SURROGACY AND SISTERHOOD:
HOW FEMALE ALLIANCES CHALLENGE PATRIARCHAL SOCIETY IN
SHAKESPEARE

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ABSTRACT

In Shakespeare’s plays, women sometimes form alliances to protect each other from the oppressive patriarchal expectations of their time. These relationships often manifest as surrogate mother-daughter relationships, or a more sisterly connection. In *Hamlet*, Queen Gertrude adopts Ophelia as a surrogate daughter, exuding confidence in Ophelia’s mind and attributes, rather than infantilizing or objectifying her as male figures do. The Nurse provides a mothering figure for Juliet as she struggles to gain control over her own sexuality and marital future in *Romeo and Juliet*. Beatrice and Hero in *Much Ado about Nothing* provide a mutual love and care for each other, protecting reputations and hearts from male abuses. In *All’s Well that Ends Well*, Helena participates in multiple female alliances, forming a bond of love and support with her surrogate mother, the Countess, and a friendship with Diana and the Widow. These relationships and friendships provide a support system for women otherwise isolated and repressed by the male authority figures in their lives, giving them the chance to make their own decisions, and challenge the patriarchal societies in which they live.
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INTRODUCTION

Female characters in Shakespearean plays are generally expected to submit to a pre-established patriarchy: whether they are queens, countesses, wealthy daughters, or servants, all are expected to yield to a higher, male order. However, while unable to defy this male authority singlehandedly, women in many of Shakespeare’s plays form bonds and alliances with other women to establish themselves as individuals acting outside of masculine authority. In my thesis, I will explore the relationships between women in four plays: Hamlet, Romeo and Juliet, Much Ado About Nothing, and All’s Well That Ends Well.

Most of these relationships manifest as mother-daughter relationships, or sister-like friendships, whether there is a blood connection or not. Older women tend to adopt younger women, and take them under their wing, regardless of class status in examples such as Queen Gertrude and Lady Ophelia, the Nurse and Juliet, and the Countess of Roussillon and Helena. Sister-like relationships are more common among members of a similar class or social standing, such as the relationship between Hero and Beatrice in Much Ado About Nothing, where a blood connection is also present, as well as a similar age range.

The relationships of these women allow for a sense of trust and understanding to be fostered between them, that cannot be obtained with a man. These alliances allow women to be appreciated for more than just their bodies or beauty, but rather for their minds and other virtues. They find power to challenge the sexual double standard enjoyed by men of the time, pointing out the exploitation and precarious position of women in their respective societies. These women serve as mothers, confidantes, advisors,
messengers, and protectors, proving that they are more than the submissive portraits promoted by the men of their time and stories.
HAMLET

I. Brief Synopsis

In the Danish Court at Elsinore, Prince Hamlet has returned from school to a world of change. His father has died under mysterious circumstances, his uncle Claudius has married Hamlet’s mother, Gertrude, and now sits on the throne. After a supernatural visit from his father reveals that Claudius carried out the King’s murder, Hamlet sets a course for revenge, becoming increasingly paranoid, and exhibiting “mad” tendencies. As he plots his retribution, Hamlet’s behavior begins to concern members of the court, including Ophelia—a young lady with romantic feelings for Hamlet. Ophelia’s overprotective and nosy father, Polonius forbids Ophelia to have any sort of romance with Hamlet, and sets about spying to uncover what may be causing the young royal to act so strangely. Gertrude and Claudius also hire old friends of Hamlet to watch him and report on his doings.

Hamlet hires players to perform at court, reenacting the murder of his father, which upsets both Claudius and Gertrude. As Gertrude questions Hamlet to learn the cause of his strange behavior, Hamlet lashes out, condemning Gertrude for her sexuality and incest from marrying her husband’s brother. Polonius, spying from behind a curtain, makes a noise, and is stabbed by Hamlet, who mistakes Polonius for Claudius. Hamlet is banished to England for his crime, and Claudius sends orders to the King of England to have Hamlet killed.

Ophelia goes mad after the death of her father, and drowns in the river. Her brother, Laertes returns to Denmark from France, infuriated by the death of his father and sister, and seeks revenge against the royal family. Meanwhile, Hamlet has returned from
England, after pirates attacked his ship. In order to save himself, Claudius plans to use Laertes’ anger as a way to get rid of Hamlet for good, by way of a duel. In order to ensure Hamlet’s death, Claudius plans to poison both a sword and a goblet, to be used during the duel.

Hamlet observes Ophelia’s funeral, where he declares his love for Ophelia, and attacks Laertes. They return to the castle, and begin the duel. During the fight, Hamlet is struck by the poisoned blade, but does not die immediately. Gertrude drinks from the poisoned goblet, and dies quickly. Laertes is wounded by the poisoned blade, and reveals Claudius’ plan, and that his poison killed the Queen. Hamlet stabs Claudius and forces him to drink the rest of the poison. As his strength begins to fade, Hamlet asks his friend Horatio to tell his story.

Fortinbras, a prince from Norway, now enters the court, and is shocked to find the entire royal family dead. He moves to take over power of the Danish kingdom, and when Horatio relates Hamlet’s tale, Fortinbras orders that Hamlet have the burial of a true soldier.

II. “Think Yourself A Baby”: The Patriarchal Expectations of the Danish Court

In Hamlet, Gertrude and Ophelia are both oppressed by the patriarchal authority surrounding them in the Danish court. Firstly, they are the only two named female characters in the entire Danish court, indicating that they have no feminine support system, and thus experience isolation from their male counterparts. Both women are also bound by social constructs and expectations of the male-dominated court, are easily pushed aside by male figures, and disparaged by their fathers, sons, and brothers.
Gertrude, left widowed after her husband’s murder remains a queen only because she is now married to Claudius. Gertrude is unable to rule in her own right because of her sex, and it is likely that to preserve her own position in the Danish court, she chose to marry her husband’s brother. Though Gertrude’s marriage to Claudius is accepted by most of the court, her son, Hamlet, finds it immensely disturbing. Hamlet criticizes his mother’s decision, and lumps all women into the same traitorous category, crying out:

…Frailty, thy name is woman!—

A little month, or ere those shoes were old

With which she followed my poor father’s body,

Like Niobe, all tears. Why she—

O God, a beast that wants discourse of reason

Would have mourned longer!—married with my uncle…

…Within a month,

Ere yet the salt of most unrighteous tears

Had left the flushing in her gallèd eyes,

She married. O most wicked speed, to post

With such dexterity to incestuous sheets!” (1.2.146-157)

Hamlet is disgusted by his mother’s new marital situation, believing her to have acted with “wicked speed.” To him, this is a selfish choice, and disrespectful to his father’s memory. Hamlet has no sense of his mother’s own situation, finding her to be unfeeling and shameless in her choices. Hamlet’s concern is also with his father’s memory and reputation, rather than concerning himself with what may be necessary for his mother, his only living parent. Elizabeth Klett summarizes Hamlet’s contempt of Gertrude’s choices
aptly, saying: “According to Hamlet, Gertrude is a ‘most pernicious woman’ (1.5.105), who lacks loyalty and selflessness, the qualities that make a good wife and mother, which are a woman’s only roles in this patriarchal world” (Klett, 130). Klett explains how easily Hamlet dismisses his mother as a traitor because she does not act the way he expects a typical woman of this time to act after the death of her husband. To Hamlet, it is unthinkable, and thus unacceptable for Gertrude to be taking control of her own life, and moving on to a new life with a new man. Here is the first example of the sexual double standard so prevalent in many Shakespeare plays; though there are two people involved in this marriage, Gertrude is the one reviled for her part, while Claudius escapes relatively unscathed by rumor and disapproval. The female partner is labeled as lustful and disloyal, while the male is allowed to do whatever he likes.

Hamlet likewise finds Ophelia’s beauty and sexuality disturbing, and uses this as a crutch to blame all women for his own misfortune and struggles. He berates Ophelia, yelling:

I have heard of your paintings too, well enough.  
God has given you one face and you make  
yourselves another. You jig and amble, and you  
lisp, you nickname God’s creatures and make  
your wantonness your ignorance. Go to, I’ll no  
more on ’t. It hath made me mad. I say, we will  
have no more marriages. Those that are married  
already, all but one, shall live. The rest shall keep  
as they are. To a nunnery, go. (3.1.142-149)
Hamlet assumes that all women are deceiving creatures, giving themselves a “face” or persona different than the one given by God, thereby causing distress for men. He condemns the behavior of women, labeling them as silly and frivolous in an attempt to blame them for his madness. In addition to insulting women and what he sees as their ignorant behavior, Hamlet attempts to place a figurative ban on all marriages based on his hatred of his mother’s new union. Hamlet associates all women with betrayal and selfishness, based only on his perception of his mother, and placing that unfair association on Ophelia only emphasizes the disadvantage of women in the Danish court. Ophelia is immediately placed into a category created for her by a man—Hamlet does not see Ophelia as an individual woman, but instead creates his own image of her as a wanton and ignorant woman. Clearly, the best way for Hamlet to come to terms with his views of women is to simply remove women from the equation. This is why he expresses a wish to dissolve the institution of marriage, and send Ophelia to a nunnery—it allows him to simply remove the offending object/woman from his life, so that he may go along on his mad, manly way. Ophelia is easily disposable to Hamlet. She is not really a person, but rather the personification of an idea he finds displeasing, and one that he wishes to simply cut out.

Likewise, Ophelia’s family demands that she be the very embodiment of chastity, virtue, and the promise of an improvement in status at the court, without any thought of individuality or personal thought. In a world where female value is based on marriageability, Ophelia’s brother, Laertes, and father, Polonius warn Ophelia not to be frivolous with her virtue. For them, Ophelia offers the ability to improve their position at court if she marries well. This comes with a small caveat—she must remain chaste.
Laertes and Polonius both warn her of Hamlet’s affection and how it could be damaging to her, but even more damaging to them by the loss of her reputation. Laertes cautions:

Then weigh what loss your honor may sustain
If with too credent ear you list his songs,
Or lose your heart, or your chaste treasure open
To his unmastered importunity.
Fear it, Ophelia. Fear it, my dear sister,
And keep you in the rear of your affection,
Out of the shot and danger of desire.
The chariest maid is prodigal enough
If she unmask her beauty to the moon.
Virtue itself ’scapes not calumnious strokes.
The canker galls the infants of the spring
Too oft before their buttons be disclosed.
And in the morn and liquid dew of youth,
Contagious blastments are most imminent.
Be wary, then. Best safety lies in fear.
Youth to itself rebels, though none else near” (1.3.28-43)

Laertes intends to inspire fear of men into Ophelia’s heart, believing that this will be the proper tactic to convince her to remain chaste. He reinforces the idea that men are more powerful than women, believing that Hamlet is the only active participant in a relationship with Ophelia, rendering Ophelia a passive member. He also describes the potential situation in sickening terms, using words like “contagious” and “canker” to
emphasize the horror Ophelia would experience should she lose her virginity. This
language is meant to inspire fear into Ophelia, and describes the skewed view of the men
of the Danish court: Ophelia would be ruined, and rendered disgusting by losing her
virginity, a view that does not also extend to men expressing their own sexual freedom (a
perfectly acceptable pastime). Laertes expects Ophelia to bow to his masculine authority
on this issue, and this speech is meant to encourage Ophelia to see the wisdom of her
brother in matters of female sexuality.

Polonius likewise demands appropriate and submissive behavior from his
daughter, and is eager to know everything that occurs between her and Hamlet. He does
not allow her any freedom in affection, but is concerned at her behavior, insisting that he
be involved in every step of her relationship,

…I must tell you,

You do not understand yourself so clearly

As it behooves my daughter and your honor.

What is between you? Give me up the truth. (1.3.94-97).

Here, Polonius demands that Ophelia tell him the truth about her relationship with
hamlet, not allowing her to keep any information to herself—as a woman and a daughter,
Polonius requires to know everything about her life, so that he can control Ophelia in
whatever way he deems fit. When Ophelia looks to her father for guidance, saying “I do
not know, my lord, what I should think” (1.3.103), Polonius replies that he will tell her
exactly what to do:

Marry, I’ll teach you. Think yourself a baby

That you have ta’en these tenders for true pay,
Which are not sterling. Tender yourself more dearly,

Or—not to crack the wind of the poor phrase,

Running it thus—you’ll tender me a fool (1.3.104-108).

Polonius infantilizes Ophelia here, reducing her to an impressionable child, and ridiculing her for believing that Hamlet may have true feelings for her. Polonius also cares so much about his reputation, fearful that Ophelia will “tender [him] a fool” if she does not properly care for her virtue. If Ophelia loses her virginity without being married, she will ruin Polonius’ reputation at the Danish court. Polonius refuses to give Ophelia and respect for her mind, emotions, or intuition, believing that he must orchestrate every step of her life in order to advance his own life. Neither Laertes nor Polonius can appreciate the fact that Ophelia may be able to navigate the world of court by herself.

Polonius also enforces the sexual double-standard that was typical for the time: men could have plenty of sexual relations before marriage, but women had to remain pure and chaste, or risk ruining their reputation and any future chance of a good match for marriage. This is why Polonius insists that Ophelia be careful in her relationship with Hamlet, taking care to keep her reputation intact. When it comes to his son, Laertes, Polonius has an entirely different approach.

When Laertes plans to go to France early on in the play, Polonius sends a man with Laertes named Reynaldo to keep tabs on Laertes’ doings. Polonius gives Reynaldo a charge to ask around in France about Laertes, but also to give information about Laertes, such as:

“And in part him, but,” you may say, “not well.

But, if ’t be he I mean, he’s very wild.
Addicted so and so.—“And there put on him
What forgeries you please. Marry, none so rank
As may dishonor him. Take heed of that.
But, sir, such wanton, wild, and usual slips
As are companions noted and most known
To youth and liberty…

drinking, fencing, swearing,
Quarreling, drabbing—you may go so far. (2.1.17-26)

Polonius has no trouble with rumors being spread about his son’s behavior, even encouraging Reynaldo to spread various rumors. Reynaldo protests, worried at what it might do to Laertes’ honor, but Polonius brushes him off, insisting that this is how Reynaldo will uncover the truth of Laertes’ actions, depending on whether people corroborate or contradict Reynaldo’s statements. A man’s reputation would not be ruined by rumors about drinking, quarrelling, or associating with prostitutes, while any of these things would be devastating to a young lady’s position. This moment makes it very clear where Polonius’ priorities lie when it comes to his children and preserving their reputations—Laertes’ reputation doesn’t have to be squeaky-clean. Polonius doesn’t want Laertes to be involved with anything too unscrupulous, but if he drinks or gambles or goes into a house of ill repute, Polonius isn’t too concerned. In fact, these are behaviors often expected of young, male courtiers. Ophelia’s reputation is dependent solely on good behavior and virtue; she doesn’t have the same right to act the way Laertes does, in any capacity.
III. “Do not as some ungracious pastors do”: Challenging the Sexual Double Standard

As the only two female characters in Hamlet, Queen Gertrude and Ophelia begin to develop a relationship that extends beyond the overpowering grasp of the male figures in their lives. Gertrude extends her mothering tendencies beyond her own family, adopting Ophelia as a surrogate daughter, and exhibiting more faith in Ophelia than either Polonius or Laertes. Gertrude encourages Ophelia to share affection with Hamlet, as it may prove fruitful to both of them. She states:

And for your part, Ophelia, I do wish
That your good beauties be the happy cause
Of Hamlet’s wildness. So shall I hope your virtues
Will bring him to his wonted way again,
To both your honors. (3.1.38)

Here Gertrude exhibits her first mothering tendencies toward Ophelia. She acknowledges that Ophelia is beautiful, and that her beauty is good. Then, she states that she believes that Ophelia could be the one to restore Hamlet to sanity. Where Polonius believes that Ophelia’s withdrawal of affection has caused Hamlet’s madness, Gertrude has faith in Ophelia’s character, believing that Ophelia can bring Hamlet back to his former self—here, Gertrude indicates her belief that Ophelia can have a positive effect on Hamlet, rather than a negative one, as Polonius insinuates. Finally, she hopes that this will bring good fortune to both Hamlet and to Ophelia, voicing her support of a marriage between them. This would make Ophelia her daughter officially, not simply a surrogate daughter. Gertrude is also a woman, who has not enforced the sexual-double standard of the time,
allowing Ophelia to see a future as more than a typical, submissive wife to Hamlet, but rather a partner who can succor him, and assist him back to proper health.

In return, Ophelia offers a defense of Gertrude, when Hamlet complains, “For, look you, how cheerfully my / mother looks, and my father died within these two hours” (3.2.121-122). Ophelia replies, correcting Hamlet that “Nay, ’tis twice two months, my lord” (3.2.123), upholding Gertrude’s marriage to Claudius, contending that an acceptable amount of time has passed since the old king’s death, and that Gertrude is allowed to make her own decisions. This defense supports Ophelia’s distaste for the sexual double standard of the time, indicating her belief that women should have some say in their sexuality, and that Gertrude’s actions should not be sneered at.

Ophelia also willingly voices her opposition to the sexual double standard many times throughout the play. First, after Laertes warns her of the importance of remaining chaste, she replies:

> Do not as some ungracious pastors do,
> Show me the steep and thorny way to heaven,
> Whiles like a puffed and reckless libertine
> Himseld the primrose path of dalliance treads
> And recks not his own rede. (1.3.46-50)

Here, Ophelia quickly reminds Laertes not to be hypocrite, and warn her of maintaining her virtue while he fools around in France. This is a critical moment for Ophelia where she challenges her brother’s authority, and the actions that he takes advantage of as a man. It demonstrates that Ophelia does understand the world that she lives in, and how unfair it is for the women of this society to be held to a different standard than the men.
Her statement in this moment, while issued as a challenge, still denotes the respect owed to a patriarchal figure—she abandons this respect later, when the patriarchal figures in her life have disappeared, giving her the freedom to speak however she pleases, and on whatever subject strikes her fancy.

When Ophelia goes mad after the death of her father, her madness gives her a remarkable amount of freedom to comment on and call out the sexual double standard that she has experienced at court. In her madness, she sings a song that relates a tale of exploitation:

_Tomorrow is Saint Valentine’s day,
All in the morning betime,
And I a maid at your window,
To be your Valentine._

_Then up he rose, and donned his clothes,
And dupped the chamber door._

_Let in the maid that out a maid
Never departed more…._

_By Gis and by Saint Charity,_
_Alack, and fie, for shame!_  
_Young men will do ’t, if they come to ’t._

_By Cock, they are to blame._

_Quoth she, “Before you tumbled me,_
_You promised me to wed.”_

He answers,
“So would I ha' done, by yonder sun,
An thou hadst not come to my bed.” (4.5.48-66)

In this song, a man takes the virginity of a maid. When she reminds him of his earlier promise to marry her, he replies that he would have—if she hadn’t slept with him first. This is a clear example of how the sexual double standard works in a man’s favor: the maid is ruined, and even the man who took her virginity will not marry her now, because she is not pure enough. He, on the other hand, gets to have sex, and then determine the future of his sexual partner. The maid has no control over the situation. Ophelia understands this feeling of no control, and it is only through her madness, when she has lost the control and proper decorum required of a courtier that she is able to finally speak the truth about her repressed existence at court. Klett explains that

[Ophelia’s] mad scenes are disruptive to those around her, and she expresses a keen awareness of male sexual exploitation of women, showing herself to be neither silent nor merely obedient…Madness, therefore, grants her access to “voice”—perhaps, by the only means available—to expose duplicity and sexual double standards characterizing male/female relationships (Klett, 132).

In singing the Saint Valentine’s song, Ophelia calls out the freedom that men possess when it comes to both their bodies, and the bodies of women, reminding the audience of the warnings given earlier by her father and brother. If she had given up her “chaste treasure” to a man before marriage, she would have been in the exact same position as the maid in the song. Her reputation would have been ruined, with no chance for a future marriage, while the man lives on with no consequences for his actions. Ophelia, in her
madness, now articulates this perfectly to the court to demonstrate the helplessness she feels.

In the throes of madness, Ophelia seeks out Gertrude for help and understanding in her time of crisis, insisting to speak with the “beauteous majesty of Denmark” (4.5.21). There are a few reasons that Ophelia would immediately look to Gertrude. First, Polonius is dead, and Laertes is absent from the court. Gertrude, who has acted as a surrogate mother to Ophelia now is the only family that is accessible to her. Second, Gertrude’s speeches in earlier scenes have indicated that she is practical, intelligent and sound of mind. Elizabeth Klett, in her essay regarding the characters of Gertrude and Ophelia elaborates, explaining:

If we look at Gertrude based on the evidence of what she says and does in the text, she emerges as a practical, intelligent woman who speaks her mind. When Claudius and Polonius puzzle over the cause of Hamlet’s supposed “madness,” Gertrude offers, simply “I doubt it is no other but the main, / His father’s death and our o’erhasty marriage” (2.2.56-57). And, of course, she’s right. In the same scene, frustrated by Polonius’ verbosity, she boldly asks him to use “more matter with less art” (96).

Klett’s argument is that Gertrude is a capable, perceptive woman who is very aware of what goes on in the court. She understands precisely what is the cause of Hamlet’s odd behavior, and is unafraid to speak her mind to a powerful man of the court. Gertrude also has not exhibited any signs of madness, or erratic behavior. This combined, with her previous favor bestowed on Ophelia perfectly summarizes why Ophelia would choose to seek her out. Gertrude is someone that Ophelia can trust as a friend and mother figure.
While singing her songs, Ophelia begs Gertrude twice, “Pray you, mark” (4.5.28, 35). Ophelia pleads with Gertrude to listen and pay attention to the messages that she brings, hoping that Gertrude will understand, and provide some support through an alliance.

While reluctant to speak to Ophelia in her madness, Gertrude continues to protect Ophelia as a daughter throughout the remainder of the play. After Ophelia’s death, Gertrude assumes the responsibility to bring the news to Laertes and the rest of the court. Gertrude offers a beautiful eulogy, describing Ophelia’s escape from the court into the natural world, where she can finally be at peace. She says:

There is a willow grows aslant a brook
That shows his hoar leaves in the glassy stream.
There with fantastic garlands did she come
Of crowflowers, nettles, daisies, and long purples,
That liberal shepherds give a grosser name,
But our cold maids do “dead men’s fingers” call them.
There, on the pendant boughs her coronet weeds
Clambering to hang, an envious sliver broke,
When down her weedy trophies and herself
Fell in the weeping brook. Her clothes spread wide,
And mermaid-like a while they bore her up,
Which time she chanted snatches of old lauds
As one incapable of her own distress,
Or like a creature native and indued
Unto that element. But long it could not be
Till that her garments, heavy with their drink,
Pulled the poor wretch from her melodious lay
To muddy death” (4.7.164-181)

Gertrude’s language illustrates a beautiful natural scene, where Ophelia exists in solitude outside of the court. Ophelia is in a position finally where men are not telling her what to do, but she is free to make her own decisions, and act how she pleases by singing, and making floral garlands. Gertrude’s description of Ophelia’s “mermaid-like” position in the water, and how she looked “like a creature native and endued unto that element” suggests that the river is finally a setting that is freeing and natural for Ophelia, rather than the oppressive setting of Danish court. Gertrude also does not classify Ophelia’s death as a suicide, instead pointing to the broken tree and the weight of Ophelia’s clothes as the cause of death. This subtle, but powerful distinction then gives Gertrude the power to ensure that Ophelia receives proper burial rights. The gravediggers and the priest disagree, believing that Ophelia committed suicide, a situation that insists on less ceremony and recognition. The priest angers Laertes when he says:

Her death was doubtful,
And, but that great command o'ersways the order,
She should in ground unsanctified have lodged
Till the last trumpet. For charitable prayers
Shards, flints and pebbles should be thrown on her.
Yet here she is allowed her virgin crants,
Her maiden strewments, and the bringing home
Of bell and burial. (5.1.217-223)
Here again is a man who doesn’t understand Ophelia’s situation in the slightest, and makes assumptions about her character, classifying her as someone who does not deserve a proper, Christian burial because of the nebulous circumstances surrounding her death. However, some “great command” has overpowered the Priest’s judgment, and gives Ophelia proper rites. As Gertrude is the one with the most information regarding the circumstances of Ophelia’s death, and as she is Queen, she would be able to give that command for an appropriate burial. Gertrude’s parting words to Ophelia are “Sweets to the sweet! Farewell./I hoped though shouldst have been my Hamlet’s wife./I thought thy bridebed to have decked, sweet maid,/And not have strewed thy grave” (5.1.232-5). Even after Ophelia’s shadowy death, Gertrude still remembers her as a sweet maid, and a girl Gertrude had hoped to call a daughter-in-law. Gertrude mourns Ophelia as a beloved daughter, not as a mad lady, as the men classify her. Rather than believing the same assumptions that the men of the court easily accept regarding a troubled young woman, Gertrude places faith in Ophelia, and acts as a protector of Ophelia until the end.
I. Brief Synopsis

In the Italian city of Verona, two families are engaged in a feud: the Montagues and the Capulets. A fight breaks out between members of both households, and the Prince decrees that any individual who disturbs the future peace will be put to death. Benvolio, one of the Montagues, sees his cousin Romeo moping about because he is experiencing unrequited love. Benvolio advises Romeo to forget the girl, Rosaline, and find someone new.

Benvolio and Romeo sneak disguised into a party hosted by the Capulets, where Romeo lays eyes on a beautiful girl named Juliet, and falls head over heels in love. Unfortunately, Juliet is Lord Capulet’s daughter, and is already promised in marriage to Paris, a nobleman. Though Juliet does not wish to marry Paris, her parents insist that she follow their instructions and go through with the wedding. At the party, Romeo and Juliet meet, become infatuated, and then devastated when they learn that they belong to enemy families. Romeo and Benvolio are discovered, and must leave the party. Later that night, Romeo waits beneath Juliet’s balcony to confess his love. With the help of Juliet’s Nurse, the lovers arrange a meeting at the cell of Friar Lawrence, where they are married in secret.

Another fight breaks out between the families, where Tybalt, Juliet’s cousin mortally wounds Mercutio, one of Romeo’s friends, when Romeo attempts to break up the fight. Romeo kills Tybalt in anger, and is banished by the Prince. The Nurse tells Juliet about the fight, and Romeo’s consequent banishment. Juliet and the Nurse concoct
a plan for Romeo to spend the night with Juliet before he leaves for Mantua, so that they can consummate their marriage.

Juliet’s parents move up the day of her wedding to Paris, ignoring Juliet’s repeated statements that she does not wish to marry him. Juliet asks the Nurse for advice, but when the Nurse voices her agreement with Lord and Lady Capulet, Juliet begins to form her own plan to run away with Romeo. Friar Lawrence gives Juliet a special potion that will make her appear dead. After her family lays her in the tomb, Romeo will come to her, and they will run away together, with none the wiser. Friar Lawrence tries to send word to Romeo about the plan, but Romeo never receives the message.

Juliet takes the potion, and is presumed dead by her family, who lay her to rest in the Capulet tomb. Romeo hears the news that Juliet has died, and buys poison from an apothecary, planning to join Juliet in death. He returns to Verona and visits the tomb, where he finds Paris mourning Juliet. Romeo kills Paris, then takes the poison and dies beside Juliet. Juliet then wakes from her drugged state, and learns what has happened from Friar Lawrence. When she sees that Romeo is dead, she takes his dagger, and stabs herself. Friar Lawrence, in the meantime, has brought the Capulet and Montague families to the tomb. Upon seeing their dead children, the families promise to make peace, and create a monument to remember Romeo and Juliet.

II. “Younger than she are happy mothers made”: Patriarchal and Parental Expectations

Romeo and Juliet is filled with moments of male oppression and disdain for women and their feminine attributes. The play opens with two men of the Capulet household describing their hatred for the Montagues. Sampson says:
Women, being the weaker vessels, are ever thrust to the wall. Therefore I will push Montague’s men from the wall, and thrust his maids to the wall…When I have fought with the men, I will be civil with the maids. I will cut off their heads…Ay, the heads of the maids, or their maidenheads. (1.1.14-23).

Even while insulting the men of the Montague household, Sampson’s desire for power includes the oppression of women, degrading them by stating that women are “weaker vessels” than men, that they can be easily overpowered and taken advantage of sexually. Even though Sampson says that he will be “civil” to the maids, the taking of their heads and or/maidenheads evokes a sense of violence associated with either murder or rape. This violence highlights the disposability of women in this particular society; women are viewed as commodities to be traded in marriage for money, or discarded depending on the feelings of the male authorities.

Friar Lawrence also perpetuates the idea of women being weak, scolding Romeo for showing too much emotion. He says:

Art thou a man? Thy form cries out thou art.
Thy tears are womanish. Thy wild acts denote
The unreasonable fury of a beast.
Unseemly woman in a seeming man,
And ill-beseeming beast in seeming both!
Thou hast amazed me. (3.3.109-114).

Here, tears and emotion are classified as the weaker, feminine trait, and unacceptable for a man to express. A few lines later, Friar Lawrence again berates Romeo, comparing him to “a misbehaved and sullen wench, / Thou pout’st upon thy fortune and thy love”
Friar Lawrence maintains the patriarchal belief that women are weaker than men, by being more open and expressive with their emotions. Friar Lawrence uses this belief to form insults intended to get Romeo to “man up” and stop acting like a girl. Romeo’s emotions are labeled as whiny, and unacceptable for a man to express or even feel.

Even Romeo, the romantic hero, treats women with only the amount of respect it takes to admire a beautiful object. On his first sight of Juliet, Romeo is swept away by her physical attributes, and immediately becomes infatuated. He waxes rhapsodic about her looks, swooning:

Oh, she doth teach the torches to burn bright!
It seems she hangs upon the cheek of night
Like a rich jewel in an Ethiope’s ear,
Beauty too rich for use, for earth too dear.
So shows a snowy dove trooping with crows
As yonder lady o’er her fellows shows.
The measure done, I’ll watch her place of stand,
And, touching hers, make blessèd my rude hand.
Did my heart love till now? Forswear it, sight!
For I ne'er saw true beauty till this night. (1.5.45-54).

Here, Romeo has only seen Juliet from afar. Without any knowledge of her mind or character, he has already assumed that Juliet is perfect based solely on her looks. He compares her to a jewel, objectifying her through the comparison to a physical item of splendor, while emphasizing that a woman’s worth is measured by the amount of their
beauty. By comparing Juliet to a “snowy dove trooping with crows,” Romeo evokes images of whiteness, and purity, immediately assigning a identity of virginity and innocence to Juliet; attributes highly desirable for men to obtain in their future wives. Romeo also raises Juliet’s character to the status of a saint through his belief that even the touch of her hand can make him less “rude” and more “blessed.” This expectation is unfounded, and impossible to uphold, as Juliet is merely a girl, not a saint. Romeo has already created an idealized, perfect image of what he thinks Juliet is, or who she should be, without knowing anything about her.

When first introduced to Juliet’s father, Capulet appears to care about his daughter’s youth and innocence, stating to her potential suitor, Paris that:

My child is yet a stranger in the world.
She hath not seen the change of fourteen years;
Let two more summers wither in their pride
Ere we may think her ripe to be a bride (1.2.8-11).

Here, Capulet presents a radical idea for a father in Shakespeare’s time: that his fourteen-year-old daughter MIGHT in fact be too young for marriage. In a time and society when girls were married off even younger than fourteen, usually at the behest of their fathers, Capulet’s view of his daughter’s age and experience indicates that he may hold a different opinion than other fathers in similar situations.

Unsurprisingly, Paris does not feel the same way. Paris responds to Capulet’s concerns by justifying the tradition of the times, believing that “Younger than she are happy mothers made” (1.2.12). Paris is unconcerned both with his future wife’s age and her feelings, placing her in a stereotypical category of all women (or in this case, girls),
believing that all girls must certainly want to be married and bear children. This must be
where their happiness stems from. Paris’ wording here is also especially telling in regards
to Juliet’s future role. Paris does not say “younger than she are happy wives made,” but
rather, “Younger than she are happy mothers made” (1.2.12), suggesting that Juliet’s
most important role is to provide Paris with children and heirs. His primary concern is
that she will be a good breeder for him, not necessarily a good wife. This is a clear
reminder of the patriarchal expectation for women of the time: their job is to provide their
husbands with children, and to do it happily.

Capulet also changes his tune throughout the course of the play, eventually
insisting that Juliet follow his order and marry Paris. Following the example set earlier in
the play by Sampson’s misogynistic tendencies toward the disposability of women,
Capulet insists that Juliet marry Paris, even turning to verbal abuse and threats of
disownment when Juliet refuses to follow his wishes. He roars:

Mistress minion you,

Thank me no thankings, nor proud me no prouds,

But settle your fine joints 'gainst Thursday next

To go with Paris to Saint Peter’s Church,

Or I will drag thee on a hurdle thither.

Out, you green sickness, carrion! Out, you baggage!

You tallow face!... (3.5.152-59)

Hang thee, young baggage! Disobedient wretch!

I tell thee what: get thee to church o' Thursday,

Or never after look me in the face.
Speak not. Reply not. Do not answer me.

My fingers itch.—Wife, we scarce thought us blest
That God had lent us but this only child,
But now I see this one is one too much
And that we have a curse in having her.

Out on her, hilding! (3.5.163-166)

Capulet is willing to renounce his daughter (a marital bargaining chip in Shakespeare’s time), because she refuses to bow to his demands. He threatens her with disownment, and even insinuates violence with the statement “My fingers itch,” perhaps indicating that he wishes to punish Juliet physically for her disobedience. Like Sampson’s statement earlier regarding his oppression of the weaker vessels, Lord Capulet is angered by the insubordination of his daughter, and threats and violence are merely tools to put her back in her place. Rather than discussing the situation with Juliet, and hearing her opinions, Lord Capulet just wants to silence her, and force her to the altar on Thursday.

Juliet’s mother also promotes the patriarchal order by following the lead of her husband in all things and approving the arranged marriage of her young daughter. When asked by her mother how inclined she is to marry, Juliet replies “It is an honor that I dream not of” (1.3.66). Juliet doesn’t mince words with her mother, stating quite clearly that she does not want to be married. In response, Lady Capulet explains:

Younger than you

Here in Verona, ladies of esteem

Are made already mothers. By my count,

I was your mother much upon these years
That you are now a maid. (1.3.70-73)

Here, Lady Capulet makes it clear that she followed the patriarchal order of her own time, becoming a wife and mother around the same age of Juliet. It becomes easy for Lady Capulet to impress the importance of marriage for her daughter, because it was Lady Capulet’s own experience to marry and bear children at a young age. Lady Capulet also supports her husband and turns on her daughter in response to Juliet’s insolence, saying, “Talk not to me, for I’ll not speak a word. / Do as thou wilt, for I have done with thee” (3.5.204-5). Because Lady Capulet does not understand Juliet’s feelings toward her upcoming nuptials, and abandons Juliet, choosing instead to follow the patriarchal lead of her husband. In her moments of desperation, Juliet cannot entrust her sensitivities to her mother, inspiring her to confide in the Nurse instead.

II. “[Marriage] is an honor that I do not dream of”: Juliet’s Control of her Sexuality and Marital Future

Juliet voices her opposition marriage in the beginning of a play. While she does enter into a marriage with Romeo, she certainly opposes the arrangement that her parents have coordinated for her. This sets up an early example of a girl voicing resistance to the patriarchal order of her household, indicating the audience that Juliet will not be a submissive, typical female. As Pragati Das describes:

It is Juliet who sets the boundaries of behavior in her relationship with Romeo. She allows him to kiss her, she pledges her commitment before him, and it is she who suggests their marriage. Juliet's forgiveness of Romeo after he kills Tybalt indicates her mature nature in contrast to his passionate impulsiveness.
Furthermore, Juliet lies and clandestinely subverts her family's wishes, a truly rebellious action against traditional Italian society. (Das, 51-52).

Das understands that Juliet is not a simple, obedient girl in this play. She is headstrong, and determined to have her own way when it comes to her life and to her ability to love. She stands up to her parents, and takes the lead in her relationship with Romeo, displaying a strength of character not often expressed by women in Shakespeare’s time, let alone a girl of thirteen.

When it comes to her parents, Juliet expresses her aversion to marriage early in the play with her mother, stating that it is “an honor that I dream not of” (1.3.66). As discussed earlier, Lady Capulet disregards Juliet’s feelings, instead insisting that Juliet should accept the fact that she will soon be married off to Paris. Juliet’s expression of her opinion here however is interesting because she takes the time to actually express her opinion to her mother. She is looking for someone to take her side, and sympathize with her situation, rather than just submitting to the expectation of girls in her society. Juliet also expresses to her father that she does not wish to marry Paris, challenging the patriarchal leader of her household.

While Juliet is headstrong, she still needs assistance to help her achieve her ends, which is clearly not going to come from her mother. This is where the Nurse comes in. When we first meet the Nurse, it is quickly apparent that she views Juliet as a surrogate daughter, reminiscing about Juliet’s childhood and exclaiming, “Thou wast the prettiest babe that e'er I nursed. / An I might live to see thee married once, / I have my wish” (1.3.60-62). Even though Juliet is not her own child, the Nurse clearly feels a strong connection to the child that she has raised for thirteen years. This nurturing spirit, and the
Nurse’s desire to see Juliet married someday are very mothering tendencies, different than those displayed by Lady Capulet. While Lady Capulet focuses on Juliet’s age as an appropriate stage of life for marriage, the Nurse reflects on Juliet’s childhood, thinking of Juliet as more than just a marital bargaining chip, but a “pretty babe.”

The Nurse, who has known Juliet since birth, adopts the role of a surrogate mother, wishing to protect her from any harm or heartache. For example, she warns Romeo to be careful not to lead Juliet on for his own pleasures, stating:

Let me tell ye, if ye should lead her into a fool’s paradise, as they say, it were a very gross kind of behavior, as they say. For the gentlewoman is young, and therefore, if you should deal double with her, truly it were an ill thing to be offered to any gentlewoman, and very weak dealing. (2.4.162-166).

The Nurse is determined that Juliet should not experience pain from love, and makes this clear to Romeo, warning him not to double-cross Juliet for his own pleasure or gain. The Nurse wishes to make sure that his love is genuine; a concern any mother would have for her daughter’s suitor. The Nurse also calls out the sexual double standard of the time—it would be very easy for Romeo to have his way with Juliet, leave her, and go on with his life with no consequences. The Nurse makes it very clear that she does not approve of this sort of behavior, especially when it comes to Juliet.

Similarly, when her parents rebuke Juliet for refusing to follow their command, the Nurse defends Juliet, crying “God in heaven bless her! / You are to blame, my lord, to rate her so” (3.5.169-170). Here, the Nurse goes against the opinion of her employer, instead choosing to defend the child “at fault.” This demonstrates the Nurse’s
determination to protect Juliet as a mothering figure—she even places fault on Lord Capulet, directing the blame away from Juliet, and challenging a powerful male authority for his treatment of women.

The Nurse is also the facilitator for much of Juliet’s rebellion against her family. While the Nurse can be a fickle character, changing her mind from helping Juliet to agreeing with the Capulets, she never betrays Juliet by exposing Juliet’s actions to her parents. She values her relationship with Juliet too much to risk the alliance by informing the Capulet’s of their daughter’s secret doings. The Nurse paves the way for Juliet to embrace her own sexuality, by supporting the marriage with Romeo, and constantly acting as a messenger, confidante, and trusted mother figure.

After her marriage, Juliet eagerly expresses her desire to engage in sex with Romeo. She impatiently waits for the day to end so that night can come, saying:

Spread thy close curtain, love-performing night,
That runaways' eyes may wink, and Romeo
Leap to these arms, untalked of and unseen.
Lovers can see to do their amorous rites
By their own beauties, or, if love be blind,
It best agrees with night. Come, civil night,
Thou sober-suited matron, all in black,
And learn me how to lose a winning match
Played for a pair of stainless maidenhoods.
Hood my unmanned blood bating in my cheeks,
With thy black mantle, till strange love, grow bold,
Think true love acted simple modesty.

Come, night. Come, Romeo. (3.2.5-17)

Juliet expresses an explicit wish to have sex. In a world where women are subject to men’s sexual desires, impulses, and timelines, it is important to note that Juliet summons Romeo to her for sex, rather than the other way around, reversing the expectations of the sexual partners. As a woman, she is taking control of her own sexuality, and the relationship with Romeo; this new control is possible because Juliet is able to confide in the Nurse to achieve her personal desires, rather than bowing to the wishes of Lord and Lady Capulet. Juliet also personifies Night as a female figure, asking to be “taught” to lose her virginity. This represents another sort of alliance where a female figure is tasked with teaching another woman, rather than a man determining what and how women should do things.

When Juliet learns of Romeo’s banishment, and the reason for his exile, she is distraught. She recognizes that men are not perfect beings, understanding that the man that she loves is in fact responsible for the heartache she feels over Tybalt’s death. She cries:

O serpent heart hid with a flowering face!

Did ever dragon keep so fair a cave?

Beautiful tyrant! Fiend angelical!

Dove-feathered raven, wolvish-ravening lamb!

Despisèd substance of divinest show,

Just opposite to what thou justly seem’st.

A damnèd saint, an honorable villain!...
Oh, that deceit should dwell

In such a gorgeous palace! (3.2.73-79, 84-85)

Juliet recognizes that not all is well in this patriarchal world, and that her husband is not an infallible figure. Juliet also reverses the standard the Romeo has held her to; while Romeo elevated Juliet to the status of a saint without even knowing her, Juliet now classifies Romeo in a category of devilish beings, tyrants, and serpents. Instead of immediately supporting her new husband with submissive loyalty, Juliet recognizes that a man’s actions were wrong and harmful. She also recognizes that Romeo’s actions have now put their relationship in an even more difficult position. His exile makes it nearly impossible for them to meet ever again, and Juliet expresses her frustration over her inability to “learn the duties” of her new marriage:

**Juliet:** Take up those cords.—Poor ropes, you are beguiled,

Both you and I, for Romeo is exiled.

He made you for a highway to my bed,

But I, a maid, die maiden-widowèd.

Come, cords.—Come, Nurse. I’ll to my wedding bed.

And death, not Romeo, take my maidenhead!

**Nurse:** Hie to your chamber. I’ll find Romeo

To comfort you. I wot well where he is.

Hark ye, your Romeo will be here at night.

I’ll to him. He is hid at Lawrence’ cell. (3.2.132-141)

This moment indicates the depth of the Nurse’s love for Juliet. Juliet’s distress at not being able to take control of her sexuality inspires the Nurse to concoct a plan for Romeo
to spend the night, so he and Juliet can consummate their marriage. In the conversation
between Juliet and the Nurse, the Nurse quickly reassures Juliet that this problem can be
fixed. Rather than dwell on Romeo’s banishment, the Nurse does whatever is necessary
to help her mistress so that she can be happy, just as she did when she helped to arrange
their secret marriage.

The Nurse also warns Juliet after her tryst with Romeo to be careful, lest they are
discovered. She calmly announces to Juliet, “Your lady mother is coming to your
chamber. / The day is broke. Be wary, look about” (3.5.39-40). This gives Juliet enough
time to send Romeo away, and protect her secret husband. This is another example of
how the Nurse protects her relationship with Juliet more than her relationship with her
employer, forming an alliance with the young girl and allowing Juliet to experience life
on her own terms.

When Juliet’s parents threaten to disown her if she does not obey their wishes,
Juliet immediately turns to the Nurse for help and comfort. She cries:

O God!—O Nurse, how shall this be prevented?
My husband is on earth, my faith in heaven.
How shall that faith return again to earth,
Unless that husband send it me from heaven
By leaving earth? Comfort me. Counsel me.—
Alack, alack, that heaven should practice stratagems
Upon so soft a subject as myself.—
What sayst thou? Hast thou not a word of joy?
Some comfort, Nurse. (3.5.206-214)
The Nurse has acted as a constant support to Juliet throughout her romance with Romeo, and Juliet expects the same assistance from her ally to make it out of this current scrape. She asks for comfort and counsel, believing that her Nurse will provide the same mothering help that she has supplied in the past. However, this is the moment when the alliance begins to break down. Instead of giving Juliet the answer that she wants to hear, the Nurse advises Juliet to marry Paris. While she still contributes advice in a comforting manner, the Nurse states her support for the plan proposed by Juliet’s parents. The Nurse, in the face of disapproval from her employers, has now reverted back to accepting the patriarchal order, abandoning the supportive alliance that she has previously provided to Juliet.

    Juliet sees this abandonment as a betrayal, and turns to a patriarchal leader for assistance: Friar Lawrence. Friar Lawrence insists that Juliet separate herself entirely from the Nurse for his plan to work, instructing Juliet:

    Go home, be merry. Give consent
    To marry Paris. Wednesday is tomorrow.
    Tomorrow night look that thou lie alone.
    Let not the Nurse lie with thee in thy chamber. (4.1.90-92).

Friar Lawrence requires that the Nurse know nothing of his plan, ordering Juliet to stay alone in her bedroom while she takes the potion, instead of allowing the Nurse to stay with her. A patriarchal figure, he now completely separates Juliet from her female ally, and expects Juliet to follow all of his instructions to the letter—a moment that recalls Lord Capulet’s expectations for Juliet to obey his orders in regards to marriage. When both Juliet and the Nurse abandon their alliance, everything goes downhill. While the
Nurse went above and beyond to carry messages to Romeo, the Friar’s messenger is waylaid, throwing the plan off completely, and leaving Juliet in a precarious position.

While it is left unclear whether a continued alliance with the Nurse could have prevented the misfortunes that follow in the play, it is clear that the patriarchal society fails Juliet not once but twice: first, her mother and father insist that Juliet follow their orders when it comes to her marriage. Second, Friar Lawrence’s plan, which relies on exact obedience from Juliet and no contact with the Nurse, results in Juliet’s death. While involved in an alliance with the Nurse, Juliet was happy, and had more control over her life, marriage, and sexuality—by the end of the play, when she and the Nurse have both returned to the patriarchal order, Juliet has lost control over all of her feminine freedoms.
MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING

I. Brief Synopsis

Much Ado About Nothing is set in the Italian town of Messina. Leonato, a nobleman, awaits the arrival of Don Pedro and his men, who are returning from war. Don Pedro’s party includes Claudio, Benedick, and Don Pedro’s illegitimate brother Don John. When the men arrive, Claudio immediately falls in love with Leonato’s beautiful daughter, Hero. Leonato has a niece named Beatrice who is witty and clever, and engages in a battle of biting wits with Benedick. Don Pedro tells Claudio that he will woo Hero for him, and thus arrange a marriage at a party the night they arrive. The scheming Don John devises a plan with his henchmen to ruin everything, starting by telling Claudio that Don John means to woo Hero for himself, not out of service to his friend. Claudio begins to doubt his friend, but is relieved when the marriage between himself and Hero is arranged for the coming week.

In order to pass the time, Don Pedro, Claudio Leonato and Hero devise their own plan to help Benedick and Beatrice fall in love. While prickly towards each other, the friends believe that they can convince them to reveal their true feelings. Don Pedro, Leonato and Claudio discuss Beatrice’s “love” for Benedick where Benedick can overhear them. Benedick is taken in by their trick, and believes that Beatrice loves him. Hero and her ladies conduct the same ploy with Beatrice, who is also taken in by their ruse, and her hard feelings toward Benedick turn to love.

Meanwhile, Don John has conceived a new scheme: his man Borachio will make love to Hero’s maid, Margaret, while placed in Hero’s window, and calling Margaret “Hero.” Don John brings Don Pedro and Claudio to view the sight, and Claudio,
believing that Hero is unfaithful to him, vows to shame her at their wedding, and leave her at the altar. Don John, pleased with his work, leaves the estate.

While Borachio celebrates his deed with another man named Conrad, they are arrested by the Watch, a police force, and are interrogated about their actions. However, the wedding begins before any of this information is made known. Claudio disgraces Hero at the altar by revealing the “truth” about her chastity. Claudio and Don Pedro leave as Hero collapses. Leonato berates Hero and despairs at the alleged actions of his daughter, while Beatrice and Hero defend her innocence. The priest who was meant to perform the wedding offers this solution: pretend that Hero has died until the truth is uncovered.

In the aftermath of the ruined wedding, Benedick and Beatrice finally confess their love for each other. In an attempt to protect her cousin, Beatrice asks Benedick to defend Hero’s honor, and kill Claudio. Benedick challenges him to a duel, but the leaders of the Watch bring Borachio and Conrad before them to confess the vile plan. Claudio is distraught at his treatment of Hero, and Leonato demands that Claudio mourn Hero, tell everyone of her innocence and marry another wife: a “niece” who is a mirror image of Hero, who is also heir to his estates. Claudio agrees, and at the wedding, the niece is revealed to be the true Hero. Everyone rejoices, Benedick asks Beatrice to marry him, and they celebrate with a double wedding, and the capture of Don John.
II. “Oh, that I were a man!”: The Inferior Position of Women in Messina

In *Much Ado About Nothing*, women are viewed as objects, to be used or bought by men for their own pleasures. From the moment Claudio lays eyes on Hero, he is infatuated, much in the same way as Romeo was when he first saw Juliet. Claudio likewise compares Hero to a valuable object that he wishes to possess, wondering, “Can the world buy such a jewel?” (1.1.173). Here, Claudio compares Hero to a precious jewel, basing her worth on her beauty from his initial impression. Without any sense of her mind or other attributes, Claudio has already assigned an identity to Hero, labeling her as a beautiful thing that he can possess through the financial transaction of marriage. Leonato, Hero’s father also emphasizes his daughter’s worth is based on her dowry, and her ability to marry well. When discussing the possibility of a match with Claudio, Leonato exclaims, “Count, take of me my daughter, and with her/my fortunes. His grace hath made the match, and all grace/say amen to it” (2.1.285-7). Leonato associates Hero’s marriageability with his wealth, easily giving her away, along with an amount of money equal to her worth once an acceptable match has been arranged. Leonato trades his daughter in marriage like a commodity; while not uncommon for women during this time, this emphasizes how much women were viewed as riches to be used in various transactions, like marriage.

By questioning the ability of the world to “buy” Hero, Claudio also raises Hero’s status to something “otherworldly,” placing her on an impossible pedestal—Hero is just a girl, not some priceless commodity, or spiritual thing. Yet, Claudio sets up unrealistic expectations that Hero must fulfill—when she falls short of what Claudio believes that she must be, Hero is slandered and shamed in front of her entire community, while
Claudio suffers no repercussions for his treatment of his jewel turned “rotten orange” (4.1.31). Claudio’s friend Benedick also declares his unrealistic expectations for women thus:

But till all
grases be in one woman, one woman shall not come in
my grace. Rich she shall be, that’s certain; wise, or I’ll
none; virtuous, or I’ll never cheapen her; fair, or I’ll
ever look on her; mild, or come not near me; noble,
or not I for an angel; of good discourse, an excellent
musician, and her hair shall be of what color it please

God. (2.3.26-33)

Bendick chooses to be overly critical of women in order to keep from being ensnared in the trap of marriage. He has a pessimistic view of marriage, and women in general, believing that most of them will cuckold their husbands. Thus, he creates impossible expectations for women, declaring that he will only enter into a marriage with a woman who can fulfill all of his demands, and the color of her hair being the only thing that can be negotiated.

When Claudio and Don Pedro are influenced by Don John’s deceitful plan regarding Hero’s chastity, they never question whether or not Hero is chaste, even though they have no hard evidence to hold against her. The only thing they know is that they saw a woman in Hero’s window, being called Hero. Immediately, they assume that she is unchaste, and without further investigation, they proceed to humiliate her in front of the entire household. Claudio’s opinion of Hero reverses completely; instead of a beautiful
jewel, Claudio now thrusts Hero back to her father’s care, crying “There, Leonato, take her back again. /Give not this rotten orange to your friend./She’s but the sign and semblance of her honor” (4.1.30-32). Claudio insults Hero, relegateing her to the status of an object once more, merely a symbol or a sign, not a person. By distancing himself from Hero on a personal level, it becomes easy for Claudio to now classify her as a spoiled product, no longer suitable for him.

Leonato, like Claudio seeks to push Hero away, and wishes to have nothing more to do with her. He shames Hero, and cries:

Do not live, Hero, do not ope thine eyes,
For, did I think thou wouldst not quickly die,
Thought I thy spirits were stronger than thy shames,
Myself would, on the rearward of reproaches,
Strike at thy life. (4.1.123-27)

Leonato, wishing that the shame of his daughter should be pushed far from him even hints at doing harm to Hero, even killing her in response to her alleged indiscretions. This is reminiscent of Juliet’s father in Romeo and Juliet who insinuates his desire to beat his daughter for her disobedience and refusal to bow to his patriarchal authority. Now that Hero has “failed” to meet the patriarchal expectations of chastity, her father would rather her be dead than to bring shame to his household.

Leonato also places his faith in the words of two men, rather than the words of his daughter. He reassures himself that Hero is lying because “Would the two princes lie? and Claudio lie,/Who loved her so that, speaking of her foulness,/Washed it with tears? Hence from her!/let her die” (4.1.151). Leonato immediately assumes that the men are
telling the truth because they are men who are powerful and have a great deal of authority. Leonato never asks his daughter for an explanation, assuming that if men would not lie, then Hero certainly is lying. Leonato also shows his preference for the male authority by stating that Claudio’s tears must surely be a sign of his truthfulness regarding the matter, while Hero’s blushing cheeks and eventual collapse only confirm her “guilt.” Claudio’s show of emotions is acceptable and trustworthy; Hero’s emotional responses are deceitful and guilty.

Beatrice recognizes the double standards placed on Hero regarding her treatment. She is appalled by Claudio’s treatment of Hero, crying out to Benedick:

Is a not approved in the height a villain, that
Hath slandered, scorned, dishonored my kinswoman?
Oh, that I were a man! What? bear her in hand until they
come to take hands and then, with public accusation,
uncovered slander, unmitigated rancor—O God, that I
were a man! I would eat his heart in the marketplace. (4.1.300-304)

Beatrice bemoans the fact that Claudio is able to treat Hero in such a terrible way, but is not classified as a villain, or berated by anyone for his despicable treatment of a woman. Beatrice feels helpless to protect her cousin because she is not a man, and cannot fight the men on their own terms. As a woman, she is unable to protect Hero, and recognizes that while a man could challenge Claudio and the Don Pedro, she would be ignored and pushed aside, just as Hero was.
III. “Kill Claudio”: A Defense of Female Friendship

As there are only a few women in the play, women must rely on the female friends that they do have. There is also a lack of mothers, meaning that the women must turn to those similar in age for support and help, leading to an alliance of sisterhood. Hero and Beatrice form a strong, sisterly bond in the absence of mother figures, and both strive to protect each other from heartache. Milinda Jay describes their relationship this way:

In Shakespeare’s script, the friendship between Hero and Beatrice is obvious from the opening lines of the play. Beatrice asks who has come home from the war when all she is really interested in is Benedick. However, this mistress of language is unable to form the sentence that actually asks specifically for Benedick, so Hero must speak for her, “My cousin means Signior Benedick of Padua” (I i 35-36).

These words signal the mutual understanding between these friends. Hero understands and protects Beatrice’s heart’s desires, just as Beatrice understands and protects Hero. (Jay, 37-8)

While Beatrice is a strong-willed, witty woman, her desire to be viewed as a formidable independent person by the men in her life sometimes overpowers her ability to speak truthfully, and from the heart. Hero thus provides another voice for Beatrice to use in her questioning to avoid potential embarrassment; like girls sending an impartial member of their group to talk to an attractive male, Hero performs the same role—gathering information for her friend, and “sister,” Beatrice. Hero has a deep understanding of Beatrice’s character and needs—they have grown up together, much like sisters, and protect each other in the absence of mothers and other female protectors.
Beyond gathering information, Hero and the other ladies conspire with each other to help Beatrice fall in love with Benedick. Milinda Jay describes a moment where Beatrice expresses her isolation now that her friends and sister has been engaged:

While Hero’s marriage plan is consolidated early in the play, Beatrice is left in the frightening unknown. In an unguarded moment, after learning of Hero’s successful engagement, she says, “Good Lord, for alliance! / There goes everyone to the world but I, and I am sunburnt./ I may sit in a corner and cry ‘Heigh-ho for a husband!”’ (II i 278–280). Thus, as her mother/friend, Hero sets out to make certain that Beatrice is safely married. Benedick is a good match for Beatrice, as the entire community seems to agree. The marriage would never have taken place without the community of women smoothing the way for Beatrice. (Jay, 39)

Jay describes the different types of marriage in *Much Ado About Nothing*: Hero’s marriage is a commodities exchange, negotiated between her father, Claudio, and Don Pedro. This marriage, typical of the time and setting for Shakespeare is arranged entirely by male figures, with no say for the woman involved. Beatrice’s marriage to Benedick however, is negotiated by both men and women, working together to ensure a relationship based on mutual affection rather than a financial arrangement. Rather than standing idly by and waiting for a marriage to be arranged for her cousin, Hero decides to take action, based on what she knows about Beatrice’s feelings regarding Benedick. In a moment of rare privilege, women are involved in creating a marriage alliance, participating fully in the process of getting Beatrice and Benedick to fall in love.

Beatrice never abandons Hero, and always defends her innocence, placing Hero’s honor above her own happiness. In fact, Beatrice is the first, and only one to rush to
Hero’s side when she collapses at the altar. After Beatrice and Benedick finally proclaim their love for each other, Beatrice still worries about her cousin’s state, as Hero has been effectively ruined by Claudio’s words and actions. When Benedick tells her that she can ask him to do anything for her, she replies: “Kill Claudio” (4.1.288). Since Beatrice cannot seek revenge effectively as a woman, she turns to Benedick for help—this is a moment where Beatrice is completely honest with Benedick, baring her helplessness to him, and asking him to do what she cannot do because of her sex. When Benedick refuses, Beatrice states: “You kill me to deny it. Farewell” (4.1.290). As Jay describes this poignant moment: “Indeed, Beatrice will have nothing to do with a man until he proves himself. It is in protecting her friend Hero that he proves himself man enough to marry Beatrice” (Jay, 40). While Beatrice cares about her own feelings and future, she will push Benedick aside in order to stand by Hero above all. This demonstrates the depth of affection and the bond between Hero and Beatrice.
I. Brief Synopsis

The play opens in Roussillon, France where a Countess lives with her son Bertram, and her ward, Helena. The Countess’ husband has recently died, and Bertram is now the Count of Roussillon. The Countess is very fond of Helena, and treats Helena as her own daughter. Helena is desperately in love with Bertram, but does not believe that they can ever be married due to her low social rank. Her chance to change her future comes however when she learns that the King of France is ill. Helena’s father was a renowned physician, and she offers her services to the King, requesting only one thing: if she is successful in healing him, she can choose the man she marries.

Helena successfully cures the King, and chooses Bertram as her husband. Bertram is scandalized, but goes through with the marriage to avoid losing the King’s favor. Bertram flees France under the guise of military responsibility with his friend Parolles immediately following the wedding, to avoid consummating the marriage with Helena. Helena returns to Roussillon, and reveals to the Countess what Bertram has written to her in a letter: Bertram states that he will never be Helena’s true husband unless she can get a certain ring off of his finger, and bear his child—both seemingly impossible tasks. Helena is heartbroken and declares that she will undertake a pilgrimage and leave Roussillon, since it is her presence that prevents Bertram from returning home.

Helena travels to Florence, where she learns that Bertram is staying, and attempting to seduce a young woman named Diana, who lives with her mother, a Widow. Helena enlists the help of Diana and the Widow to trick Bertram into consummating their marriage: Diana will agree to sleep with Bertram, but demands the ring off his finger as a
promise. Helena also gives Diana a ring that will be given to Bertram. Later, Helena and Diana switch places, and Helena spends the night with the unsuspecting Bertram instead.

Bertram soon receives a false message that Helena has died. This combined with the news that the war is drawing to a close prompts him to return to France. Helena, Diana, and the Widow follow him back to Roussillon, where the King has moved his court. The King gives permission for Bertram to marry the daughter of Lafew, a French nobleman, now that Helena is “dead.” The King notices that Bertram has a new ring on his finger—a ring previously given to Helena by the King. The King demands to know how Bertram came by it, believing that Bertram has stolen it. Diana and the Widow arrive at Roussillon, and Diana describes Bertram’s plan to seduce her in Florence. She announces that she is the one who gave him the ring, but refuses to tell the King how she got it in the first place. The Widow leaves to fetch Helena, who corroborates Diana’s story, and informs Bertram that she has fulfilled his tasks: she has his ring, and is carrying his child. Bertram is repentant, and vows now to be a good husband.

II. “A poor physician’s daughter, my wife?”: Bertram’s Patriarchal Arrogance

The majority of the patriarchal issues in All’s Well that Ends Well come from Bertram, the Countess’ son. Bertram refuses to marry Helena because of her low class status. Bertram is so concerned with his reputation, and is worried that a marriage with the lowly Helena will sully it. He irritably exclaims “A poor physician’s daughter my wife? Disdain/ rather corrupt me ever!... I cannot love her, nor will strive to do’t” (2.3.114-115, 144). Bertram also proclaims that “Although before the solemn priest I
have sworn,/ I will not bed her” (2.3.267-68). Even after he has been married to Helena, he refuses to accept his duties as a husband because of his ego.

Bertram’s conduct in regards to Diana is quite different; even though Diana is also a commoner, Bertram desires to sleep with her. In his pursuit of Diana, he cries out:

Titled goddess,

And worth it, with addition! But, fair soul,

In your fine frame hath love no quality?

If the quick fire of youth light not your mind,

You are no maiden but a monument.

When you are dead you shoule be such a one

As you are now, for you are cold and stern;

And now you should be as your mother was

When your sweet self was got. (4.2.2-10)

This is a classic example of how Bertram (and other men in Shakespeare’s time) were accustomed to getting what they wanted—they expect sex, and so they should have it. If a woman refuses, she must be a prude. Even though Diana is determined to maintain her virginity, Bertram refuses to take no for an answer.

However, he has no issues throwing himself at Diana, and trying to convince her to let him take her virginity—with no promise of marriage. Diana is also a commoner, like Helena, so Bertram’s refusal to marry and bed Helena is unfounded except when it comes to the sexual double standard.
Diana herself understands her precarious position if she indulges Bertram’s desires. Mariana, her friend, warns her of the sexual double standard enjoyed by men, saying:

Beware of them, Diana; their promises, enticements, oaths, tokens, and all these engines of lust, are not the things they go under. Many a maid hath been seduced by them; and the misery is, example, that so terrible shows in the wrack of maidenhood, cannot for all that dissuade succession but that they are limed with the twigs that threaten them” (3.5.18-24)

Even when Diana attempts to brush off Bertram’s advances, she tells him what a position she will be in if she does succumb to his advances. She says:

Ay, so you serve us
Till we serve you; but when you have our roses,
You barely leave our thorns to prick ourselves,
And mock us with our bareness. (4.2.17-20)

This moment is reminiscent of Ophelia’s mad scene in Hamlet, where she sings the St. Valentine’s day song, telling the story of a man who lures a girl to his bed with a promise of marriage if she indulges his sexual desires. When she reminds his of this fact, he refuses to marry her since she is no longer chaste. Diana likewise reminds Bertram of this potential situation, where her reputation could be shattered, while he experiences no consequences. Diana further illustrates the importance of her virginity to her family, explaining to Bertram that:
Mine honor’s such a ring;
My chastity’s the jewel of our house,
Bequeathèd down from many ancestors,
Which were the greatest obloquy i’ th’ world
In me to lose. Thus your own proper wisdom
Brings in the champion Honor on my part
Against your vain assault. (4.2.46-51).

Diana emphasizes how in the eyes of the world, her worth is based on her virginity; it is an expectation of her family that Diana remain chaste, and it would be shocking for her to lose it without being married. Diana uses this argument against Bertram, claiming that his “assault” on her chastity requires Honor to champion her cause, and protect her from the selfish desires of men. Loyalty to her family is one of the reasons that Diana refuses to throw her virginity away on empty promises.

Beyond the issues of remaining chaste, the Countess also warns Helena of how she may be received in the French court is she offers her intelligence to the King. The Countess cautions:

But think you, Helen,
If you should tender your supposed aid,
He would receive it? He and his physicians
Are of a mind: he that they cannot help him;
They, that they cannot help. How shall they credit
A poor unlearned virgin, when the schools,
Emboweled of their doctrine, have left off
The danger to itself? (1.3.231-8).

Here, the Countess questions Helena’s reception by the men at the court, wondering if their egos will be hurt by a young girl who claims to be able to cure the King when the most intelligent men at court haven’t succeeded in healing him. It is perfectly reasonable to think that the men of the French court will be offended and resentful of a woman entering their intellectual territory and attempting to overstep what they believe to be a woman’s place.

Lafew also emphasizes this belief when he introduces Helena to the King. Lafew wonders about his own state of mind as he brings a poor woman to heal the King, and asks the King for forgiveness in advance, showing a lack of faith in Helena’s abilities because of her sex. He introduces her as “Doctor She!” (2.1.80) and describes her to the King, saying:

Now by my faith and honor,

If seriously I may convey my thoughts

In this my light deliverance, I have spoke

With one that in her sex, her years, profession,

Wisdom and constancy, hath amazed me more

Than I dare blame my weakness. (2.1.81-6)

The first identifier he uses to describe Helena is based on her sex; distinguishing her first as a woman, then by her age and claims as a physician. Lafew offers an insult veiled as a compliment, impressed by the fact that Helena is a woman who steps out of her female comfort zone to offer her services to the King on a medical matter, but still indicating that his opinion of her may be influenced by his senility. He introduces her to the King, but
fully expects to be laughed at for his support of a woman. Lafew also insinuates Helena’s sexuality in this meeting with the King. Terry Reilly explains more of Lafew’s speech regarding Helena in this way to emphasize Helena’s position at the French court:

When [Lafew] jokingly refers to himself as Pandarus—“Cressid’s uncle” (2.1.79)—he underscores the implied sexual nature of the scene. (In the tale from the Greeks, Pandarus arranged the sexual liaison between Troilus and his niece Cressida.)…When Helena cures the King, the courtiers waiting outside the room unanimously agree that his recovery has something to do with sex and/or witchcraft—no one even considers that Helena is simply a competent doctor who has cured her patient. (Reilly, 9).

As a woman in the French court, Helena is expected to exhibit a lower level of intelligence than the men, as described by the Countess. In order to explain her meeting with the King, and his subsequent recovery, Reilly argues that the courtiers believe that Helena has substituted intelligence and medical ability with sexuality or witchcraft—surely a woman wouldn’t be able to fix the King’s problem without one of those tools (especially since a man couldn’t do it before she came along). This demonstrates how easily dismissed women were for their minds, relegated to whatever explanation fit the patriarchal fancy.

III. “I am a mother to you”: The Support of a Surrogate Mother and Friends in Florence

Helena herself is not one easily classified as a woman seeking to challenge the patriarchal order outright. In fact, she wants to be married, and seeks to submit herself to
Bertram; the man she hopes will someday be her husband. Unfortunately, she feels trapped by her social status, and unable to express her love to Bertram. It is through the support of her surrogate mother, The Countess, as well as her friendship with Diana and the Widow that Helena truly begins to take control of her marital future, and eventually gets the best of the piggish Bertram.

All the women in the play are acutely aware of the patriarchal expectations and bounds that are placed on them. As discussed earlier, the Widow, Diana and Mariana worry about the importance of chastity, and the sexual double-standard that men can enjoy while women must think constantly of their reputations and purity; the Countess worries about how Helena will be treated as an intelligent woman at the French court. Helena, for example, refuses to make her feelings known to Bertram early on because she feels inferior to him. She relates her feelings thus: “That I should love a bright particular star/And think to wed it, he is so above me” (1.1.88-9). To Helena, her ideal marriage seems so far out of reach because of her commoner status. However, with the support of the Countess, Helena finds the courage to go to Paris, offer her medical services to the King, and ask to choose her husband. The Countess offers everything Helena needs for this task, assuring her that:

Why, Helen, thou shalt have my leave and love,
Means and attendants, and my loving greetings
To those of mine in court. I’ll stay at home
And pray God’s blessing into thy attempt.
Be gone tomorrow, and be sure of this,
What I can help the to, thou shalt not miss. (1.3.247-252)
The Countess provides Helena with the means to get to Paris, as well as the introductions necessary to enter the court—this is something a mother would provide to a daughter, emphasizing the depth of affection that the Countess feels for Helena. She is not obligated to provide these things for her ward, but it is through her kindness and generosity that Helena is able to go to Paris, enter the French court, and meet with the King. The Countess also sends along her prayers, and faith in Helena, giving Helena her support in order to build the girl’s confidence in her abilities, and which in turn gives Helena the courage to ask the King for her own choice of husband.

The Countess takes Helena in as a ward, but treats her like a daughter without questions or a blood connection, truly adopting Helena as her own child. She states:

You know, Helen,
I am a mother to you….
I say I am your mother,
And put you in the catalogue of those
That were enwombed mine. ‘Tis often seen
Adoption strives with nature, and choice breeds
A native slip to us from foreign seed.
You ne’er oppressed me with a mother’s groan,
Yet I express to you a mother’s care. (1.3.133-4, 138-144)

The Countess has no qualms about Helena’s status and how it affects their relationship, unlike her son, Bertram. The Countess places Helena on the same level of Bertram by putting Helena in the “catalogue of those that were enwombed” within the Countess’ own body, like Bertram, essentially erasing any sort of class difference between Bertram and
Helena. The Countess gives her undying support to Helena, and encourages her to go to the French court.

While the Countess states that she does not distinguish love between Helena and Bertram, as soon as she learns that Bertram has abandoned Helena, the Countess chooses to throw her support behind Helena, stating “[Bertram] was my son,/But I do wash his name out of my blood,/And thou art all my child” (3.2.65-7). The Countess metaphorically disowns Bertram, washing her hands clean of the decisions that she disagrees with. The Countess chooses to ally herself with a woman in need—her surrogate daughter (and now daughter-in-law), Helena, rather than mindlessly supporting Bertram. After the death of his father, Bertram has become the Count of Roussillon, and likely holds a higher status than his mother—however, the Countess still chooses to support the abandoned Helena, rather than submit to her son’s authority.

The Countess also has no qualms about demanding responsibility from Bertram for his actions. When Diana presents his ring as proof of his advances, the Countess states: “This is his wife/That ring’s a thousand proofs” (5.3.197-8). Rather than taking her son’s side, the Countess takes the side of Diana, favoring the female side of the story, and accepting Diana as her new daughter-in-law. This demonstrates how open the Countess is to welcoming new women into her family, and taking them under her protection, much like she did with Helena at the beginning of the play. This also shows the Countess’ refusal to overlook her son’s behavior, forcing him to accept the consequences of his actions.

Diana and the Widow provide the support that Helena needs to fulfill her marital vows, and prove to Bertram her worthiness as a wife. The Widow assures Helena that
“You never had a servant to whose trust/Your business was more welcome” (4.4.15-16). The Widow classifies herself as a servant to Helena, offering unwavering support in carrying out the plan. Diana likewise pledges “Let death and honesty/Go with your impositions, I am yours/Upon your will to suffer” (4.4.28-30). While Diana holds her chastity as the highest honor she can provide for her family, she is willing to put it aside to assist Helena, putting her own reputation aside to aid a woman in need. These women extend a hand of friendship and alliance to Helena, and participate in her plan to catch Bertram in his own confidence, and trick him, making him the fool, rather than the master of deception that he believes himself to be. When Helena concocts her plan to have sex with Bertram, she is taking control of both their marriage and her sexuality—rather than being commanded by Bertram, Helena takes control of what she wants—control that becomes possible through the support and assistance of her friends, Diana and the Widow.
CONCLUSION

In these four plays, communities of women form friendships and alliances to help one another survive in their patriarchal societies. While the masculine figures in these plays often emphasize women as objects, unintelligent beings, representations of purity, and unworthy associates, the women of the plays support each other without prejudice. The support of female friends allows those repressed by male authority to challenge the sexual double standard promoted by men, take control of their own sexuality, decide their own marital future and be appreciated for more than just their beauty or bodies.

In the absence of true mothers, other women step in to protect those under their care, whether it is a lost lady of the court like Ophelia, a headstrong thirteen year old like Juliet, or an orphaned physician’s daughter, older women provide support, protection and love to those without a mother. Women of the same age provide sisterhood and friendship to those around them, like the relationship between Beatrice and Hero, or the camaraderie of Helena and Diana. No matter the situation, these female alliances provide women in Shakespeare’s plays with a support system based on trust and support that is otherwise absent in their patriarchal societies. Relationships like the ones explored in this thesis provide women with power and control that they use for their own means and desires, instead of succumbing to the pressures of the male authorities in their lives.

Sometimes the alliance fails. Sometimes the alliance isn’t strong enough to change expectations or society enough for the women in need to survive. However, the friendships that exist in these oppressive male worlds provide moments of control that would not otherwise exist without female support. These moments, however small and short-lived speak to the power of female friendship, and its ability to push women out of
the shadows of patriarchal authority. These moments allow women to live their own lives, speak their own words, and protect their minds, bodies, and virtues on their own terms.
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