furthermore, although dental alliteration in the phrase “Disdains the tillage” conveys the disgust of the hypothetical fair woman who rejects the youth, it also suggests the disdain of the speaker for such a woman, jarring with the soft consonants of lines 5 and 7. The phrase also contains an echo of “stain” and “pillage,” suggesting the threat of enforced intercourse and perhaps implying a moral imperative for women to become mothers. The implication that any woman would do for the young man’s task seals the speaker’s objectification of women.

At best, the misogyny of the early sonnets might be read as the speaker’s crude attempt to convey to the youth a homoerotic desire through ambivalence towards female sexuality. Sonnet 20 is often read as an expression of the speaker’s homosexuality, with the preceding sonnets forming a narrative in which “homosocial desire changes by degrees into homosexual desire.”<sup>23</sup> However, in terms of the representation of gendered relations in the sequence, the poem also explores the slippery interplay between sex and gender:

A woman’s face with nature’s own hand painted  
Hast thou, the master-mistress of my passion;  
A woman’s gentle heart, but not acquainted

<sup>23</sup> Bruce R. Smith, *Homosexual Desire in Shakespeare’s England: A Cultural Poetics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 248.

With shifting change as is false women's fashion  
(*Son.* 20.1–4)

Enjambment between lines 3–4 enacts the “shifting change” the speaker considers an essential attribute of women, echoing the patriarchal fears of inconstancy expressed in *Dream*. Similarly, the fricative phrase “false women's fashion” forcefully labels all women deceitful, echoing Posthumus' essentialist fears. However, the speaker's belief that the youth possesses a “woman's face” and “gentle heart” relies upon the transference of supposedly fixed feminine qualities. His elusory androgyny is encapsulated in the speaker's phrase “master mistress,” and in turn, is conveyed formally through feminine ending and slant rhyme (“a-doting” / “nothing” (*Son.* 20.10, 12)). Yet despite the speaker's attraction to the youth's femininity, he insists that the youth retains masculine control over these traits, describing him as “A man in hue all 'hues' in his controlling” (*Son.* 20.7). Overall, the sonnet suggests that the speaker is both attracted to and troubled by the youth's androgyny, and perhaps in turn, suggests the difficulty for men in responding to the aforementioned circular reasoning at the heart of patriarchy.

While only one of many figurative strategies in the *Sonnets*, androgyny, in one sense, symbolizes the speaker's conflict between the masculine and the feminine, a conflict which is mirrored by the range of rivalries described in the sequence. Throughout Sonnets 79–86, the speaker meditates upon a rival poet's claim for the youth's affections. However, he reverses the gendered expectation for a combative male rival by praising the poet in phallic, masculine terms, claiming, “I am a worthless boat, / He of tall building and of goodly pride” (*Son.* 80.11–12), while conceding his own feminine response to the youth: “I faint when I of you do write” (*Son.* 80.1). Later, while reflecting on his “ripe thoughts,” he likens writing to procreation as he compares his own brain to “the womb wherein they grew?” (*Son.* 86.3–4). A further rivalry is

addressed concerning the youth's relationship with the speaker's mistress. The opening quatrain of Sonnet 144 reveals:

Two loves I have, of comfort and despair,  
Which like two spirits do suggest me still:  
The better angel is a man right fair,  
The worser spirit a woman coloured ill  
(*Son.* 144.1–4)

Although the speaker asserts that the youth is the “better angel,” the syntax suggests balanced opposition. The simile in line 2 invites a figurative reading of the youth and the mistress as personifying the “spirits” of masculinity and femininity. However, the speaker's fear that “my angel be turned fiend” (*Son.* 144.9) suggests gender fluidity, while gendered expectations are reversed by comparing “his purity with her foul pride” (*Son.* 144.8). Overall, the rivalries described in the *Sonnets* between the speaker and the subjects of his poems perhaps mirror the relationship between masculine and feminine attributes within the speaker himself: “two spirits do suggest me.” Furthermore, while the speaker recognizes tension between these assorted attributes, his embrace of the feminine aspect of his own character is in marked contrast to both Posthumus' explicit disgust after similar reflection and Cymbeline's figurative recuperation of masculine control.

The speaker's repeated insistence on the young man's fairness might be seen to convey the view that metaphysical character traits are themselves related to the physical body. One aspect of such materialist readings is to consider how the appearance of others affects the assessment by others in a particular cultural context. This view finds expression through the speaker's ambiguous focus upon the color of his mistress, described unsentimentally as “a woman coloured ill” (*Son.* 144.4). Many critics argue that her darkness should be understood figuratively as offering a criticism of Petrarchan love sonnets—poetry, which in the process of idealizing the invariably “fair” female subject, serves only to “dehumanize [them] and

constitute[s] an implicit rejection of the imperfect bodies of actual women.”<sup>24</sup> In Sonnet 130, the speaker asserts that, “If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun; / If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head” (*Son.* 130.3–4). Equating “white” with “snow” underlines how all skin tones are “dun” in comparison, while comparing all hair to “wires” detaches the blackness of the mistress’ hair from racial signification. An alternative figurative reading interprets the mistress’ darkness as signifying moral degeneracy.<sup>25</sup> In Sonnet 131 the speaker addresses his mistress with the claim that she is “the fairest and most precious jewel” (*Son.* 131.4), using conventional imagery of equating fairness with virtue, darkness with degeneracy. Yet, his assertion that, “Thy black is fairest in my judgment’s place” suggests a speaker unwilling to chastise what he knows to be her dissolution, and concludes that, “In nothing art thou black save in thy deeds” (*Son.* 131.12–13). On the other hand, the fact that he is “thinking on thy face” (*Son.* 131.10) invites a literal interpretation of her blackness, with an implicit refusal to use a skin tone to figuratively represent moral worth. Other critics reject figurative interpretations altogether and argue instead that the *Sonnets* explore the speaker’s desire for a black woman, and that in the sequence the “patriarchal dream of producing fair young men turns into the patriarchal nightmare of a social melting pot.”<sup>26</sup> The implication by such critics that figurative readings of the mistress’ color signify a conservative unwillingness to accept interracial relationships perhaps underplays the extent to which the “blackness” of the mistress is contrasted with the “fairness” of the young man in a figurative strategy that in more general terms explores the ascription of metaphysical traits based upon biological sex. Either way, to see such readings as mutually exclusive perhaps simplifies the provocative

<sup>24</sup> Phyllis Rackin, *Shakespeare and Women* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 5.

<sup>25</sup> Marvin Hunt, “Be Dark But Not Too Dark: Shakespeare’s Dark Lady as a Sign of Color,” in *Shakespeare’s Sonnets: Critical Essays*, ed. James Schiffer (New York: Garland Publishing Inc, 1999), 370.

<sup>26</sup> de Grazia, “The Scandal of Shakespeare’s Sonnets,” 105.



ambiguity of the later sonnets in the sequence.

While it is possible to read the darkness of the mistress in the *Sonnets* as entirely figurative, critics have argued that, in the world of *Dream*, “Athenian patriarchal structures . . . are established in implicit opposition to [the] spectre of female and racial otherness.”<sup>27</sup> This opposition is established by the exchange between Theseus and Hippolyta which opens the play, in which the Amazonian queen responds to the Duke’s impatience with the waning moon with a speech that is often performed as an elegy for lost freedom:

Four nights will quickly dream away the time;  
And then the moon, like to a silver bow  
New-bent in heaven, shall behold the night  
Of our solemnities.

(*Dream* 1.1.8–11)

Hippolyta’s figurative linking of the moon with her former position as reigning Amazonian archer establishes the significance of the moon as the symbolic spectre of unruly femininity, foreign in both an astronomical sense, and in the sense of an allusion to a world beyond the strictures of patriarchy. Theseus is swift to dismiss all hints of melancholy, insisting that this “pale companion is not for our pomp” (*Dream* 1.1.15), yet implicitly he refers here to the moon, whose “bow” he counters with his own evocation of violence, reminding Hippolyta that “I woo’d thee with my sword, / And won thy love, doing thee injuries” (*Dream* 1.1.16–7). The pointed observation foreshadows the punishing threat of Athenian Law wielded against Hermia, but also suggests Theseus’ defence against a threatening femininity embodied by his Amazonian fiancée. This discomfort with foreign femininity is transmitted to the young Athenian men. Attempting to convince Helena of his sudden love, Lysander draws upon the symbolic opposition between white and black present in the *Sonnets*, asking “Who will not

<sup>27</sup> Ania Loomba, “The Great Indian Vanishing Trick—Colonialism, Property, and the Family in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*,” in *A Feminist Companion to Shakespeare*, ed. Dymphna Callaghan (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2000), 173.

change a raven for a dove?" (*Dream* 2.2.120). However, his rhetoric is swiftly literalized into racial slurs, calling the now hated Hermia, "Ethiope" and "tawny Tartar" (*Dream* 3.2.258, 264). It remains for Titania to reclaim foreign femininity in her description of her pregnant votaress, gossiping together "in the spiced Indian air by night" (*Dream* 2.1.124)—an intimacy in stark contrast to the racism and violence enacted by the Athenian men.

While both *Dream* and the *Sonnets* establish kinship between femininity and the foreign, Jodi Mikalachki argues that the opposite is the case for *Cymbeline*, where "[n]ationally inflected gender anxiety haunts the drama, emerging particularly in contests over Roman–British relations."<sup>28</sup> This anxiety is manifest in reports to Giacomo by the Frenchman, who tells how he and Posthumus each "fell in praise of our country mistresses" (*Cym.* 1.4.54). The metonymic association between women and their country of origin is affirmed by Innogen, when during Giacomo's tall tale of Posthumus' deceit, she reflects, "My lord, I fear, / Has forgot Britain" (*Cym.* 1.6.112–3). While it might be tempting to read this association as reflecting patriarchal fantasies of conquest and control, it is the Queen herself who delivers the celebrated and impassioned nationalistic speech to Lucius concerning Caesar's failed invasion, mocking how his ships, "Like egg-shells moved upon their surges, cracked / As easily 'gainst our rocks" (*Cym.* 3.1.28–29). Nevertheless, Mikalachki underlines the patriarchal prerogative, observing that, "respectable nationalism depends in part on respectable womanhood,"<sup>29</sup> and *Cymbeline* ultimately blames his wife's duplicity for his rued cancellation of Britain's tribute to Rome, claiming, "We were dissuaded by our wicked queen" (*Cym.* 5.6.462–3). In turn, the renewed partnership between Britain and Rome recalls to *Cymbeline* a youth spent much under Caesar (*Cym.* 3.1.68–9), and together with Posthumus' Rome of "adolescent male

<sup>28</sup> Jodi Mikalachki, *The Legacy of Boadicea: Gender and Nation in Early Modern England* (London: Routledge, 1998), 100.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

competition," suggests how "Both Romes represent a male refuge from women."<sup>30</sup> However, too narrow a conception of Britain as feminine ignores Belarius' masculine pastoral, and consequently jars with Adelman's analysis of the male parthenogenesis fantasy. Bringing these ideas together, the play's depiction of nationalism might be taken to suggest a figurative parallel with the human quality of possessing both masculine and feminine traits.

The opening scenes in both *Dream* and *Cymbeline* present patriarchal societies in which both male and female characters negotiate masculine control. The assumption that each sex conforms to its apposite gendered category is transformed under patriarchy into an explicit pressure to do so. While both Hermia and Innogen express monogamous desire, male authority responds to their perceived transgression with the threat of incarceration as an attempt to control female sexuality and remove their right to procreate. For *Cymbeline* and Posthumus, this impulse is an expression of their fear of contamination by femininity, and *Cymbeline* has been read to enact "the recuperation of male power over the female."<sup>31</sup>

Although *Dream* concludes with the assimilation of three female characters into conventional marriage bonds, the imagery of the moon and foreign femininity "suggests that a subliminal discourse on female sexuality pervades Shakespeare's text,"<sup>32</sup> alluding to a realm beyond the bounds of Athenian patriarchy. While the misogyny present in the *Sonnets* remains firmly within such bounds, the representation of transgressive sexuality is used to explore the blending of masculine and feminine gender qualities into an alluring androgyny. This form of androgyny, while disabling to Posthumus, is present in *Dream's* fairyland, and characterizes the effects of Oberon's drug upon the young Athenian lovers. It is this very quality of the youth that the speaker of the *Sonnets* tries to persuade him to immortalize through

<sup>30</sup> Adelman, *Suffocating Mothers*, 201.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 211.

<sup>32</sup> Montrose, *The Purpose of Playing*, 174.

procreation, a process he likens to his own immortalization of the youth in verse. Overall, the representation of gendered relations in each text suggests that destabilizing gender expectations could be liberating for the full range of human relationships.