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Nicole Kassabian April 7, 2023

Shakespeare and #MeToo

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Abstract

Shakespeare and #MeToo
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How have sexual violence and harassment aged in a modern climate through Shakespeare's performances? How did Shakespeare engage with issues of victimization, consent, allyship, enforced silence, rape, and masculinity? This project addresses such questions through the lenses of performance and cultural studies. Stephen Greenblatt defines "strategic opacity" as key elements that Shakespeare omitted from his plays so in order to intensify the audience's response. Utilizing his understanding of strategic opacity, I examine how opacity in textual moments, such as the lack of stage directions and ambiguous plot points, has influenced performance choices through our changing perspectives on sexual violence. In tracing how the #MeToo movement has influenced the social climate, I aim to better understand how performance choices of Shakespearian plays are received by audiences. This analysis should contribute to filling the literary gap connecting Shakespeare to modern feminism by analyzing texts, performances, and literary discourses. While Shakespeare's plays often enforce silence upon women who have been wronged, emerging cultural shifts condemning non-consensual sexual behaviors and the #MeToo movement give more powerful voices to victims who wish to share their stories. This cultural shift creates a critical discussion in Shakespearean studies as these plays have carried significance throughout time and are still taught to developing teenagers today. Tracing the variations in performance choices, textual strategic opacity, and audience reactions through a #MeToo lens will illuminate how early modern plays influence the modern societal acceptance of behaviors.

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Introduction

At least six of Shakespeare's female characters say the words, "me too": Queen Margaret and Hermia exclaim "kill me too," Anne admits that Gloucester's penance "joys me too," and Cressida, Adriana, and Dorcus all utter the words in conversation to express shared situations and emotions. But while none of Shakespeare's women say "me too" to explicitly express solidarity with other survivors of sexual abuse and harassment, Shakespeare wove the principles of the #MeToo movement throughout his plays. Sexual objectification, sexual assault, victim blaming, rape culture, slut-shaming, sexual harassment, and predatory behavior abound in Shakespeare's plays—as do female empowerment, empathy, solidarity, allyship, and accountability. Shakespeare's plays open spaces to explore the #MeToo movement. By reading his plays through the lenses of performance studies, contemporary culture, and feminism, I will acknowledge how modern performances approach toxic behaviors that were normalized in Shakespeare's England—and how he created space in his plays to challenge norms.

The critical conversation about Shakespeare's gender dynamics, including rape, spans many decades. Feminist approaches to Shakespeare span examinations of gender differences (Cook), performance reviews (Deleyto), and law (Howe). But, when examining the intersection of Shakespeare and the #MeToo movement, specifically, less literature can be found. Most literature turns to focus individually on the role of being a "good" woman (Mann), victim representation (Finch), or rape (Detmer-Goebel). What my writing will attempt to do is collectively address all of the topics mentioned above. Through performances and reviews, we can gain some insight into what the gender differences and social values were at the time Shakespeare wrote these play in comparison to the times they were performed. Seeing how

sexual violence has evolved in performances over time will enable us to evaluate what is required for victims to adequately receive justice.

A woman's role was dependent on men as "she is a man's possession" (Williams 94). Yet, examination of early modern dramas, like Shakespeare's, focus on the rape of women and the female response to such sexual violence. Many Shakespearean plays do not explicitly state how gender dynamics influence responses to rape, but they do touch upon the difficulty faced by women to prove rape occurred (Williams 101). When messages like this are repeatedly performed and shown, audience members hold the potential to absorb these dynamics and social values. This absorption can be best demonstrated through the fact that these plays were presented in the early 17th century in a manner that was "focus[ed] on female feelings" (Mann 64) since they comprised a large part of the audience. Shakespeare's romantic comedies led to an increase in female spectating through their "optimistic affirmation of female potential" (Mann 64). But such potential was marginal and remained in the confines of a strict patriarchal society to a greater extent than we have today. While women were a part of the audience, they seemed to have, to a certain extent, accepted the acts of violence portrayed against women, since they were both habituated to them and since they were not as "extreme" as instances of rape.

Throughout feminist analyses of Shakespeare's writings, the concept of "the woman's part" (Gravlee 119) has been formed. In *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, a woman disguised as a male claims she had to play "the woman's part" (Gravlee 119) to sympathize with them. This concept arises again in *Cymbeline* where a man claims he must remove such a "woman's part" (Gravlee 119) to leave his masculinity intact. This fundamental and stereotypical approach to femininity set the ambiguous precedent of attitudes that must be held towards women: men must be like them to empathize, and yet they should not want to be like women.

These subtle acts of sexual dominance stem from performance choices that are variable because of Shakespeare's famously adaptable style. Due to Shakespeare's paucity of stage directions, and what Stephen Greenblatt refers to as his "strategic opacity" (Greenblatt 324), the plays are open to directors' and actors' adaptations. In his 2004 book *Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare*, Stephen Greenblatt expanded on how Shakespeare purposely left his plays open:

> Shakespeare found that he could immeasurably deepen the effect of his plays, that he could provoke in the audience and in himself a peculiarly passionate intensity of response, if he took out a key explanatory element, thereby occluding the rationale, motivation, or ethical principle that accounted for the action that was to unfold. The principle was not the making of a riddle to be solved, but the creation of a strategic opacity. This opacity, Shakespeare found, released an enormous energy that had been at least partially blocked or contained by familiar, reassuring explanations. (Greenblatt 323-24)

These spaces in Shakespeare's writings—where he did not clearly mark his intentions for performances, and where explanations are missing—create open spaces where directors and actors can adapt, customize, improvise, and even insert motivations and ethical rationales. Utilizing this understanding of strategic opacity in this project, I analyze Shakespeare's plays for moments without explicit direction that can be performed in accordance with directors' intentions, and aligned with contemporary social concerns. These moments of strategic opacity enable Shakespeare performances to continually reinvent themselves as social values and movements emerge.

In this thesis, I aim to examine how strategic opacity within Shakespeare's writings creates a space for social values regarding sexual violence to be expressed through performance choices. Through performances of *Much Ado About Nothing, Measure for Measure*, and *Titus Andronicus*, sexual themes arise through the opacity in Shakespeare's writings which intersect with modern values of the #MeToo movement. Understanding the degree to which these moments occur in text and in performances is critical as we continuously teach them in academic settings and overlook problematic elements under the guise of artistic freedom.

#MeToo Movement: Social History and Sexual Violence

The #MeToo movement is rooted in decades of feminist activism. The development of feminism as we know it today came in several "waves": first the women's suffrage movement surrounding the fight for women to own property and have the legal right to vote, best exemplified by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott and the *Declaration of Sentiments* which famously stated, "all men and women are created equal" (Stanton n.p.). After the 19th amendment was passed, giving women the right to vote, feminists shifted towards further eliminating discrimination legally (19th Amendment). The second wave of feminism challenged women's traditional roles of housework and childcare. Female activists fought for the Equal Rights Amendment in 1972, which declared there to be no discrimination on the basis of sex (Soule 1874). Then came the Supreme Court's Roe v. Wade in 1973, granting women reproductive rights (Feminism). Shakespeare also writes about these issues (Charney 451).

Third wave feminism acknowledged that women of color and women who are not straight face intersectional challenges (Kimberlé Crenshaw). By moving away from straight, white women's concerns, modern movements advocate for all women regardless of race or sexual orientation. This was the wave in which more diverse activists were given platforms with which to share their voices. Most importantly for this project, third wave feminism includes activist Tarana Burke, who founded the #MeToo movement to build "a community of advocates determined to interrupt sexual violence wherever it happens" (*Get to Know Us*).

Some assert that a fourth wave of feminism emerged in the mid-2010s, when sexual violence discourses on social media amplified sexual assault victims' stories and challenged their socio-political context ("The Fourth Wave"). In 2017, this shift in activism and motivation was

embodied when Tarana Burke's #MeToo went viral on Twitter creating a space in which sexual violence survivors could share their experiences and advocate for reform and justice.

While the societal discourse surrounding sexual violence has risen over the last several years, the definition of sexual violence is fairly ambiguous. The #MeToo movement's website contains a glossary page that provides definitions for a variety of relevant terms to provide some degree of uniformity within discourses. However, it is missing an official definition for the term "sexual violence." For the purposes of my research, I define "sexual violence" as any behavior that falls within the #MeToo movement's broader definitions of sexual assault, sexual harassment, or sexual coercion.

Sexual assault and harassment, certainly, abound in Shakespeare's plays. As defined by the #MeToo movement, sexual assault and harassment constitute "any type of sexual activity or contact that you do not consent to. Sexual assault can happen through physical force, or threats of force or if the attacker gave the victim drugs or alcohol as part of the assault. Sexual assault includes rape and sexual coercion" (Glossary). Sexual violence does not have to be direct physical violence, though. Sexual harassment, or "unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal or physical harassment of a sexual nature… can include offensive remarks about a person's sex" (Glossary). Consent is central to both sexual assault and harassment, with the technical definition of consent being

> when someone agrees, gives permission, or says "yes" to sexual activity with another person or persons. Consent is always freely given and all people in a sexual situation must feel that they are able to say "yes," or "no," or stop the sexual activity at any point. Consent can be withdrawn by either party at any point. Consent to engage in one sexual activity, or past agreement to engage in a

> particular sexual activity, cannot be presumed to constitute consent to engage in a different sexual activity or to engage again in a sexual activity. Consent cannot be validly given by a person who is incapacitated, which includes intoxication or any other hindrance to clear communication. (Glossary)

This definition of consent is particularly important because while a lack of consent can seem fairly black and white in some instances, other moments can land in a grey zone of technicalities. Sexual coercion is an example of sexual violence that can teeter the legal grey zone with consent. Sexual coercion is "is a tactic used by perpetrators to intimidate, trick, or force someone to have sex with them without physical force. Coercion is an issue of power and control" (Glossary). Sexual violence, for the purpose of this thesis will encompass all consensual departures in the forms of assault, harassment, and coercion.

Much Ado About Nothing: Allyship and Masculinity

When people who are not victimized or marginalized offer active support for those who are, that is called "allyship"; allies are engaged and committed, they are advocates for others, they seek to understand different perspectives, and perhaps most fundamentally, they are present in the conflict on behalf of others (Strauss, Swanson, and Szymanski). In 2021, Meg Warren, Samit Bordoloi, and Michael Warren studied the benefits of male allyship for women and found that both men and women benefit from men standing up as it promotes female well-being and healthy forms of masculinity (Warren et al.) Allies stand in solidarity with those who have been socially, politically, emotionally, or physically harmed. "Allyship" is a twenty-first century concept ("Allyship"), but four hundred years earlier, Shakespeare explored allyship and masculinity in a popular comedy, *Much Ado About Nothing*.

While *Much Ado About Nothing* is a seemingly straightforward Shakespearian play that conforms to comedy's enemies-to-lovers romantic trope, underneath the plot are issues of toxic masculinity, slut-shaming, victim-blaming, and problems regarding consent. The play begins with some soldiers being warmly welcomed back to a community called Messina (1.1.36-37), thus setting the stage for a group of closely-bonded men—possibly traumatized by war and deeply suspicious of female fidelity—mingling with potential female partners. Leonato, the landowner and father to an eligible daughter, approaches the soldiers with his daughter, Hero, and niece, Beatrice. Beatrice and Benedick resume their "merry war" (1.1.60) of banter, as was typical for the pair; and yet while the play's two central couples begin to form pairs, the play features ongoing male bonding as a form of resistance to female partnership. The abundant toxic masculinity demonstrated at the start of this play surrounds the heterosexual desire to romantically partner with a woman. Don Pedro, another soldier, stumbles upon Benedick; and

when hearing of Claudio's secret desire for Hero, proposes a trick for the men to conduct at the ball that night to secure a proposal between Claudio and Hero – Don Pedro would disguise himself as Claudio while confessing his love to Hero and then get her father's approval (1.1.301-06). This first instance of trickery sets the stage for limiting the extent to which individuals can knowingly fall in love throughout the play.

As the women prepare for the ball, the audience gains insight into female homosocial bonding; and yet, what they discuss are their "ideal man" and questions about marriage. Far from establishing empathy and respect between men and women—and certainly not allyship—Shakespeare centers every conversation around the fundamental inability of men to trust women or women to gain the friendship and respect of men. Claudio and Hero are engaged to be married, but they hardly speak to each other. Beatrice and Benedick bicker and insult each other. And yet, both their homosocial banter and the couples' interactions are preparing the audience for the allyship Benedick's character will develop.

Don John, the brother of Don Pedro, worked with his servant, Borachio, to devise a plan to ruin Claudio's marriage to Hero: a plan that will involve using an unsuspecting woman as a decoy in order to slut-shame Hero (2.2.21-26). They decide that Don John must go to Claudio and convince him that Hero is not a virgin, and therefore a not worthy of marrying (2.2.21-26). Such a notion, alone, demonstrates the gender roles and values that were important during the time period: women's bodies are simultaneously available for use by men, and women were to be virgins, while men never had to prove such purity. To prove Hero's infidelity, they will bring Claudio to her bedroom window and see her having sex with another man, but in reality it will be her servant with Borachio (2.2.40-49).

The plan works. Claudio immediately believes that his "precious jewel" is actually a sexually-experienced woman, and rather than approaching her and talking, he vows to humiliate Hero publicly at their wedding the next morning (3.3.159-64). Thus, in front of her family and friends, Claudio publicly rejects Hero and degrades her by saying "Leonato, take her back again" (4.1.31). The wedding descends into chaos as Claudio shames her in front of all the attendees at church, telling them what he saw (4.1.33-42). Leonato almost immediately believes Claudio—over the protestations of the two women that he knows well, and whose character he has observed—and he pleads for both his own and Hero's death ("do not live Hero, do not ope thine eyes"); when Hero collapses he rejects help on her behalf since death would be better than letting her live in shame (4.1.121-23). Beatrice, so used to her own independence and strong voice, finds that she is powerless. The toxic, masculine social order limited the ability for women's voices to be heard. The only male "ally" in the wedding scene is the Friar, who suspects that foul play is afoot, and devises a plan to investigate: while the play's villain faked a sexual encounter with Hero, the Friar will fake her death while they investigate (4.1.211-19).

And yet, at this low point in the play, Shakespeare has created a space in which Benedick will become an ally. Benedick and Beatrice are alone on the stage. Benedick professes his love for Beatrice and claims he will do anything for her. Beatrice's frustration with the situation compels her to ask him to "kill Claudio" for his actions (4.1.303); she essentially says to him, "be an ally." Benedick agrees to help Beatrice after hearing her argument about sexism and punishment (4.1.346-47), ultimately transforming him from a toxic man—who only viewed women as sexual objects and potential humiliators of men— into a feminist ally. From this moment forward, Benedick uses his privilege on behalf of women, breaking with his war-bonded male friends to defend the wronged woman.

Don John's slut-shaming plan begins to unravel through the guards' comic antics, and Hero's innocence is vindicated (5.1.240-54). A horrified Claudio realizes his mistake and begs Leonato for forgiveness (5.1.264-67). His pleads for forgiveness are directed at a man. While thus far in the play Hero's mother has only been mentioned in a joke about her potential infidelity, it is notable that Claudio's pleas are not extended to women (including Beatrice), but rather to the father of the woman he scorned. Claudio is ordered by Leonato to clear Hero's name publicly and marry his niece, who purportedly shares a lot of characteristics with Hero (5.1.299-305).

As everyone prepares for the second wedding, Benedick asks Leonato for permission to marry Beatrice. While such permission is still a practiced tradition, it is rooted in sexism that places a woman's value as something owned by the men in their family. The women enter the wedding all wearing veils, and when the bride takes hers off, Claudio realizes it is truly Hero and laments that she could be his wife again (5.4.64-66). Claudio's controlling nature of the entire situation sets him far apart from Benedick as an ally. Claudio represents toxic masculinity throughout the majority of the play while Benedick develops into a male ally.

While *Much Ado About Nothing*, overall, presents many issues involving slut-shaming, victim-blaming, mistrust of women, consent, and gender dynamics, it presents a positive perspective towards potential change—a progressive concept in the seventeenth century—that men can use their in-group status on behalf of women. In the original wedding scene, gender is the sole motivator behind all the male actions. Hero is accused of adultery and the only person coming to her defense is another woman, Beatrice, who claims something like this could not have taken place because "until last night I have this twelvemonth been her bedfellow" (4.1.157-158). Everyone else, however, easily succumbs to the accusations and immediately disregards

Hero as the woman they knew her to be. The staging of such a scene lacks directions from Shakespeare and creates an opportunity for performances to physically degrade women. The strategic opacity created by Shakespeare enables Kenneth Branagh's 1993 production of *Much Ado About Nothing* to portray Hero in this scene as not only verbally shamed by the men of her life, but also physically assaulted by Claudio (1:03:43). This renders her both vulnerable and unable to fight back. While Claudio had lost faith in his soon-to-be wife, Leonato equally abandons his daughter by grabbing Hero by her hair and dragging her around like she is insignificant (1:06:26). Such a violent act was easily brought upon her as a woman despite her intimate relationship as a daughter to her abuser in this instance. Men readily support one another, assume that women are false, and degrade women as they pose a threat to homosocial bonding previously established. By not supporting their friend and fellow soldier, these men would provide women with a larger sense of power and ultimately limit their own reach. So, to eliminate such an occurrence, the men blindly and readily support Claudio despite his poorly researched claim that Hero is an adulteress.

Such blind support extends through a variety of performances. While the theme of masculine support is inherent in the text, Shakespeare's strategic opacity in his writings creates space in performances for toxic masculinity to develop. In a review of James Evans' 2019 version of *Much Ado About Nothing* in the Sydney Opera House, the misogyny was brought to the forefront of the performance as others noticed the toxic dynamics shared between men and the intention to ruin women based on assumptions. Jade Kops writes

> whilst the performers do well with the material, the direction stops the work from providing a definitive stance but rather seems to be dismissing the men's behavior as ok in the same way men have been let off with "boys will be boys" and that

> there is no real repercussions for sullying an innocent woman's reputation as she takes him back in the end. (Kops n.p)

The social values of Shakespeare's time dismissed slander and degradation of women as insignificant regardless of the cruelty expressed; such misogyny is reproduced and exemplified in the performance noted above.

Gender dynamics in *Much Ado About Nothing* influence not only the way men interact with women, by limiting their social power, but also the way in which men view themselves. Celestino Deleyto writes about how gender dynamics are seen in *Much Ado About Nothing* and how they are transformed as a basis for the genre we now label romantic comedies. Through Benedick, Deleyto claims, audience members are able to see how the masculinity is dependent on women and their ability to change a man through love. As a precedent for the genre,

> Benedick ultimately proves to be the most compromising of the male characters and ripe for a heterosexual union in which an egalitarian relationship between the sexes may at least be envisaged, it is precisely through him that the play articulates the patriarchal view that falling in love affects manliness and turns men into effeminate posers. What is ironic about his famous soliloquy in scene 2.3 of the play is that it comes immediately before Don Pedro's plot to get Benedick and Beatrice to fall in love with each other, and, consequently, immediately before Benedick starts behaving in the exact manner he so vehemently criticizes. (Deleyto 93)

Benedick vehemently despised men in love at the beginning of the play, but transforms and becomes more vulnerable once Beatrice declares her love for him. He actively seeks to comfort her by asking "come, bid me do anything for thee" (4.1. 302). She engages Benedick by asking

him to "kill Claudio" (4.1.303). When he rejects her proposal, she pleads with him and, as a strong woman, acknowledges the flaw with society: that she is not a man. She claims

> O, 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. (4.1.317-21)

Her inability to seek, what she deems, adequate justice is limited by her gender. Much like the women who speak up in the #MeToo movement, she seeks "to expose the totality of hostility [faced by] women" (Diaz 207). But Beatrice realizes to make an adequate change, she must employ Benedick as a feminist ally. Benedick solidifies his commitment to Beatrice by declaring "enough, I am engaged. I will challenge him. I will kiss your hand, and so I leave you. By this hand, Claudio shall render me a dear account" (4.1.346-48).

The shift in Benedick is most critical as it exemplifies male allyship and the need to abandon his firmly socialized toxic masculinity. The New Jersey Coalition Against Sexual Assault defines toxic masculinity as

> refer[ing] to the ways that harmful and violent behaviors can be tied to defining one's 'maleness.' This includes harmful norms that are 'expected' of men – aggression, absolute dominance and control, having a lot of sexual partners, masking emotions, etc. Traditionally 'feminine' values – empathy, kindness, gentleness – are devalued. (*Men as Allies*)

Benedick abandons his toxic masculine perspective that he held when entering Messina for a more "feminine" approach to problem solving. Then he goes beyond passive acceptance and

stands up for Hero, believing her, defending her, and even breaking with his close community of fellow soldiers over their behavior.

In doing so, Benedick becomes an ally to women. Men can become better allies by learning, practicing and modeling empathetic behavior, listening to the issues faced by others, and speaking up (*Men as Allies*). Benedick, in his transition to an ally, does all of this; various performances utilize the strategic opacity throughout the play to physically demonstrate the shift into an ally.

In David Tennant's 2011 performance of *Much Ado About Nothing*, Benedick develops from a stubborn man who is scorned by women and actively pushes them away romantically to a man who has fallen in love and will use his privilege to support them. Others who have seen such a performance noticed the shift as well as one reviewer writes "Tennant is especially good at showing Benedick's transition from the self-conscious madcap of the officers' mess into a man capable of love" (Billington n.p.). Others noted how his performance expressed this allyship in a physical nature through costuming. At one point Tennant "threw himself into dancing (and into pantomime drag) with gusto at the masked ball" (London Theatre Review n.p.). Such acceptance of his "feminine" side and dressing as a woman allows him to play the "woman's part" (Gravlee 119) and empathize with them later in the play.

In Kenneth Branagh's performance, Beatrice makes her request for his support in a chapel (Branagh 1:09:27). Her "if I were a man" speech is framed with her directly underneath a cross. Such symbolic framing subtlety places her in a community of faith, specifically within a religion of self-sacrifice on others' behalf. Beatrice is asking that of Benedick: to speak on her behalf, to take a stand for an out-group, and make a change in their society. Benedick and

Beatrice hold sustained eye contact when agreeing upon the killing of Claudio; such intensity solidifies their deep connection leading them to such a decision. It becomes clear that Beatrice has led Benedick to this decision, but he is making it because he too believes it is just. Benedick becomes the ultimate ally to Beatrice in this moment. While allyship does not equate to extralegal punishments (and in fact, the play's more lighthearted register tones down the reality of such an act), Shakespeare creates a male character who is willing to act on behalf of the wronged woman. It is ultimately through Beatrice that Benedick becomes enlightened to the extent of female oppression in society and takes an active role that benefits him, in addition to the play's women.

Much Ado About Nothing is considered a comedy. In many respects, this classification makes sense: the men and women form couples and the play culminates in a wedding scene. The genre of romantic comedy uses "compulsory heterosexuality and the subjugation of women… [as] the two central ideological tenets of classical romantic comedy" (Deleyto 92). Hero, Claudio, Benedick, and Beatrice all get married in the end; heterosexuality and the subjugation of women is built into the design of this play. The two central couples are heterosexual; and women are not only oppressed through the men's actions in this play, but they are given fewer lines to share – ultimately oppressing them verbally, as well. For example, "in the opening scene, where the personalities, roles, and relations of the characters are largely established, Hero has only one line, seven words, and these are to explain a remark of Beatrice's" (Cook 192). This limitation of expression extends throughout the play. While the wedding scene is what, by a certain definition, makes the play comedic, it is also the setting for some of the most toxically masculine moments. Men berate women, silence women, and in some performances

physically dominate women – leaving them weak and helpless. But all it takes for a change to be made is for one man to abandon the homosocial culture and feed into the gender hierarchy to support those who are unable to adequately support themselves. This we find in Benedick.

Ultimately, one of Shakespeare's most beloved comedies holds a deeper value of female oppression which can only be broken by female leaders and the use of male allyship. While it is unfair to say women must lead the charge to their own sexual freedom, the best way to achieve adequate change is by instilling their values not only within their sex but also with those who hold enough socio-political power to make the change notable and deemed "worthy" by society. Understanding the need for male allyship in *Much Ado About Nothing* can influence the approach to solving issues like sexual violence brought to the social forefront by campaigns like the #MeToo movement.

Measure for Measure: Consent and Victimization

As one of Shakespeare's lesser-known comedies, *Measure for Measure* has surged in cultural consciousness in connection with the #MeToo movement examining sexual violence. In 2021, as the #MeToo movement empowered women across the world to speak up against sexual assault, actor Romola Garai starred as the play's female lead, Isabella, at London's Old Vic Theatre. "I think it's the best play he ever wrote" (Shakespeare Uncovered 0:21), Garai's claims frequently pointed to the contemporary relevance of the play to #MeToo. One of the play's iconic lines, spoken by a sexual predator, "who will believe thee, Isabella?" resonates with the 2018 public hearings of Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh, whose female accuser was not believed in the face of Kavanaugh's power and political backing. While *Much Ado About Nothing* allows productions to explore allyship and masculinity, *Measure for Measure* opens spaces for contemporary productions to examine consent, victimization, and silencing.

Throughout *Measure for Measure,* characters, especially the females, are confronted with issues of consent and sexual morality. The play begins with the Duke of Vienna announcing to his second in command, Escalus, that he will temporarily step down from his political position and leave the city, putting Angelo in power (1.1.30). Angelo begins to strictly enforce laws that were overlooked, especially laws governing sex: extramarital sex will now carry the death penalty and the houses of prostitution will be closed under Angelo's strict control. Claudio, Isabella's brother, is arrested for impregnating his fiancé, Juliet, and sentenced to hang (1.2.60). As the central figure in the play, Isabella is introduced to the audience as a woman who has chosen to live outside the world of men: she is training to become a nun. But Claudio's friends convince her to plead with Angelo to spare her brother's life (1.4.94). The moment where Isabella must leave her nunnery is the first instance in which she must give up what is important

to her for a man. While Claudio is family, the obligation she feels to leave in support of him makes her a victim of social norms and circumstance since she has been socialized to hold such values.

During her meeting with Angelo, Isabella says she agrees with the law yet asks for her brother to be pardoned (2.2.96-103). As she continues to beg, Lucio, a friend of Claudio who accompanied Isabella to her meeting, continues to tell her she needs to warm up to Angelo both in a physical and verbal sense (2.2.76). While Isabella is given the choice to use her femininity to her advantage, the expressed need to do so begs the question of consent. She is technically given the option, but is left in a situation in which unwanted sexual expression is socially forced. Then, in a wonderfully Shakespearean turn of the plot, after Isabella exits, Angelo embarks on a soliloquy in which he explores his own sexual desire for Isabella (2.2.198). He is a character whose sole purpose thus far has been to legislate sexual morality, and now, for what seems like the first time, he awakens to his own sexuality and its complications. The following day, Angelo proposed an exchange with Isabella, what is often referred to as a "monstrous bargain"; he proposes to Isabella that he will spare Claudio's life in exchange for her sleeping with him (2.4.53-57). This proposal outright serves as a moment of sexual harassment as she is placed in a moment where unreciprocated sexual desires are being expressed; further, the blackmail component is how this proposal develops into a deeper form of assault since the sexual desires are unwanted and being forced upon her. In response to the proposal, Isabella becomes defiant, refusing his request (2.4.69-71). She then threatens to blackmail Angelo; however, he points out that due to the gender dynamics and social hierarchy *no one will* believe her (2.4.168).
In act three, Isabella goes to visit Claudio in jail and tells him the ultimatum Angelo presented to her (3.1.106-10). Ultimately Claudio realizes the hypocrisy in Angelo's desire and request.

Claudio asked his sister to relinquish her virginity so as to save his life (3.1.127-29). This request would strip her of any values she held dearly and leave her unhappy with herself. Any consent she could give during such an instance would be invalid, as well, since she would have been coerced to engage on behalf of her brother. As Isabella begins to leave the jail, the Duke disguised as a friar pulls Isabella aside to create a plan to save her virtue and Claudio's life (3.1.202). The Duke creates the plan for Isabella to accept Angelo's request; however, Angelo's former fiancé, Mariana, will sleep with Angelo in disguise (3.2.261-82). While Mariana supposedly consents to this engagement, Angelo would be forced to unknowingly have sex with her and then the issue of consent becomes much more complicated. This bed-trick will force Angelo to marry Mariana and release Claudio (3.1.238). Ironically, except for Claudio impregnating his fiancé, no sexual activity in this play is fully consensual.

And what is more, marriage is held up as a legal technicality that justifies the nonconsensual sex: As the Duke, Mariana, and Isabella prepare to trick Angelo, the Duke reassures Mariana that she is not committing a sin due to the previous promise Angelo made to marry her (4.2.78). Such reassurance begs the question how morally sound this trick is if the main people involved are questioning how comfortable they are with it.

Isabella wants to confront Angelo and expose him, but the disguised Duke advises Isabella to wait for the Duke's return and Angelo's punishment (4.3.114). Stripping Isabella of her voice, again, leaves her powerless as she must depend on men to make decisions and fix problems for her. The lack of power she holds leaves her in a victimized state for the majority of the play. The Duke, now stripped of his disguise, re-enters the town to restore peace (4.5.1). When the Duke asks Isabella to state her complaint, Angelo interrupts and attempts to speak over her, telling the story himself (5.1.37-39). Isabella, however, persists and attempts to tell her

story; this becoming the first instance in which Isabella, alone, attempts to regain social strength. In a baffling and frustrating moment in the final act, the Duke dismisses Isabella as insane and invalid, sentencing her to jail (5.1.142). Mariana stands up to testify on Isabella's behalf (5.1.195). Mariana talks of the bed trick they planned and executed (5.1.219-24). When the Duke asks for Angelo's side of the story, he confesses to his crime pleading for a death sentence (5.1.413-21). By pleading for death, Angelo attempts to become a victim in demonstrating that death would be better than living with these "informal" women. The Duke, however, states that Angelo must marry Mariana to preserve her virtue (5.1.426). Claudio is revealed and pardoned for his crime. The last moment of the play is when the Duke asks Isabella to marry him, offering what would be seen as a comic resolution to the play. And yet: Isabella does not speak. Shakespeare—in a moment of strategic opacity—leaves her on the stage, but in silence (5.1.613).

Thus despite being classified as a comedy in the First Folio, this play resists a comedic resolution and foregrounds ambiguous morality. In 2.4, Angelo shared his exchange proposal with Isabella, a "monstrous bargain": her virginity for Claudio's life. Angelo's hypocrisy is clear in Shakespeare's writing as seen when Angelo said, "He shall not, Isabel, if you give me love" (2.4.155). The hypocrisy sets an underlying tone for all of Angelo's actions but specific directions are unclear in Shakespeare's writings.

While this disparity between Angelo's actions are implied throughout the play, Shakespeare never wrote stage directions for how this moment should be performed – an example of Greenblatt's strategic opacity. In 1997, David Tennant performed scenes of *Measure for Measure* for a documentary called *Conjuring Shakespeare*. In this scene, Angelo physically coerces Isabella in addition to his words. In this performance, Angelo grabs Isabella's hips while

claiming her choice to be a nun makes her less of a woman. The specific way Angelo phrased his sexist comment was

> I think it well.
>
> And from this testimony of your own sex,
>
> Since I suppose we are made to be no stronger
>
> Than faults may shake our frames, let me be bold.
>
> I do arrest your words. Be that you are—
>
> That is, a woman. If you be more, you're none.
>
> If you be one, as you are well expressed
>
> By all external warrants, show it now
>
> By putting on the destined livery. (1.4.141-49)

The use of the word "none" is particularly important as it holds a double meaning. For Isabella, it is a play on what she deems to be her calling in life, to serve God through service as a nun. But Angelo manipulates this word in his comment by taking it and transforming it into something demeaning. He diminishes her by using her version of "nun" into something that strips her of her gender and autonomy. This domination of women continues in the scene as Tennant—Angelo—pushes Isabella to the ground and pins her struggling body down while saying

> And now I give my sensual race the rein.
>
> Fit thy consent to my sharp appetite;
>
> Lay by all nicety and prolixious blushes
>
> That banish what they sue for. Redeem thy brother
>
> By yielding up thy body to my will,
>
> Or else he must not only die the death,

> But thy unkindness shall his death draw out
>
> To ling'ring sufferance. (2.4.174-81)

Shakespeare's writing of "redeem thy brother/By yielding up thy body to my will" (2.4.177-178) is particularly well-complimented by the physical dynamics of Angelo and Isabella in David Tennant's performance. His position on Isabella serves as a vessel through which he intends to sexually coerce her into succumbing to his will. While their verbal sparring can be seen as a form of flirting through their back-and-forth dynamic, it does not override consent and counts as a moment of violence as sexual harassment. Angelo held the power throughout this scene as he runs the city in the Duke's absence; but the performance choice to create instances of physical domination were moments of sexual violence created through the strategic opacity in Shakespeare's writings.

The performances of today have been informed by societal shifts, and yet also inform the way plays should be executed in the future. As our social attitudes towards sexual violence have become more progressive so have theatrical portrayals of such instances. Carolyn Ratteray, who played Isabella in the Antaeus Theatre Company's performance of *Measure For Measure* noted the shift in societal approaches to the play in her own performance by observing audience reactions to Isabella's sexual coercion. In an interview with the *L.A. Times* she said

> Years ago, people would say, "Isabella is so cold not to sleep with Angelo so she could free her brother…" That reaction was the norm. Today, as a society, we're at least a little more attuned to survivors' rights. Reading this play anew, I realized Isabella suffers a tremendous trauma. (Jacobs n.p.)

Our perceptions on consent have shifted and so have the reactions to her decision to maintain her virtue. We have gone from a society that placed higher value on men to one that strives to reach

equity for women. While there is still a lot of progress to be made, performers like Ratteray are noticing a shift within their own performances that spark a feminist reaction within many of their audience members. By shifting the dynamic in theater, hopefully more progress can be made to support women in avoiding instances of sexual violence and those who decide to speak up after the fact.

As the play progresses, female somatic domination continues, although its form changes. Instead of physical domination, the concept of silence possesses a heavy influence on female perception and autonomy. Silence in any literary situation is always important as its interpretation can alter the perceived meaning of the play (Aebischer 2). Particularly, silence is best seen in the final moments of the play where Isabella has no lines after the Duke declares their marriage to one another. Her silence regarding her own future follows an emotionally difficult moment for her where she must confront the position Angelo put her in while also pardoning him for the benefit of Mariana. The overall situation Isabella faces in the final moments of the play creates an ending that critic Burton says,

> is complicated and bittersweet. Isabella, whose anger has driven so much of the plot, is forced to show mercy to Angelo, reversing her earlier willingness to let Claudio die for his sins. It's hard to watch — we want Angelo punished and killed. But it also makes sense as a kind of redemption arc for Isabella, who has gone from someone who rejoices in her brother's impending death to someone more tolerant of human frailty (Burton n.p.).

This moment where she is not given her voice to advocate for herself is particularly important because Angelo had earlier pointed out that had she used her voice no one would have believed

her anyway. His infamous quote, "who will believe thee, Isabel?" (2.4.169), emphasized the societal oppression faced by women solely due to their gender.

Larger dynamics of gender politics contribute to societal perceptions of a specific group of individuals. While not all victims of sexual violence are female, gender politics influence the way society imagines the "ideal victim". This concept of an ideal victim exists to limit the likelihood of victims speaking out, seeking justice, and feeling validated (Finch 150). Amanda Finch examined victimization in *Measure for Measure* and found that

> despite the more recent focus on victims' agency and the requirement for an ideal victim to 'be strong enough to be listened to', Christie also noted that it is key to the concept of the ideal victim that she also be '*weak enough not to become a threat to other important interests*'. The ideal victim does not threaten the established social order or dominant cultural norms. This is evident in the world of the play where Isabella cannot escape the overriding power of the Duke and societal and comedic norms of matrimony. (Finch 152)

The emphasis on Isabella's femininity throughout the play and the balance she exhibits through her stubbornness to maintain her virtue make her a somewhat ideal victim. When she tells the Duke of Angelo's alleged assault, she's originally dismissed and then believed. The dismissal of Isabella exemplifies how femininity is viewed as weak, but to be the ideal victim she has to have a strong enough voice to make others believe her. This concept of the ideal victim is particularly compelling because it is framed around womanhood.

In the era of the #MeToo movement, the issue of consent and femininity has become more apparent in portrayals of this scene. Instead of staging a play where women are victimized, strategic opacity and directorial choices strengthen women instead. For example, Blanche

McIntyre's 2021 production of *Measure For Measure* used women to play some male roles (Akbar n.p.). While casting is not quite an instance of strategic opacity, this casting choice demonstrates that

> It is the women who hold the moral rectitude here, and the ultimate power: Escalus (Bennison, doubling up brilliantly) and Vincentio are gender-switched. Hattie Ladbury, as the Duke, is both stately and mischievous in her disguise as the friar. This latter reversal also makes her wedding proposal to Isabella more progressive, with its lesbian overtones, and the nun's final pause is all the more pregnant. (Akbar n.p.)

By adding levels of homosexuality and underlying femininity to toxic males, women regain the power even in the most damning of situations. They play men who ultimately decide the fate of the play, and that hidden meaning of power has been made possible by the shift in societal values towards a more feminist future.

One often overlooked aspect of *Measure for Measure* is that there are multiple victims in this play. While the most notable and often examined is Isabella, Mariana is a victim as well. Isabella is defined by her lack of sexual experience through her status as a virgin and a nun. Mariana, alternatively, "threatens order not only because she disrupts the maid/wife/widow paradigm, but because she simultaneously and equivocally occupies the sexual position of "wife" in the virgin/wife/whore paradigm" (Digangi 591). Her status as an aspiring wife makes her a less ideal victim as her claims to sexual violence are less likely to disrupt the social system she is in. Sexually violating the unknown creates chaos in the existing social structure because nuns take a vow of abstinence. To violate your own wife, however, can create a socially ambiguous area surrounding conversations of consent. While consent does not fade in a marriage, the gender

politics existing in this play create a hierarchy in which men's voices hold greater value. Angelo is less likely to be seen as a sexual abuser to his own wife than to nun.

This gender hierarchy, however, is not the only factor worth examining when looking at who is a victim in *Measure for Measure*. Angelo, too, is a victim, albeit an uncomfortable one for the audience. His character is particularly difficult to analyze because, while he is clearly an abuser, he also presents as a victim of toxic masculinity and other male power structures. Thus, despite his attempt to sexually coerce Isabella into breaking her vows, Isabella, Mariana, and the Duke plan a bed-trick in which Angelo himself is never given the opportunity to adequately consent. There are two approaches to viewing Angelo as a victim. The first acknowledges Angelo as an abuser who violates other women by harassing them and attempting to sexually coerce them. The second approach is a bit more nuanced in how Angelo is viewed by proposing a sexual exchange with Isabella. The hypocritical nature of Angelo's actions make it hard to sympathize with him, an approach Shakespeare so often experiments with. But, one view that can be taken examines that "the play never suggests that Angelo is a total hypocrite — he seems to really believe in the principles of sexual morality he tries to enforce. He's just weak, too weak to realize that he is not the exception to the rules he makes for others. He is, in other words, totally human" (Burton n.p.).

While the two views of Angelo influence the degree of sympathy one feels he deserves at the end of the play, it does not negate the fact that he himself was also raped. The bed-trick is deemed somewhat justifiable in the play since it would maintain Isabella's chastity while creating a better future for Mariana, but

> there is certainly a sense that the bed-trick through which Angelo is duped into having sex with the one woman in the world he least wants to sleep with is a kind

> of rape by Isabella through her substitute Mariana. 'Measure for measure' indeed: the rapist is punished by being raped; victim and aggressor swap places. The roles are reversible and bodies, as has often been noted, are oddly interchangeable: Mariana's body can be substituted for Isabella's, just as the role of victim can be substituted for that of the perpetrator. (Aebischer 7)

When examining Isabella as the ideal victim, the gender dynamics were not in her favor until she decided to speak up against her abuser. When looking at Angelo as a victim, his gender could ultimately be his downfall.

Ultimately, Shakespeare wrote a play which was deemed a comedy due to the multiple marriages at the end; but the classification of this play as a comedy feels misleading as it addresses a variety of deeply tragic themes: female oppression, sexual harassment, religion and law as problematic governors of human sexuality, and nonconsensual sex. When performed, Shakespeare's opaque moments, such as Isabella's silence after the Duke's proposal, enable tragic dynamics to become physicalized and ultimately perpetuate existing socio-political discourses. The way in which audience members and play readers internalize interpretations of the gender politics in *Measure for Measure* influences perspectives on victimization. Understandings of who is a victim and who holds a valid sexually violent story depends heavily on sympathy for the characters and the perspectives one can take on.

Titus Andronicus: Enforced Silence

While *Measure for Measure* is a comedy with tragic sub-themes, *Titus Andronicus* sits comfortably in its "tragic" genre. Not only is it the Shakespearean play with the most deaths, but it also tells the story of a raped and tortured woman who is physically and socially silenced—epitomizing the extreme extent of sexual violence #MeToo supporters are actively fighting against today. Rape victims are often dismissed by those with authority, punished for reporting instances of sexual violence, and denied future benefits due to their past (Park n.p.). In *Titus Andronicus*, a woman is brutally raped and assaulted. While she avoids the disbelief that is faced by many survivors, her story lays the foundation for many of the impacts of rape culture. She was silenced physically and her future was taken from her by the men in her life. Rape culture enables those in power to poorly treat victims and then punish them for instances of promiscuity despite consent. Gender and power dynamics enable men to abuse and silence women, much like was done in *Titus Andronicus*.

Titus Andronicus begins with a political dispute over who has the right to be the emperor of Rome. Saturninus and Bassianus, both sons of the recently deceased emperor, believe they have a right to the position (1.1.19-22). Marcus Andronicus, the tribune, announces the peoples' favorite is Titus Andronicus, his brother (1.1.179-82). When Titus returned from war, he had captured Tamora, the queen of the goths, her three sons, and Aaron the Moor (1.1. stage direction). When Titus is told he was preferred to be emperor, he rejects the proposal and lends his support to Saturninus (1.1.225-28). Saturninus declares Lavinia, Titus' daughter, shall marry him; but Bassianus objects because he loves Lavinia (1.1.279). The discussion to determine who Lavinia shall marry emphasizes the silence of women in this military context since the ultimate

decision is dependent on the men involved. Saturninus changes his ambition then to marrying Tamora, freeing her and Aaron, her lover (1.1.321-26).

Aaron overhears Tamora's sons, Chiron and Demetrius, fighting over Lavinia and suggests that rather than bickering with each other, they should rape her (2.1.110-39). By encouraging sexual violence, Aaron embodies rape culture that leaves women voiceless. And yet, they not only rape Lavinia, they dismember her—cutting out her togue and her hands so they can enforce her silence (2.4.11-57). It is an act of inhuman barbarity, rendering Lavinia physically incapable of naming her rapists, paralleling the emotional inability many women have faced when it comes to speaking about their own sexual assault. Lavinia instantiates the emotional and psychological silencing that rape often invokes in women.

Titus is reunited with a disheveled and abused Lavinia (3.1.64). In addition to seeing his harmed daughter, Titus begged for his sons' freedom as they were framed for Bassianus' murder; Aaron claims the sons would be freed if Titus sends his severed hand to the emperor (3.1.152-58). While Titus does so, he is provided with the severed heads of his sons' rather than their lives (3.1.239-45).

The severe tragedies experienced begin to send Titus into a madness (4.1.19). While the trauma is widespread, the emotions of men are mostly shown while Lavinia, who arguably suffered the most, is unable to express how she feels.

In an attempt to seek justice for herself, Lavinia names her abusers by flipping through the pages of a book and landing on the story of Philomel (4.1.49-51). Philomela, in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, was the sister-in-law to Tereus, the king of Thrace. Tereus went to bring Philomela to Thrace to please his wife, but along their journey developed a lust for Philomela and raped her in the woods. When she threatened to expose his infidelity and sexual violence, he

cut her tongue out and left her alone in a cabin in the woods. Unable to speak, she wove her story into a tapestry for her sister to discover and seek vengeance ("Tereus" n.p.). The story of Philomela was reiterated through Lavinia and encompasses the theme of enforced silence as they were deliberately physically abused to limit their ability to share the injustices inflicted upon them.

Using her limited abilities, Lavinia grabs a stick and writes the names of Tamora's sons, officially implicating them of such a brutal crime (4.1.stage direction). Lavinia confronts Chiron and Demetrius, and kills them with the help of her father (5.2.169-210.). Titus invited Tamora and Saturninus over for a meal and tells the story of Virginius who killed his daughter to protect her from shame (5.3.34-39). Following the story, Titus stabs a veiled Lavinia, paralleling the story just told (5.3.stage direction.). In ending her life, Titus, drawing upon preexisting mythical stories, sets the stage for many generations to believe that punishing a woman for her rape should be acceptable as long as it is done under the guise of ending their suffering.

Titus then shares the crimes of Tamora's sons with her and claims that regardless of their terrible, they had been at the banquet all along as they were the meat in the pies everyone had been eating (5.3.61-64). To finish the cycle of "justice," Titus stabbed Tamora (5.3.stage direction). This resulted in Titus' demise by the hands of Saturninus, who was consequently killed by Lucius, Titus' son (5.3.stage directions).

Titus Andronicus is one of Shakespeare's most physically violent tragedies; from a father who descends into madness after the loss of his sons, to a war in Rome, to a brutal rape, to a final act with some of the most graphic deaths, the most profound tragedy is that experienced by Lavinia. To begin, she tried to be with Bassianus, the man she loved, only to witness his murder (2.3.116-17). Then she is raped. Her rape scene, however, is not explicitly described by

Shakespeare. The lack of description by Shakespeare enables directors to monopolize on the strategic opacity to adapt and imbue performances with deeper meanings. In Julie Taymor's 2000 film, *Titus*, Chiron holds back Lavinia and whispers in her ear that he and his brother "will enjoy that nice-preservèd honesty of yours" (2.3.134-35). To which Lavinia does not fight him verbally, but rather "appeals to Tamora as a woman: 'O Tamora, thou bearest a woman's face'" (Yoshino 212). Tamora, however, is the first to silence Lavinia in saying "I will not hear her speak. Away with her" (2.3.137). In many performances, Lavinia's rape is not explicitly shown on stage or screen; Tamora seals Lavinia's fate and condemns her to this brutal act by repeating the sentiment "therefore away with her, and use her as you will; The worse to her, the better loved of me" (2.3.166-67). Tamora's female consent to the rape only heightens the tragedy.

When discussing sexual violence, the topic of prevention always arises. But often these solutions are complex and focus more on the abusers rather than victims and the wider community. While Tamora was more than a simple bystander, she held the ability to actively make a difference and yet chose not to. For stopping such a heinous act would have deemed her a bad mother for not seeking revenge for her son that Titus killed and "rob[ing] [her] sweet sons of their fee" (2.3.179). Having previously examined allyship, women too need to make an active effort to support other women. But in this case, such support seems to be completely lacking as one woman subjects the other to sexual violence at the hands of her sons.

In the lead up to the rape, the language itself describes the social setting as women were discouraged from talking about such horrid acts. Emily Detmer-Goebel best describes this by noting that

> Lavinia refuses to name rape; she refers to an impending sexual assault as that which "womanhood denies my tongue to tell" and as a "worse-than-killing lust" (2.3.174, 175). Lavinia's chaste refusal to say the word "rape" reminds the audience that even to speak of rape brings a woman shame. As feminists have pointed out, an environment that makes it shameful to speak of rape disallows a critique of rape and the culture that sustains it. (Detmer-Goebel 75)

While Lavinia avoids using the word "rape," it legally and socially describes what was about to occur. The social pressures to avoid the crass-ness of the word is meant to appease and settle the audience. But in doing so, conversations about social taboos are avoided and ultimately have the potential to breed a culture where sexual violence is ignored.

Beyond the lead up and act of the rape, Lavinia is further silenced by Chiron and Demetrius. After her implied assault, the two men taunt Lavinia, furthering the emotional trauma she must face. In the Julie Taymor version, Lavinia is placed on a podium, symbolically representing her beauty before the attack, and is berated by Chiron and Demetrius shouting terrible things such as "she hath no tongue to call, nor hands to wash; And so let's leave her to her silent walks" (2.4.7-8). Such harsh calls serve as a form of verbal abuse that can remind her of all she has lost and what has been taken from her. In this version, Lavinia is not just stripped of her hands, but has them replaced by some sharp objects that appear to be sticks or twine that have been jammed into her open arm nub wounds (*Titus* 1:05:46). Such an image is not only heart wrenching, but provokes some thought as to the additional torture and abuse Lavinia had to endure for them to have done that to her. This act of violence resulted from her being assaulted and further silenced her physically.

This silencing continued as she was found by her uncle and presented to her father. She was unable to identify her abusers at the beginning. Such a heinous act left her in a "shameful" state, as is repeatedly mentioned. Ultimately, this state is what resulted in the final silencing of Lavinia. Her father killed her after seeking validation from Saturninus, a man who repeatedly has shown poor judgement throughout the play. The final words Lavinia hears are

> A pattern, precedent, and lively warrant
>
> For me, most wretched, to perform the like.
>
> Die, die, Lavinia, and thy shame with thee,
>
> And with thy shame thy father's sorrow die. (5.3.44-47)

By selecting the story of Virginius to follow as "precedent," Titus was somewhat solidified in his decision to kill Lavinia before this banquet began. It has been found that "Shakespeare scholars have noted too how the performance history of Titus Andronicus has overwhelmingly endorsed Lavinia's death; most directors are content to accept Titus's 'lively warrant' to 'perform the like'" (Howe 417) because "both the knowledge and resolution of her violation are enabled by classical allusions that allow Titus to contextualize murder as 'justice'" (Howe 417). Making the decision to kill Lavinia is the final act of silencing her. She was not given the opportunity to continue with her life and to heal. The sexual violence she endured served as a death sentence and forced her final moments to be filled with this social shame and physical torture. While death may have been a sympathetic choice and an escape from what she was experiencing, it was not a decision she made on her own and was something that once again was imposed upon her. Imposition seems to be the ultimate silencer in this play.

The only moment that served as a reprieve for Lavinia was the scene where she was able to identify her abusers. After being continuously silenced, this was an instance where she was

able to decide and act upon it herself. The way Lavinia handles the trauma of her rape is only lightly described by Shakespeare, and often focuses on her physical state. The emotional actions of Lavinia are mostly left up to the decision of the directors; such strategic opacity is how they can shift the perception of such heinous torture as something freeing for Lavinia in her mission for justice. In the Julie Taymor film, the leadup to the moment where she identifies her abusers is heartwarming as Lavinia, with her wooden hands, is finally able to be understood through a series of miming motions (*Titus* 1:31:32). This development allows her sorrows to be fully understood as is realized when Titus vocalizes her sadness by saying "I can interpret all her martyred signs. She says she drinks no other drink but tears brewed with her sorrow, mashed upon her cheeks" (3.2.36-38). Later, by frantically turning pages in a book with her wooden hands and her teeth, Lavinia is able to compare her experience with that of Philomel, a "tragic tale… of Tereus' treason and his rape" (4.1.49-50). She is able to explain without words to her father and uncle what occurred. While exposing her rape is one way in which Lavinia acts for herself and is able to regain her voice symbolically, her vocalization does not end there. She again fights for her own justice by naming her abusers and mustering the strength to use a stick in the sand (*Titus* 1:37:48). Lavinia is continuously silenced in this play by others making decisions for her; but in this scene, Lavinia makes all the decisions herself. She decides to speak her truth. She decides to name her abusers. And she decides to seek revenge. This one scene is the only moment of reprieve Lavinia gets from her silencing. But this too was short lived as her father killed her following the revenge.

Lavinia epitomizes enforced silence throughout this play. Her story is the most tragic because beyond the physical torture she endured, she was subjected to multiple degrees of psychological and verbal oppression that ultimately determined her future. Lavinia was given no

voice through the majority of the play. She was silenced by women and men alike, but the irony is her voice was truly shown when she was theoretically incapable of speaking. Lavinia's only moment where she gets the freedom to make a choice is when she is physically broken; but her mental fortitude persevered and brought her momentary freedom from carrying the weight of her story. However, this temporary freedom ultimately was not enough to completely save her from the enforced silence.

Lavinia's story represents that of many women participating in the #MeToo movement. For centuries, women have been socially silenced to avoid discussions surrounding sexual violence (Park n.p.); but now, women are making a proactive effort to resist this socially enforced silence, to speak out, and share their experiences in an attempt to find healing through solidarity. For Lavinia, sharing her story was not enough to ultimately save her from the social pressure her father felt he needed to save her from. The best way to counteract that is to continue to vocalize female needs and potential solutions to create social change, in a way Lavinia could not after seeking her justice.

Conclusion

I was a senior in high school during the Brent Kavanaugh hearings. At seventeen, I learned the critical lesson that victims of sexual violence face an uphill battle when it comes to seeking justice after sexual assault, especially when the men are white, powerful, and wealthy. Christine Blasey Ford accused Supreme Court Justice Kavanaugh of sexually assaulting her at a high school party (Anderson n.p.). As Ford publicly claimed Kavanaugh as her assaulter, she faced backlash through the entirety of her process for justice. When she testified as to her recollection of that night, I remember thinking how unfair this whole process had been for her. She recalled as many details as she could remember from 36 years prior (Edwards n.p.); having to relive such trauma is not uncommon for victims of sexual assault and can make the healing process more difficult (Wendler n.p.). The re-traumatization of victims is common when and if these individuals are even believed. From the moment a sexual assault victim shares their truth, they are doubted, minimized, re-traumatized, and excluded. It would make sense for large-scale accusations to have successful results at justice, but our social system failed Ford as Kavanaugh went on to become a Supreme Court Justice.

At the same time, I was watching these hearings, I was reading Shakespeare in high school. I remember thinking that the reading I was doing would not matter as much as things I was learning on the news because it was so outdated. But the more I read and sat with Shakespeare's words, the more I found parallels between the characters in his plays and the reality around me. I read about characters, mostly women, who were taken advantage of and given no lines. I began to wonder why nothing seemed to fundamentally change from the time these plays were written to the 21st-century. Most importantly, I began to consider how we could

teach these plays in a way that emphasized the modern need for concepts like feminism, consent, and allyship.

While there has not been a perfect solution yet, we can consider a few possibilities. One way we may begin reframing the way we learn about Shakespeare and healthy sexual relations in school is to stop teaching Shakespeare as we would other literature. He wrote plays that were meant to be performed; so, it would be better to teach them as such (Paquette 41). Topics like sexual violence may begin to absorb into the students' minds better if they could see the relationship between characters develop and go awry. Students may also fear misunderstanding the text due to the unfamiliarity of Shakespeare's early modern language choices. By teaching them strategies to understand the text, they will be better able to analyze passages and important moments they would have otherwise missed (Paquette 41-42). With a better understanding, these students should be able to examine the text from new perspectives, which is where teachers can intervene to enlighten them through a feminist lens. Teachers may also draw explicit connections to modern events for their students. By guiding young individuals into seeing connections, not only will appreciation for the work itself increase, but student passion and activism may rise as well serving as a preventative aspect to instances of sexual violence. By approaching Shakespeare in the context of #MeToo, allowing his strategic opacity to create space for the new language of allyship, assault, harassment, and enforced silence, Shakespeare's art will live into its abilities to adapt and embrace emerging cultural issues.

Many productions are implicitly doing just this. In 2019, *Romeo and Juliet* was adapted into a jukebox musical called *&Juliet* which takes on the classical play but adds a bit of a twist. Instead of both Romeo and Juliet dying in the end, the play explores the question: what if Juliet lived (& Juliet)? Not only does this play touch upon themes of female sexuality and coming of

age, but it brings in some of Shakespeare's personal history to emphasize feminine autonomy. In *&Juliet*, Shakespeare's wife, Anne Hathaway, plays a major role in leading the story and changing the plot. She is seen encouraging Juliet to explore the world and make different choices (*& Juliet*). Anne even takes Shakespeare's quill at one point, which at a surface-level demonstrates her taking over the story but may also symbolize one woman freeing another from the oppression of a man.

As I have traced in this project, the strategic opacity in Shakespeare's work allows for the modern social setting to influence portrayals of his place. But new educational approaches and theatrical portrayals of Shakespearean works can influence the way people see the world around them. The cyclical nature in which society feeds into art and vice versa allows for this field of research to go on infinitely. Using art as representative of society enables us to see where we are at in comparison to our goals. If we would like to become a society in which sexual violence is prevented, further research could be done to examine how instituting those values into art can shape our future society.

As the #MeToo movement has influenced the way we can view Shakespeare's work, Shakespeare lends something to the #MeToo movement as it provides a historical context for these "modern" approaches to sexual violence. Topics like allyship, victimization, gender dynamics, and silence are seemingly new in their rise with the #MeToo movement, and yet they were written and heavily formulated by Shakespeare. In gaining a deeper understanding of the way Shakespeare used these concepts, we can create a comparison to the way we view them now and discover the way social values have changed these concepts over time. This thesis attempts to start the conversation that would fill in that literary and historical gap through a performative lens.

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