

Contradictory Shakespeare:

An Investigation of Female Protagonists in *Othello*, *Measure for Measure*, and *Pericles*

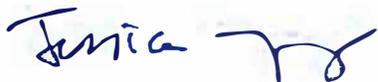
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## Abstract

Unlike the stereotyped image of women in the Elizabethan era, in which women should submit to men's control, Desdemona in *Othello*, Isabella in *Measure for Measure*, and Marina in *Pericles* present their powerful and brave characteristics when facing male dominance. More specifically, all three young women — Desdemona, Isabella and Marina — negotiate sexual and marital arrangements with their language intelligently, despite the fact that they sometimes lack self-determining power in the plays. That is to say, Shakespeare gives women rhetorical power while in certain circumstances, men cannot be persuaded. Such contradiction within how Shakespeare depicts his female figures leads to the question this thesis explores: whether Shakespeare's plays are pro-feminist or tools of patriarchal oppression. I would argue that he treats the three women in both advanced and patriarchal ways. Desdemona displays her autonomy on the matrimony; Isabella and Marina use silence to express their unwillingness to men's proposal. Instead of submissive behavior, kneeling for them is a measure to defend their reputation and rescue the life of others as well as themselves. On the other hand, Shakespeare weakens their rhetorical power when women face a man with desire for them, valuing men's honor more than women's honor. In his plays, the honor of women can be challenged in public while the honor of men is worthy of defending, even if at the cost of their life.

## 1. Introduction

“Beseeching you to give her princely training, / That she may be mannered as she is born.”

— Pericles in *Pericles* (3.3.19–20)

Pericles’s petition above is made to Cleon, who he hopes can bring up his daughter Marina. When Pericles voyages in the sea with his pregnant wife Thaisa, they encounter a fierce storm. At this critical time, Thaisa gives birth to Marina while herself remaining unconscious. Pericles thinks his wife has died. To prevent the ship from sinking, he puts Thaisa into a delicate coffin to reduce the weight, and has the coffin floated in the sea. After several days, their ship comes to an island called Tarsus, where Pericles is entertained hospitably by the governor Cleon and his wife Dionyza. Therefore, Pericles decides to temporarily stay in Tarsus for recovery. After one year, due to the political affairs of his own territory, he has to leave Tarsus for Tyre. Considering the fact that Marina is still too young, her body too weak to experience another voyage, Pericles determines to leave Marina in Tarsus, and beseeches Cleon to bring up her.

The word “princely” in Pericles’ request is striking. What makes an education princely? According to the *OED*, “princely” can apply to either a prince or a princess. Princely training means the very best training. In Shakespeare’s day, that would mean training in “letters” (4.Chorus.8): in rhetoric and literature. While such an education was usually reserved for boys, according to William Wotton’s book *Reflections upon ancient and modern learning*, written in 1694, training for the upper-class women in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries also included rhetorical skills, developed by reading Plato and Aristotle (350). Shakespeare thus arranges for Marina to receive the literary education (“letters”), which corresponds with the education that

many men and some upper-class women would receive in the Elizabethan era. And yet, Marina does not only learn letters. It is worth noting that, apart from literary education, Shakespeare also arranges for Marina to receive the education in “music” and feminine skills: to be more detailed, Marina not only knows “letters,” but can also “sing, weave, sew, and dance” (4.6.189). Thus, Shakespeare gives Marina both an education in rhetoric and an education in domestic affairs. The contradiction in Shakespeare here is that he not only expects Marina could receive the literary education which was often learnt by men in the sixteenth century, but also makes her learn the skills a housewife should master.

Further contradictions structure Shakespeare’s representation of Marina and other female characters. In several plays, he gives women rhetorical ability and stages them to persuade men with their language. Most of time, however, these women fail to move men. According to Wotton, “when learning first came up” on women, “men fansied that every thing could be done by it, and they were charmed with the Eloquence of its Professors” (349). Therefore, in the early sixteenth century, receiving literary education “was so very modish” for women and they believed reading Plato and Aristotle could become the “ornaments of their closets” (350). In other words, the reason why aristocratic women in this period were expected to learn classical grammar and language is that the society considered such learned education could give upper-class women charms to attract men. Nevertheless, in the case of Desdemona, Isabella and Marina, their eloquence is not meant primarily to attract male listeners, but to persuade them. The complexity here is that no matter how gifted women are with words, they face a built-in disadvantage, that the listener is hard to be moved.

Such contradictions in Shakespeare's portrayal of women raise the question of whether his plays can be said to anticipate feminist thought. On the one hand, he exhibits some advanced thoughts of women, which are totally contrary to what an ideal woman was supposed to be like according to traditional norms. As Lawrence Stone, Marianne Novy and other scholars have demonstrated, women in the Elizabethan era were expected to be chaste, silent and obedient. In contrast, women like Desdemona in *Othello*, Isabella in *Measure for Measure* and Marina in *Pericles* are eloquent and independent. On the other hand, Shakespeare still cannot really jump out of the conventional frame established by the patriarchal society. He gives the rhetorical power to women but makes men fail to be persuaded.

In this thesis, by analyzing language in three of Shakespeare's plays (*Othello*, *Measure for Measure*, and *Pericles*), I would like to argue that Shakespeare has both advanced and patriarchal thinking of women. In some aspects of his presentation of women, like the autonomy in matrimony, Shakespeare seems advanced; in others, however, his depiction of women is more traditional, for instance, eloquent women often fail to move men, and men's honor can be reserved well by the social conventions that male chastity and loyalty matter less than female chastity and fidelity. When it comes to women's honor, Desdemona in *Othello* fails to defend her honor of marital fidelity; in *Measure for Measure* and *Pericles*, Isabella's and Marina's honor of chastity is nearly violated but recovered soon, in which women's honor becomes a comic matter that enables happy endings.

## 2. Historical Context

To better understand Shakespeare's representation of eloquent women, it is necessary to investigate the historical context in which he wrote, especially in the matters of women's education and honor. In the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, the period in which Shakespeare wrote these three plays, the advent of Renaissance Humanists who advocated female classical education coincided with the rise of Protestants who denied the importance of learning for women in England (Stone 204). Two competing ideals of womanhood emerged: to be a well-trained noblewoman expert in classical grammar and language, or to be a docile housewife who knew few letters but had prime social graces such as music, painting, drawing, dancing and needlework. Perhaps influenced by the two different ideas of womanhood that appeared in the same period, Shakespeare draws on contradictory concepts of women. In *Pericles*, for instance, he not only confers "masculine" rhetorical skills on Marina, but also makes her receive a "feminine" education in singing, dancing and sewing.

Shakespeare's contradictory representation of women also extends into his perspective of the honor of men and women. By looking into what honor on earth represented for males and females in the sixteenth century, we can better perceive Shakespeare's unequal treatment on men's and women's honor. According to Stone, there were three highly prized values in sixteenth-century England: lineage, 'good lordship' and honor (90). Specifically, early modern English society had different definitions of "honor" for men and women. For an upper-class man, honor depended on the reliability of his spoken word (503), backed by "good lineage origins and good marriage connections" (90). For an upper-class woman, honor depended on the reputation of premarital chastity and marital fidelity (504). In my thesis, I employ this idea to argue that Shakespeare values men's honor more than women's honor. In *Othello*, Desdemona's eloquence

fails to defend her honor while the violation of Othello's honor can bring the play into tragedy. In other two plays, Isabella's and Marina's honor is nearly to be tarnished, while men who once intended to violate these women's honor can receive a happy ending. In fact, all three women are honorable — Desdemona is faithful to her husband Othello; Isabella and Marina remain chaste before marriage. But in all three cases, their honor is called into question publicly. Because of it, they suffer, especially Desdemona, who is smothered by Othello in the end.

### 3. Shakespeare's advanced thinking

#### 3.1 Choosing and resisting marriage

Desdemona, Isabella and Marina, all present their autonomy in matters of matrimony and the resistance to arranged marriage. Whereas in *Othello* Desdemona speaks out her matrimonial decision with rhetorical force, in *Measure for Measure* and *Pericles*, Isabella and Marina use silence to express their rejection of men's proposal.

Before Desdemona leaves with Othello for Cyprus island, in the public eye, she is an obedient woman. Her father Brabantio comments on his daughter, "A maiden never bold, / Of spirit so still and quiet that her motion / Blushed at herself" (1.3.94–95); the noble Venetian Lodovico warrants Desdemona, "Truly, an obedient lady" (4.1.239). Even Desdemona herself has lines in self-deprecation after the marriage: when perceiving a negative change in Othello's attitude due to her plea for Cassio, Desdemona says to him before leaving, "Whate'er you be, I am obedient" (3.3.90); when telling Othello's doubt about her fidelity to Lodovico, she shows her obedience to Othello by saying "I will not stay to offend you" (238). However, some of Des-

demonia's behavior and language demonstrates that she is disobedient in certain circumstances and dares to resist the patriarchy.

In a period when the marriage of children in propertied classes was mostly arranged by their parents (Stone 180), Desdemona has the courage to choose her spouse on the basis of romantic love, regardless of her father's opposition. At the beginning of *Othello*, Iago asks Roderigo, a suitor to Desdemona, to tell her father Brabantio that his daughter has married Othello. After hearing the news, Brabantio gets furious with Othello and confronts him in front of the Duke. He believes Othello has lured his daughter with witchcraft, and asks Desdemona to tell him "Where most you owe obedience" (1.3.179). She answers:

My noble father,  
I do perceive here a divided duty.  
To you I am bound for life and education;  
My life and education both do learn me  
How to respect you: you are the lord of duty,  
I am hitherto your daughter. But here's my husband;  
And so much duty as my mother showed  
To you, preferring you before her father,  
So much I challenge that I may profess  
Due to the Moor my lord. (1.3.180–88)

In this speech, it is noticeable that Desdemona starts with "My noble father" and ends with "the Moor my lord." She shows respect for her father Brabantio by saying "My noble father" at first and then presents her final option is to leave with Othello for the island of Cyprus by saying "the Moor my lord". Although the former part of the speech is full of Desdemona's gratitude for Brabantio's upbringing, it actually lays the foundation for her following resistance. By starting with "but," Desdemona begins to show her tough attitude. In addition to comparing her mother's submissive relationship with Brabantio to herself with Othello, she is also claiming for the same

amount of duty to Othello as her mother shows to Barabantio. In the line “So much I challenge that I may profess”, the word “challenge” carries the meaning of demanding something as a right (*OED*). Therefore, under the mask of politeness, Desdemona is asserting her claim to follow her husband.

Desdemona’s firm response above leads to her second performance of disobedience, that she is brave about speaking out her own thoughts and making a request. In terms of the disposition of Desdemona after the Duke asks Othello to combat Turks, Desdemona tells the Duke she hopes to leave with her husband together and pleads, “let me find a charter in your voice” (1.3.243). Here, the word “charter” means to receive sanction. Then, Desdemona uses “let me” to straightforwardly ask for permission from the Duke. Later, while explaining more about her willing to go with Othello, she ends with the phrase “let me” again, “Let me go with him” (257).

In addition to the insistence on departure with Othello, the scene where Desdemona confronts Othello regarding Cassio can also display she takes advantage of the rhetorical power to present her firm attitude. Owing to the involvement in a drunk brawl on Cyprus, Cassio is removed from his position of lieutenant. In Desdemona’s eyes, Cassio is such a loyal and kind person who has mediated a settlement between Othello and her many times. Therefore, when Cassio comes to request her assistance, she agrees. During her negotiation with Othello, Desdemona tries to remind Othello of Cassio’s goodness, “Michael Cassio, / That came a-wooing with you, and so many a time, / When I have spoke of you dispraisingly, / Hath ta’en your part” (3.3.71–74). Here, Desdemona calls Cassio the full name “Michael Cassio” to stress the seriousness of her speech. Further, she strikes a tough tone to question Othello, “When shall he come? / Tell me,

Othello!” (68–69). It is noticeable that Desdemona here not only uses the imperative sentence “Tell me”, but also ends with the exclamation mark. Due to Othello’s hesitation in calling Cassio back, Desdemona here expresses the strong disagreement with his indecision.

Confronted by her question, Othello replies, “Prithee no more: let him come when he will— / I will deny thee nothing” (75–76). It seems that Othello has no choice but to give in. Desdemona’s following speech indicates she feels unsatisfied with this respond. Though Othello gives consent with words “let him come”, the line “Prithee no more” indicates that his compromise is full of great reluctance. In Desdemona’s mind, calling Cassio back is something beneficial to Othello, “a peculiar profit” (3.3.80) to himself, which should receive consent easily and quickly, not “full of poise and difficult weight, / And fearful to be granted” (83–84). Later in the play, faced with Othello’s suspicion of her unfaithfulness, along with his penetrating accusation “Heaven truly knows that thou art false as hell” (4.2.39), Desdemona “rises” and asks indignant questions, “To whom, my lord? With whom? How am I false?” (40). Either her behavior of rising or a series of rhetorical questions can show Desdemona’s defense for her reputation and the courage to confront a man in power without fear.

In a nutshell, Desdemona’s daring to pursue her true love and the bravery to make a request for Cassio’s reinstatement have portrayed a powerful and insubordinate woman, which is totally contrary to the “obedient” image in other characters’ mouth. Having the awareness to arrange marriage on her own can be regarded as an advanced behavior of women in the sixteenth century.

Like Desdemona, both Isabella in *Measure for Measure* and Marina in *Pericles* resist the marriages arranged by their parents or by men in power, but instead of mounting their resistance

through speech, these two women do so with silence. It is unusual for a rhetorically gifted woman to become silent. Once they refuse to voice their opinions, silence can be a powerful weapon to show their desire for self-determination. Both Isabella and Marina lack the answer to their appointed marriage, which can be understood as a form of silence. Nonetheless, their lack of response cannot prove their consent, and rather, could be viewed as a clever evasion implying rejection.

Near the end of *Measure for Measure*, the Duke proposes to Isabella twice, neither of which receives her response. In terms of an event that should have been important in her life, Isabella has no words to talk about it. Based on her earlier debates with Angelo and the Duke, we know by this point in the play that Isabella is very eloquent and full of autonomy. At her second meeting with Angelo, for instance, she endows a negative word with positive meaning during their controversy about the frailty of men and women. As Angelo criticizes Isabella for regarding her brother's crime of fornication as "a merriment" not "a vice" (2.4.124), Isabella asks his pardon and argues that since humans are inherent in "weakness" (133), it will not be his fault if he could spare Claudio. Angelo stresses at once that not only men but women are also frail, "Nay, women are frail too" (134). Isabella contradicts his statement, replying, "Nay, call us ten times frail, / For we are soft as our complexions are, / And credulous to false prints" (139–40). Here, it seems that by saying "call us ten times frail," Isabella admits women's fragility, but the phrase "ten times" actually adds irony to her speech. By stating "we are soft as our complexions are", Isabella ingeniously substitutes the negative word "frail" with more positive words "soft" and "complexions", indicating women are intrinsically kind with good quality. "False prints" implies her allegation for Angelo's evil intention. The word "credulous" shows the innocence of women

under the foil of men's "false prints". Therefore, Isabella in this moment compliments women on their kindness and soft heart, while at the same time reproaching Angelo for his improper sexual desire for her.

Moreover, Isabella shows her rhetorical power when accusing Angelo of his desire for her in front of the Duke. At the beginning of the fifth act, as the Duke comes back to govern Vienna, Isabella charges Angelo with his stain on her chastity, repeating her request of "justice" (5.1.27). After her long passages of allegation, Angelo replies "And she will speak most bitterly and strange" (41), which makes him seem like a director, who wants to manipulate Isabella's words. He tries to plant an interpretation in his audience's mind: what Isabella will say later may be bitter and strange, please don't believe her. Nevertheless, Isabella in the following speech appears to follow Angelo's script but actually takes his sharp words as a weapon to attack him, at the same time defending herself. She asks a series of rhetorical questions:

Most strange, but yet most truly will I speak.  
That Angelo's forsworn, is it not strange?  
That Angelo's a murderer, isn't not strange?  
That Angelo is an adulterous thief,  
An hypocrite a virgin-violator,  
Is it not strange, and strange? (5.1.42–48).

Isabella uses the word "strange" that would have described her to describe Angelo, with a list of his guilt — "forsworn", "murderer", "adulterous thief", "hypocrite" and "virgin-violator". The strange part Isabella implies is that as a just person in the public's eyes, it is also possible for Angelo to be an "archvillain", despite his "dressings, caracts, titles, forms" (64–65).

Thence, as a rhetorically gifted woman, why does Isabella suddenly lose her rhetorical ability when facing the Duke's proposal? Why doesn't she directly express her thoughts but

chooses silence? One reason is that she does not want to disappoint and infuriate the Duke. A person with great power can determine not only her destiny but also her brother Claudio's. In the first proposal scene, when the Provost comes to say there is a prisoner he saved looking like her brother Claudio, the Duke turns to Isabella, revealing his heart, "If he be like your brother, for his sake / Is he pardoned; and for your lovely sake, / Give me your hand and say you will be mine, / He is my brother too" (5.1.562–65). In the second proposal scene, also the ending of the play, after arranging a marriage for Claudio and his fiancée Juliet, the Duke discloses his heart to Isabella again, "What's mine is yours, and what is yours is mine" (611). Especially in the first proposal scene, the time the Duke proposes to Isabella is very delicate, when the Provost comes to give Isabella a hope that her brother may be still alive.

Isabella's main goal is to plead for Claudio. It is not until the Provost comes to see the Duke that Isabella realizes her brother may survive the decapitation. If she speaks out her rejection directly, the Duke may feel embarrassed and then it is very possible for him to change his mind, to give the Provost a hint that Claudio must die by saying the prisoner he saved is not Claudio at all. The other reason is that as a novice in probation, Isabella may have excluded the marriage from her life plan. Isabella's first line in *Measure for Measure* talks about the privileges of nuns with a votarist Francisca, expressing she wishes "a more strict restraint" (1.4.4). It indicates Isabella disciplines herself well and more important, she values her chastity. The regulation of a church made for nuns usually focuses on the gender segregation, as Francisca points out, "When you have vowed, you must not speak with men / But in the presence of the Prioress. / Then, if you speak, you must not show your face; / Or if you show your face, you must not

speak” (11–14). Thereby, facing Duke’s proposal, she doesn’t know how to reply. For Isabella at this very moment, silence may be the most appropriate measure she can come up with.

Like Isabella, in *Pericles*, Marina remains silent three times regarding her marriage. When the governor of Mytilene, Lysimachus, tells to one lord of Tyre, Helicanus, about Marina’s possibility to help Pericles recover from sorrow, he first conveys his wish to marry Marina: “She’s such a one that, were I well assured / Came of a gentle kind and noble stock, / I’d wish no better choice, and think me rarely wed” (5.1.75–77). Here, the word “wed” means to marry, indicating Lysimachus wants to take Marina as his wife. Except for this, Shakespeare also applies subjunctive mood to the line “were I well assured” to suggest in Lysimachus’s mind, the prerequisite of his marriage with Marina is that she be a noble woman with substantial assets, “a gentle kind and noble stock.” Faced with his hinds of love, Marina has no response, jumping to the topic of how to use her skill in Pericles’s recovery. After that, as Marina’s royal identity gets confirmed and it is revealed that she is the daughter of Pericles, Lysimachus mentions his request of marrying Marina for a second time to Pericles, “I have another suit” (296). Pericles’s answer indicates Lysimachus’s “suit” is to wed Marina, “You shall prevail / Were it to woo my daughter, for it seems / You have been noble towards her” (297–99). Here, the word “prevail” means to be successful (*OED*), denoting Pericles’ promise that Lysimachus will succeed in courting Marina.

One thing should be noted that, before Lysimachus implies to Pericles he wants to wed Marina, the stage direction says “Enter Helicanus, Lysimachus, Marina, and Attendants”. This indicates when Lysimachus speaks his wish and Pericles expresses his approval of the marriage, Marina is present. However, there are no lines for her. In face of the matter about her marriage, she remains silent again. Last but not least, after reunion with his wife Thaisa, Pericles talks to

her about Marina's matrimony, acknowledging Lysimachus as a "fair betrothed" of Marina (5.3.85). Even more, he has decided to hold his daughter's wedding at Pentapolis (86), where Thaisa got wed to him. Till the last line of his penultimate speech in the play, Pericles suddenly switches his speaking object from Thaisa to Marina, "To grace thy marriage day I'll beautify" (90). To "beautify" here means to "clip to form" (87) his hair and beard, for he has not shaved and got a haircut for fourteen years since he left his daughter. Though there is no stage direction showing the line is spoken to Marina, it can be inferred that "thy marriage" implies "Marina's marriage". Thus, at this moment, Pericles is speaking this line specifically to Marina, but the same as before, receives no answer. Instead, Thaisa has her lines immediately after Pericles's speech. However, what Thaisa says has nothing to do with Marina's marriage, but concerning the death of her father, "Lord Cerimon hath letters of good credit, sir, / My father's dead" (91-92).

Isn't it strange that the last second Pericles is speaking about the marriage of his daughter with pleasure, and the next second Thaisa changes the joyful tone of the dialogue with Pericles into a lugubrious tone? Thaisa's lack of response to Marina's marriage, and changing the topic of their conversation to her father's death displays she is unwilling to marry out her daughter right now. After all, they just reunited for a short time. It is too cruel for a family which has been departed for a long time to separate again. As a priest with motherhood, Thaisa is loath to part from her daughter with whom she had lost contact for around fourteen years.

Further, Pericles's reaction to the news about the death of Thaisa's father is more worth pondering. After Thaisa mentions the death of her father, he only uses six words to express his sympathy, "Heavens make a star of him!" (5.3.93), and then goes back to the topic of Marina's

marriage again. In his last speech of the play, besides the subject of the wedding between Lysimachus and Marina, Pericles even has drawn a blueprint regarding his future with Thaisa after abdicating the throne, “We’ll celebrate their nuptials, and ourselves / Will in that kingdom spend our following days. / Our son and daughter shall in Tyrus reign” (94–96). His daughter has not yet been married now while Pericles has begun to call Lysimachus his “son” and decides the area Lysimachus will rule, “in Tyrus reign”. Overall, upon the regathering with his family, Pericles appears to be too eager to arrange the matrimony of his daughter. Pericles’s behavior of keeping talking of his own accord makes his speech seem like a monologue. Some critics view Pericles’s unusual zeal to marry his daughter as an escape to avoid himself falling into Antiochus’s precedent for father-daughter incest. Earlier in the play, Antioch, the king of Antioch, asks the suitors of his daughter to solve a riddle correctly, which is a requisite for his agreement on the marriage. Pericles finds out the right answer is that Antioch has an incestuous relationship with his daughter. For it, Pericles chooses not to reveal the truth. Jeanie Grant Moore argues in her article “Riddled Romance: Kinship and Kinship in ‘Pericles’”, during the process of resolving the riddle concerning the adulterous relationship between Antiochus and his daughter, Pericles also discovers his own internal conflict, the desire for father-daughter incest (35). On account of the fear to fall in the incestuous relationship with Marina, Pericles cannot wait to marry his daughter to Lysimachus.

No matter what the reason of Pericles’s strange behavior is, coincidentally, if leaving out the epilogue part of Gower in *Pericles*, both *Measure for Measure* and *Pericles* end with the arranged marriage of the two female protagonists: the Duke proposes to Isabella; Pericles promises Marina in marriage to Lysimachus. To be more accurate, both *Measure for Measure*

and *Pericles* end with Isabella's and Marina's lack of response to their appointed marriage. On the one hand, as Moore points out, Shakespeare writes such an ending because he has to satisfy the comedy convention "of marriage and the promise of rebirth through future children" (41). If Isabella and Marina directly speak out their refusal, it will bring some tragical elements to the plays. Instead, silence seems to be more neutral and tactful. On the other hand, Shakespeare intentionally arranges them to use silence in response to the discussions of wedlock, which aims to leave readers in suspense, and calls the audience's attention to the two women's attitude to their marriage. Their silence does not mean obedience but indicates their reluctance and opposition. Moreover, even if they get married, the rhetorical power of Isabella and Marina never leaves them. Their probable "husbands", the Duke and Lysimachus, have betrothed themselves to a woman fully capable of arguing them under the table (Williams, "Papa Don't Preach: The Power of Prolixity in *Pericles*", 599).

Remarkably, two of the major sources on which *Pericles* was based, the third-century *Historia Apollonii* and John Gower's fourteenth-century *Confessio Amantis*, both include the scene in which Thaisa (Marina in *Pericles*) gets married with the prince (Lysimachus in *Pericles*). However, Shakespeare does not mention if Marina accepts the marriage with Lysimachus in his play, which makes his advanced thinking in female matrimony more obvious.

Desdemona dares to marry Othello without informing her father, and is brave to speak out her willing before the Duke to leave with Othello; Isabella and Marina remain silent when facing the proposal from men in power. The three women's attitude to their marriage displays Shakespeare's progressive idea that women should make their own marriage choices, which is incompatible with the traditional concept in the sixteenth century. By depicting the three

women's not following parental requirement and not obeying the powerful men's command, Shakespeare demonstrates his awareness of the patriarchy that dominates the society. He also has the awareness to resist the society controlled by males, giving a degree of autonomy to women when it comes to marriage.

### 3.2 The power of kneeling

Like silence, kneeling may seem like submissive behavior. Nevertheless, once we put this behavior into context, it can become a display of agency. Desdemona, Isabella and Marina, all kneel in the plays. However, their kneeling does not indicate submission, but a way to fight for their destiny in the patriarchal society, to ask for justice, to defend their valuable reputations.

Desdemona kneels twice, once to defend her reputation for faithfulness to her husband, the other to make an oath to God. When Othello sees the handkerchief that he gave to Desdemona but now in Cassio's mistress Bianca's hand, he regards the handkerchief as the evidence to prove Desdemona's cheating on him with Cassio. Then, in 4.2, after asking Desdemona's waiting-woman, Emilia, several questions regarding the fidelity of his wife, Othello asks Emilia to bring Desdemona to him. Finding Othello's skepticism becoming deeper and deeper, Desdemona perceives that the problem has worsened. As Desdemona comes with Emilia at his request, Othello first commands Emilia to leave and "shut the door" (4.2.28), which deepens Desdemona's fear. Then, upon Emilia's leaving, she kneels, "Upon my knee, what doth your speech import? / I understand a fury in your words, / But not the words" (31-33). Desdemona knows her supposed unfaithfulness has violated Othello's honor. Having felt the fury in Othello's words, Desdemona understands that if she does not do anything to retrieve his trust, there would be something terri-

ble waiting for her. After all, expect for her husband, she is isolated in Cyprus. Even if she also talks to Emilia, Cassio and even Iago about her conflict with Othello, they do not have as much power as Othello has over her. Therefore, Desdemona cannot rely on the three to help her mitigate the conflict. Before going with Othello, her father Brabantio has expressed he will not accommodate Desdemona in Venice, "I'll not have it so" (1.3.239), that is, Desdemona cannot return her parents' home to seek comfort when encountering grievances. After she arrives at Cyprus, the closest person to her is Emilia, while Emilia actually obeys her husband Iago and steals the decisive evidence (the handkerchief) at Iago's request, as she states, "I nothing, but to please his fantasy" (3.3.301). Without knowing Iago's evil intent, Emilia has become an accomplice in Desdemona's death.

Besides, although Desdemona's relative Lodovico comes to Cyprus after the couple's quarrel over the handkerchief, Lodovico focuses on discussing the political affairs with Othello, totally ignoring Desdemona's speech about her grievances. Even when he later sees Othello strike Desdemona, Lodovico just reacts to his behavior in a perfunctory tone, "I do beseech you, sir, trouble yourself no further" (4.3.1), without any actual action to solve their conflict. Desdemona must have known the relative cannot help her, so at the second meeting with Lodovico, she sees him off with super-politeness, "Your honor is most welcome" (4), instead of the initial appellation for Lodovico "good cousin" (4.1.213) at their first meeting. From "good cousin" to "your honor", from the close title to the distant title, Desdemona's emotion also changes from excitement to disappointment. Coming to an unknown island alone, accompanied only by a maid Emilia, Desdemona has no-one to depend on, expect for her husband. Unfortunately, Othello has begun to suspect her loyalty. From this moment, she falls into helpless situation and becomes

really alone. The arrival of Lodovico lights her fire of hope, who is her only relative in the island. She expects that he could resolve the misunderstanding between Othello and her, yet his following behavior discourages her.

Take a broad view of the situation. Emilia is only a gentlewoman with little power who waits on Desdemona, Lodovico does not show any enthusiasm for helping her, and her husband Othello seems to be going to forsake her. Therefore, Desdemona kneels for the first time in front of her husband, trying to regain the trust of her only closest companion in Cyprus — Othello, who, far away from the Duke in this island, can control her destiny.

After the meeting with Othello, Iago comes to see Desdemona. In this scene, she kneels for a second time, not at Iago's feet, but "by this light of heaven" (4.2.150). Desdemona kneels and swears to God:

Here I kneel:  
 If e'er my will did trespass 'gainst his love,  
 Either in discourse, or thought, or actual deed,  
 .....  
 Comfort forswear me! (4.2.151–59).

By kneeling, she is making an oath, a way of underscoring and guaranteeing her words, a way of calling the divine to witness Othello and her. She kneels for a second time before the gods witnessed by Iago, an ensign who currently has gained Othello's most confidence. She is trying to arouse his sympathy, meanwhile, showing her devotion to God. Hence, Desdemona's kneeling cannot be considered as a submissive behavior, but a defense for her fidelity. In despair, Desdemona pins her hope on kneeling which she thinks would change Othello's mind and help her escape death.

Like Desdemona, Isabella also kneels twice. The difference is that before the last act where Isabella kneels in front of the Duke, in the earlier acts, Lucio, as Claudio's friend, has suggested twice she should kneel before Angelo. Although there is no specific stage direction to indicate Isabella "kneels" down, some directors do ask the actress to kneel before Angelo. Even if Isabella takes Lucio's advice and kneels, given her following reaction to his suggestion, she is not a woman who only knows to follow others' words, but has her own mind.

The first time Lucio advises Isabella to kneel takes place after Claudio asks him to persuade Isabella into helping him out. Near the end of the first encounter between Isabella and Lucio, Isabella doubts if she has the power to save Claudio, Lucio saying:

Our doubts are traitors  
And makes us lose the good we oft might win  
By fearing to attempt. Go to Lord Angelo  
And let him learn to know, when maidens sue  
Men give like gods; but when they weep and kneel,  
All their petitions are as freely theirs  
As they themselves would owe them. (1.4.85–91).

Here, Lucio indicates Isabella could evoke Angelo's sympathy by weeping and kneeling. By replying "I'll see what I can do" (92), Isabella implies she will use her own discretion.

The second time Lucio asks Isabella to kneel down happens at the beginning of the first Angelo-Isabella encounter. Finding Isabella's pleas too cold, Lucio takes Isabella's aside, saying, "Give 't not o'er so. To him again, entreat him, / Kneel down before him, hang upon his gown. / You are too cold" (2.2.60–62). Notwithstanding, after Lucio's such speech, instead of speaking some softer words, Isabella makes a request to Angelo with the modal auxiliary "must", "Must he needs die?" (65). Thus, no matter whether or not Isabella kneels at Lucio's request, she has shown the strong personal autonomy. Unlike the vague description of if Isabella kneels before

Angelo, there is specific stage direction in the last act to show Isabella does kneel twice in front of the Duke. Even so, her aim is not to cater to or please men, but to defend her chastity and to sincerely supplicate for the life of Claudio.

When it comes to what accounts for Isabella's first act of kneeling before the Duke, it is necessary to put her behavior into context. Upon leading Isabella to see the Duke, Friar Peter commands, "Now is your time. Speak loud, and kneel before him" (5.1.21). Following Friar Peter's words, she kneels. Therefore, here comes a question: why does Isabella with independent thoughts listen to Friar Peter's command and kneel down immediately? I will demonstrate it from two speeches of the Duke. In 4.3, the Duke (as Friar Lodowick) tells Isabella the information of his return, "The Duke comes home tomorrow—nay, dry your eyes. / One of our convent, and his confessor, / Gives me this instance" (139–40). Soon, he reveals to her that the "confessor" who told him the information is Friar Peter, "This letter, then, to Friar Peter give. / 'Tis that he sent me of the Duke's return" (150-51). For one thing, when the Duke disguises himself as a Friar, taking into consideration the same religious belief they have and the same church they serve at, Isabella naturally believes the Duke's words. Hence, Isabella does not doubt the truth of the Duke's statement regarding Friar Peter. For another thing, till that time, no one knows when the Duke will come back. A person who can know such a secret information of the Duke's return date must be very close to the Duke, have gained most confidence of the Duke, and know the Duke's habits very well. Due to the two reasons, Isabella fully trusts Friar Peter, thinking whatever he lets her do will be beneficial to make the Duke help her uphold justice. Thereby, as Friar Peter advises her to kneel before the Duke, she kneels down without hesitancy.

Besides the trust of Friar Peter, Isabella's desperate situation at that time results in her first kneeling as well. The reason I use "despair" to describe Isabella's first kneeling scene comes from the Duke's another speech. In the second Isabella-Angelo meeting scene, by saying "Now took your brother's life, [or] to redeem him, / Give up your body to such sweet uncleanness" (2.4.55–56), Angelo has made it clear that Isabella's chastity can redeem Claudio's life. Therefore, according to the bed-trick the Duke (as Friar) put forward, when Angelo's former fiancée, Mariana, fulfills the sexual appointment in substitute for her, Isabella would have considered Angelo had kept his word and released her brother. However, out of her expectation, Angelo still issues the order to the Provost, "Whatsoever you may hear to the contrary, let Claudio / be executed by four of the clock" (4.2.132–33), and "let me have / Claudio's head sent me by five" (134–35). If the Duke were not present when the order is issued, Claudio must have been decapitated. Fortunately, as knowing the news, the Duke comes up with an idea that can save Claudio's life, in which another prisoner's head will be sent to Angelo disguised as Claudio's. While the Duke decides not to tell Isabella her brother is still alive, his speech to himself can present that because of failing to save Claudio, Isabella will be in despair:

The tongue of Isabel. She's come to know  
 If yet her brother's pardon be come hither.  
 But I will keep her ignorant of her good  
 To make her heavenly comforts of despair  
 When it is least expected. (4.3.115–19).

Here, the Duke uses the word "despair" to indicate Claudio's death will put Isabella in the depths of despair. Vice versa, once she knows her brother is still alive, it will turn her despair into "heavenly comforts".

During the conversation with Isabella, in addition to the fake news of Claudio's death, the Duke (as Friar) also discloses the following information to Isabella, that when the Duke returns home tomorrow, he will carry "Notice to Escalus and Angelo, / Who do prepare to meet him at the gates, / There to give up their power" (4.3.141–43). It is noteworthy that the Duke not only informs Isabella of his return, but also mentions the deputy Angelo will give up his power at that time. Shakespeare here deliberately adding the line "There to give up their power" to this speech, is to suggest Angelo's power will be weakened once the Duke comes back. In other words, Shakespeare is dropping a hint to Isabella that it is very possible for the Duke, who has more power than Angelo, to take vengeance on Angelo for her. After all, when the Duke returns, Angelo will give back his current power and be in the Duke's control. Therefore, when the Duke who holds the greatest power in Vienna is standing in front of her, Isabella follows the command of Friar Peter and kneels down. She knows the man (the Duke) is her last hope, her last opportunity to ask justice for her "violated" chastity and the "death" of her brother. For this purpose, in such a desperate situation, the drowning woman Isabella tries to clutch at her last straw, the Duke.

It appears that Isabella kneels for the second time at Mariana's request. As the Duke pronounces the death judgement on Angelo, Mariana, whom the Duke just married to Angelo, asks Isabella twice to kneel and plead for her husband, with lines such as "Lend me your knees" (5.1.494) and "O Isabel, will you not lend a knee?" (506). Mariana has ever sacrificed her virginal body to protect Isabella's chastity. For it, Isabella kneels to show her gratitude for Mariana's aid. On the other hand, since both are women, Isabella understands what malicious rumors a non-virgin will face before her marriage. Mariana needs Angelo to give her a home, to lean on.

However, Isabella's second kneeling is not only for Mariana's sake, but also for Angelo's justice and due to her mercy on him. While kneeling in front of the Duke, Isabella says:

Most bounteous sir,  
 Look, if it please you, on this man condemned  
 As if my brother lived. I partly think  
 A due sincerity governed his deeds  
 Till he did look on me. Since it is so,  
 Let him not die. My brother had but justice,  
 In that he did the thing for which he died.  
 For Angelo,  
 His act did not o'ertake his bad intent,  
 And must be buried but as an intent  
 That perished by the way. Thoughts are no subjects,  
 Intent but merely thoughts. (5.1.508–19).

The line “My brother had but justice” indicates in Isabella's mind, Claudio has received the justice. As Isabella states, “he did the thing for which he died”. Claudio has gotten his fiancée Juliet with a child before their marriage. According to Stone, in the sixteenth century, “apart from buggering and bestiality, which carried the death penalty, the one crime that was severely punished was not irregular sex itself, but its consequence.” (520) — the production of a bastard child. By the strict laws in the play's version of Vienna, Claudio should die for the bastard child after his fornication with Juliet. At this moment, Isabella believes her brother has died, the “justice” he deserves. Since the person Angelo really has sex with is Mariana, he only has the “intent” to seize Isabella's chastity, which has not been put into practice yet. For it, Isabella also hopes Angelo could receive justice. For Angelo, “justice” means “life”. The only crime he conducts is the fornication with Mariana, without the production of a bastard child. For it, Angelo should live, not sentenced to death.

Due to her sympathy for Mariana and desire for showing mercy to Angelo, Isabella kneels. Her second kneeling also coincidentally corresponds to the Duke's thought of "pardon for pardon, death for death", which is displayed by the Duke's speech before Isabella's second kneeling scene. After marrying Mariana to Angelo, he says, "'An Angelo for Claudio, death for death.' / Haste still pays haste, and leisure answers leisure; / Like doth quit like, and measure still for / measure. —"(5.1.465–68). In this speech, the Duke interprets "Measure for Measure" as "An Angelo for Claudio, death for death". The under-meaning is that Claudio's life is closely connected with Angelo's life. Pardoning Angelo is pardoning Claudio. Moreover, a second before Isabella's kneeling, the Duke repeats the idea of "death for death" again: "He dies for Claudio's death" (507). In view of this, the Duke's emphasis on "death for death" can also be understood as "life for life".

The instant Isabella kneels and pleads for Angelo, the Duke questions the Provost why Claudio's head is not sent to the court on time: "Your suit's unprofitable. Stand up, I say. / I have bethought me of another fault.— / Provost, how came it Claudio was beheaded / At an unusual hour?" (5.1.521–24). Isn't it strange that he suddenly changes the speaking subject from Isabella to the Provost? This plot design can indicate on account of Isabella's kneeling and petition, the Duke intends to reveal the fact that her brother is still alive. When disguised as a Friar, the Duke has told the Provost his plan that Claudio's life will be saved by sending another prisoner's head to Angelo. Plus, before Isabella kneels, the Duke has told to all characters that he ever disguised himself as a Friar. Thence, the Provost knows the Duke is the Friar who put forward the stratagem of head exchange. He responds to the Duke as scheduled, "This is another prisoner that I saved / Who should have died when Claudio lost his head, / As like almost to Claudio as him-

self” (5.1.559–61). After the Provost's speech, the Duke turns to Isabella, “If he be like your brother, for his sake / Is he pardoned” (562–63). At the end of the play, the truth that Claudio is still alive has come out. It can prove that the Duke indeed fulfills his promise that if Isabella will pardon Angelo, her brother will not die for Angelo’s death.

Overall, Isabella’s kneeling is her earnest plea for Claudio and Angelo, a behavior to defend for her chastity and other people’s life. Such supplication shows her mercy and sincerity. Consider the two women’s reasons for kneeling. Desdemona kneels to defend her fidelity and to save her life; Isabella kneels to ask justice for the supposed violation of her chastity, and to save Angelo's life. In this way, their kneeling does not mean the compliance but a defense for their reputation, for the life of themselves and others.

By contrast to Desdemona and Isabella, Marina only kneels once, not before men, but before a woman. In the denouement of *Pericles*, after Marina’s identity as a princess gets confirmed, her father Pericles leaves for the temple at Ephesus with her, to make sacrifice for the incoming marriage between Lysimachus and Marina. In the temple, they are reunited with Thaisa. When Pericles embraces his wife with great excitement, Marina kneels, saying, “My heart / Leaps to be gone into my mother’s bosom” (5.3.52–53).

Compared to the reunion with her mother, in the reunion scene with her father, Marina does not kneel. After finding not only does Marina’s life story have many similarities with his daughter’s but she also says her father is King Pericles, Pericles nearly believes Marina is his daughter. To confirm his supposition, Pericles asks Marina to tell him her mother's name. However, Marina does not reply to his question instantly. Instead, she questions him, “First, sir, I pray, what is your title?” (5.1.237). Contrary to Pericles’s excitement, Marina seems to be very

calm. Her question also calms Pericles's excitement down. Nonetheless, in the reunion scene with her mother, Thaisa also does not speak out the name of herself while Marina is assured that Thaisa is her mother and kneels down. As a girl who has never seen her parents since she was born, Marina recognizes the woman who she has just met is her mother, while cannot be sure Pericles is her father. The time Marina converses with Pericles is even longer than that with Thaisa. From this contrast, Shakespeare displays the natural familiarity between a mother and a daughter. Meanwhile, Marina's kneeling before Thaisa not Pericles can indicate Shakespeare is lowering the position of patriarchy and raising the position of matriarch.

One thing needs to be explained that in the reunion scene between Marina and Pericles, after Marina speaks out her mother's name, Pericles finally becomes convinced of her identity, saying, "Now, blessing on thee! RISE. Thou'rt my child. — " (5.1.246). Here, Pericles asking Marina to rise does not mean Marina kneeled just now. In fact, when in the earlier time Marina began to tell the story of her life, Pericles asked her to sit by him (162). There is a stage direction to present as well that Marina "sits". Therefore, the word "rise" is to ask Marina to stand up from the seat. Soon, in the same speech of "rise", Pericles says, "She shall tell thee all, / When thou shalt kneel, and justify in knowledge / She is thy very princess." (249–51). In this speech, the word "kneel" should not be spoken to Marina. Given that following this speech it is Helicanus who answers Pericles, the first person pronoun "thou" could be Helicanus. The third person pronoun "she" refers to Marina. Thereby, the word "kneel" is spoken to Helicanus or other followers of Pericles.

Though the three women have the courage to fight for their matrimonial autonomy, to debate with the men they confront, and to show resistance with seemingly submissive behavior.

Considering male reactions, their rhetoric seems to lead them to an opposite way. Shakespeare does have advanced thought for women, but at the same time, still cannot jump out of the thought pattern established by the patriarchy society.

#### 4. Shakespeare's patriarchal thinking

##### 4.1 Rhetorically gifted women fail to move men

Desdemona, Isabella and Marina are all eloquent speakers. Other characters' remarks about them indicate their rhetorical ability. In *Measure for Measure*, Claudio designates Lucio to acquaint Isabella with his dangerous state, having a great hope in her: "There is a prone and speechless dialect / Such as move men. Besides, she hath prosperous art / When she will play with reason and discourse, / And well she can persuade" (1.3.181–84). Words like "play with reason and discourse" and "can persuade" indicate in Claudio's mind, Isabella is eloquent enough to use her verbal power to move men, to persuade men. In *Pericles*, after Pericles entrusts Cleon to educate his daughter, Gower recounts Marina's growing story in Tarsus, describing how well she learns to sew, to sing and to write: "She would with rich and constant pen / Vail to her mistress Dian" (4.Chorus.28–29). Here, "rich and constant pen" denotes Marina's proficiency in languages. Diana stands for the goddess of chastity. Thus, "vail to her mistress Dian" foreshows that Marina will use the eloquence to defend her chastity. Though in *Othello*, there is not any explicit compliment from others on Desdemona's language, when fighting for her matrimonial autonomy, the debate with her father Brabantio has proved she is a powerful woman. After hearing Desdemona's response that she chooses to follow her husband, Brabantio expresses shock by saying, "I had rather to adopt a child than get it" (1.3.190) and "I am glad at soul I

have no other child; / For thy escape would teach me tyranny / To hang clogs on them. I have done, my lord” (195–97). The fury in Brabantio’s speech reflects the power and eloquence in Desdemona’s language.

Despite the fact that in some situations the three women do receive positive male reactions, are these men really persuaded by them? I would argue that Shakespeare gives the rhetorical ability to these women but sometimes their rhetoric fails to move men. Even though at certain moments they seem to be successful, the men agrees with them not due to women’s eloquence but instead, they are moved by other men’s words or out of their private interest.

In *Othello*, though Brabantio finally consents to Desdemona leaving with Othello for Cyprus, his consent is based on the Duke’s approval of the wedding and the journey. The Duke’s permission results from Othello’s language. As the Duke states “Be it as you shall privately determine, / Either for her stay or going: th’affair cries haste, / And speed must answer it” (1.3.272–74), he in fact does not care whether Desdemona stays or goes, as long as Othello will not neglect his official duties. The speech “Men do their broken weapons rather use, / Than their bare hands” (172–73) indicates that the Duke values men’s military service. As a general, Othello does know the advantage of his status in the Venetian forces. Therefore, when Iago comes to tell Othello that Brabantio strongly opposes Desdemona's marriage with him, he says, “Let him do his spite: / My services which I have done the Signory / Shall out-tongue his complaints” (1.2.17–19). Besides, at this moment, the Duke is busy dealing with the incoming battle with Turks, regarding Othello as the most appropriate person to do the battle. Because of this, on Othello’s arrival with Brabantio, the Duke speaks to him, “Valiant Othello, we must straight employ you / Against the general enemy Ottoman” (1.3.49–50). The Duke’s next line

displays he has totally ignored the presence of Brabantio: “(To Brabantio) I did not see you: welcome, gentle / signor — “ (51–52). Thence, when later accused by Brabantio, Othello on purpose stresses the meritorious achievement he has contributed to this country, who delivers the speech:

The tyrant custom, most grave senators,  
Hath made the flinty and steel couch of war  
My thrice-driven bed of down. I do agnize  
A natural and prompt alacrity  
I find in hardness, and do undertake  
These present wars against the Ottomites. (1.3.228–33)

In this speech, Othello conveys two pieces of information. First, by describing some details of the harsh environment in the war, such as “the flinty and steel couch” and the “thrice-driven bed”, Othello tries to remind the Duke of the “hardness” he went through in the past, to evoke his sympathy. Second, by saying “do undertake / These present wars against the Ottomites”, Othello is expressing his determination that he will take up the mission. The Duke has to look to Othello to battle with the Turks, so for Othello’s sake, he becomes biased in favor of Desdemona.

As Desdemona formulates her willingness to leave with Othello in words, Othello speaks to the Duke, “Vouch with me, heaven, I therefore beg it not / To please the palate of my appetite, / Nor to comply with heat the young affects / In my defunct and proper satisfaction” (1.3.259–62). In this speech, Othello admits he has a voracious sexual appetite for Desdemona, which will distract him from military feats. Words like “beg it not” and “nor to comply” expresses Othello’s unwillingness to let Desdemona go with him, “But to be free and bounteous to her mind” (263), he hopes Desdemona could accompany him. In other words, Othello ingeniously prevents the agreement of the Duke on Desdemona’s company from becoming a

type of behavior to support his sexual desire, but for Desdemona's own mind. In addition, by stating he follows Desdemona's mind, Othello is reaffirming his stand for Desdemona.

After that, with words “And heaven defend your good souls that you think / I will your serious and great business scant / For she is with me — no” (1.3.264–66), Othello makes a promise to the Duke that the new marriage will not make him ignore his duties. In the same speech, Othello's following joke about his helmet makes the Duke more convinced that Othello will still concentrate on the military affairs, even if his wife is going to live in the barracks with him:

“That my disports corrupt and taint my business, / Let housewives make a skillet of my helm, / And all indigo and base adversities / Make head against my estimation!” (268–71). After all, for a soldier, the helmet stands for the honor the war brings to him, which has accompanied the soldier to experience the pain along with the glory in the war. Thereby, soldiers usually do not tell a joke on their weapons casually. As a person who values his honor, Othello's joke on his helmet cannot mean he does not care the helmet, but shows the opposite — he values the helmet which is related with his reputation in the force.

To sum up: urgent state affairs, Othello's reminding of his past military achievement and the dangers he has experienced in the war, as well as the promise that he will not neglect his official duties lead to the Duke's decision to allow Desdemona in Othello's company. By saying “Goodnight to everyone — and, noble signor, / If virtue no delighted beauty lack, / Your son-in-law is far more fair than black” (1.3.286–88), the Duke tries to persuade Brabantio to accept the reality. On account of the Duke's consent, Brabantio has no choice but to give in. For this, it is not Desdemona's rhetoric but Othello and the Duke that makes Brabantio comprise on his daughter's marriage. Desdemona's eloquence also loses its power in the crucial scene of her death. As

discussed in the section of “the power of kneeling”, Desdemona kneels twice to plead for her life and denies infidelity. However, Othello fails to be moved, keeping believing Iago’s fabrication. Desdemona’s rhetorical ability finally still has no effect on her male audience, failing to save her life.

In *Measure for Measure*, apart from making Isabella fail to move Angelo, Shakespeare shows how Angelo’s desire reduces Isabella from a complex woman with rhetorical ability to a mere body. In so doing, he reveals that faced with the desire of a powerful man, a woman’s all rhetorical skill and strength of personality is irrelevant. Angelo’s sexual desire for Isabella has been aroused since their first meeting. At the end of their first encounter, after Isabella leaves, Angelo gives a long soliloquy, “What’s this? What’s this? Is this her fault or mine? / The tempter or the tempted, who sins most, ha? / Not she, nor doth she tempt; but it is I” (2.2.199-203). Angelo asks himself “what’s this?”, implying he has found himself has sexual desire for Isabella. The word “tempt” in the next line is more obvious to display he is lured by Isabella, who awakens his desire to “raze the sanctuary” (208). As a man whose blood “Is very snow-broth; one who never feels / The wanton stings and motions of the sense, / But doth rebate and blunt his natural edge / With profits of the mind: study and fast” (1.4.62–65), Angelo must be very reluctant to admit he has such a desire for a woman. Whence, he continues to ask himself, “Shall we desire to raze the sanctuary / And pitch our evils there?” (2.2.208–09). Isabella is a novice, and the word “sanctuary” refers to bodies of believers (*OED*). For it, the “sanctuary” can refer to the body of Isabella, meaning Angelo wants to wound the body of Isabella, which is a carnal desire.

Earlier in this scene, Angelo has a moment in which he speaks to himself, “She speaks, and ’tis such sense / That my sense breeds with it” (2.2.172–73). The word “sense” can be under-

stood in two ways. First, “sense” can mean Isabella’s speech is reasonable—it “makes sense”—so that Angelo is nearly persuaded to pardon her brother. At the same time, the word “sense” carries the meaning of physical sensation from which sexual desire and pleasure arises (*OED*). Isabella’s eloquent speech is the origin of his carnal desire, and such desire grows in the process of her debate with Angelo. Thereby, at this time, Angelo perceives that Isabella’s eloquence has evoked his sexual desire for her.

As a man “of stricture and firm abstinence” (1.3.8) in the public eye, Angelo will not allow the sexual desire that has spread in his mind to ruin his reputation. He knows how to restrain himself opportunely, so Shakespeare directs him to “exit” from the stage (2.2.173) after his “sense” speech. At this moment, Isabella speaks out, “Gentle my lord, turn back” (175), further offering to “bribe” Angelo (177).

When Angelo asks her whether she really intends to bribe him, Isabella answers, “Ay, with such gifts that heaven shall share with you” (2.2.179). Then, she explains “such gifts” is the “prayers from preservèd souls, / From fasting maids whose minds are dedicate / To nothing temporal” (185–87). Seeing Angelo is going to leave and being afraid there may be no chance to negotiate with him in the future, Isabella uses the word “bribe” to stop his step. Upon hearing the word “bribe”, Angelo must feel a little bit shocked, for this word with negative meaning contrasts with Isabella’s upright character. So he stops exiting and turns back.

What Isabella wants to “bribe” him with is the prayers from other nuns. However, since Angelo has had sexual desire for her, he presumes that Isabella will bribe him with her body. According to *OED*, the word “preserved” refers to something kept in its original state, and the word “maid” refers to a virgin. With reference to the meaning of “maid”, “preserve” can mean to keep

chaste. Above all, there is another possibility for Angelo to understand Isabella's speech. He could regard the words like "preserved" and "maid" as a sexual temptation she tries to create for him. There is, in other words, a deviation of understanding between how Isabella speaks and how Angelo understands her words.

In their second encounter, Angelo asks Isabella to please him directly, in lieu of questioning what his pleasure is. At the beginning of this scene, following Angelo's question "How now, fair maid?" (2.4.32), Isabella responds, "I am come to know your pleasure" (33). Then, Angelo replies, "That you might know it would much better please me / Than to demand what 'tis. Your brother cannot live" (34–35). Isn't it strange that Angelo asks Isabella to please him directly instead of demanding what his pleasure is? In the ordinary course of events, without knowing the demand first, how does Isabella know how to please Angelo? The explanation could be that based on her "bribe" speech, Angelo wishes Isabella could have known what his "pleasure" is. There is that same deviation of understanding going on here. "I am come to know your pleasure" in Isabella's mind simply means to find out what Angelo wants. Angelo hears the word "pleasure" differently and plays upon it, which, in his mind, means the desire. He hopes Isabella could discern his desires and makes an offer of her body to exchange with Claudio's life, so he asks her to please him directly without questioning more.

No matter whether or not Angelo deliberately understands Isabella's speech in such way, his demand for Isabella's body in their second interview scene indicates that Angelo totally ignores her rhetorical ability and cares more about her appearance. It is not until very late that Isabella realizes what Angelo is asking and he is serious about his demand for her body. When Angelo asks Isabella to make a choice between her chastity and her brother's life, "Now took your

brother's life, [or], to redeem him, / Give up your body to such sweet uncleanness / As she that he hath stained?" (2.4.55–57), Isabella denounces him, "I will proclaim thee, Angelo, look for 't." (163). "Proclaim" means to declare publicly (*OED*). Faced with Isabella's threat that she will declare his evil behavior to the public, Angelo refutes her, "Who will believe thee, Isabel?" (168) due to his reputation for self-discipline. Further, he states, "That you shall stifle in your own report / And smell of calumny. I have begun, / And now I give my sensual race the rein." (172–74). "Stifle" means to deprive of someone's consciousness by covering the mouth (*OED*). In this sense, "stifle" the "report" can indicate Angelo is asking Isabella to be silent. He now gives his sensual race the rein, which implies Angelo does not want to control his sexual desire any more.

It is Isabella's eloquence that arouses Angelo's desire for her; it is Angelo's desire that makes him want to silence her. Shakespeare gives Isabella rhetorical ability, which pales into insignificance before a powerful man with the desire.

The failure of eloquence also appears in Marina's case. In *Pericles*, at Dionyza's request, her servant Leonine comes to murder Marina. When becoming aware that Leonine is coming to kill her, Marina tries to persuade him to give up the evil intent. Though after her first attempt fails she changes her speaking style, the second attempt still fails to move Leonine. On the first attempt, Marina tries to move him by displaying she is such a kind person and never does anything evil before, hoping Leonine could let her off:

I never did her hurt in all my life.  
 I never spake bad word, nor did ill turn  
 To any living creature. Believe me, la,  
 I never killed a mouse, nor hurt a fly.  
 I trod upon a worm against my will,  
 But I wept for 't. (4.1.85–90)

It is noticeable that in the speech Marina focuses more on herself, with first-person pronoun “I”, to express how virtuous she has ever been. In addition, she speaks the word “never” three times in her six lines, which functions as a repetition to emphasize her goodness, to arouse Leonine’s pity. Unfortunately, the first attempt fails. Leonine sticks to his commission. Then, on the second attempt, Marina changes her tack, starting to acclaim him, “You are well-favored, and your look foreshow / You have a gentle heart” (4.1.96–98). This time, Marina focuses more on the person she is speaking to, with second-person pronoun “You” in the speech. “You” is formal, used to address a persons as a mark of respect and deference (*OED*). By shifting the subject from “I” to “You”, Marina tries to raise the human side of Leonine. The transformation of Marina’s speaking style corresponds to her eloquent image Shakespeare stages. However, her failing to move Leonine indicates in Shakespeare’s mind, women are disadvantaged in front of men, who can deprive female language of its language.

It cannot be denied that there are some moments Marina does move men with her words. After escaping from Leonine’s hand, Marina is sold to a brothel in Mitylene. No matter how the Bawd and the Pander induce Marina to sell her body, she always takes a firm stance to refuse the sexual trade. That’s why the Pander makes such complaint, “Well, I had rather than twice the worth of her / she had ne’er come here” (4.6.1–2), which indicates Marina has successfully defended her chastity several times against different customers. The dialogue between two gentlemen can display the effect of Marina’s rhetoric as well:

FIRST GENTLEMAN

Did you ever hear the like?

.....

SECOND GENTLEMAN

No, no. Come, I am for no more

bawdy houses. Shall 's go hear the vestals sing?  
 FIRST GENTLEMAN  
 I'll do anything now that is virtuous,  
 but I am out of the road of rutting forever. (4.5)

From the conversation, we can see Marina succeeds in persuading her guests to give up buying sex, even urging them to do something virtuous.

Things are more complicated in her encounter with the powerful Lysimachus, in which Shakespeare shows the same powerful eloquence at work, but with mixed effects. Though in the end Marina persuades Lysimachus, as she earlier persuaded the two gentlemen quoted above, to quit attempting to buy sex from her, she does not succeed the first time. At the beginning of the meeting with Lysimachus, she tries to use her rhetorical skills to move him. First, Marina “brings others to name the deeds they do” (Beckwith 99). Instead of being a nasty person who criticizes people’s improper behavior directly, Marina makes others realize their faults on their own. When the Bawd brings Lysimachus to meet Marina, Lysimachus is engaged in a rapid back-and-forth dialogue with her:

LYSIMACHUS  
 Now, pretty one, how long have you been  
 at this trade?  
 MARINA  
 What trade, sir?  
 LYSIMACHUS  
 Why, I cannot name 't but I shall offend.  
 MARINA  
 I cannot be offended with my trade. Please  
 you to name it.  
 LYSIMACHUS  
 How long have you been of this profession? (4.6.68–74)

From Beckwith’s perspective, Marina intentionally brings Lysimachus to name the “trade”, which means “sexual trade”, making Lysimachus understand that he should take responsibly for

his actions if he wants to have sexual relationship with her. Also she is trying to make Lysimachus realize his improper behavior on his own, and reflect over himself: as a “honorable man”, is it proper to involve in such trade? Nevertheless, if “trade” from Marina’s mouth means “sexual trade”, the time that she began the trade would not be so early, which as Marina answers “E’er since I can remember”, earlier before five (4.6.75). If the “trade” in Marina’s mouth does not refer to sexual trade, according to *OED*, the word carries another meaning of “manner of living” or “way of life”. In this sense, Marina is trying to evoke Lysimachus’s sympathy on her. On birth Marina had to depart from her parents; when she grew up, Dionyza assigned Leonine to assassinate her; even if she escaped from Leonine’s hand, the pirate sold her to the brothel. As Marina tells her life later, “That am a maid, though most ungentle Fortune / Have place me in this sty, where sine I came” (99–100), “trade” here in Marina’s mouth refers to her “ungentle fortune”, the vagrant life. For this, although “trade” in Lysimachus’s mind refers to “sexual trade”, Marina knows it but deliberately misunderstands it.

In general, during the interview with Lysimachus, Marina tries to bring himself to name the evil deeds he wants to do, and mentions her miserable past to evoke his sympathy. Unfortunately, Shakespeare does not make Lysimachus moved. Lysimachus even feels enraged, saying, “Why, your herbwoman, she that sets / seeds and roots of shame and iniquity. O, you have / heard something of my power, and so stand [aloof] / for more serious wooing” (4.6.87–90). Then, he still asks Marina to bring him to a private place to have sex, “Come, bring me to some / private place. Come, come” (92–93). Later, by saying “If you were born to honor, show it now” (94), Marina asks Lysimachus to show his honor. But he does not take her words into heart, with two repeated rhetorical questions, “How’s this? How’s this? Some more. Be sage” (97). In

this case, even though Marina stresses his honor on purpose which is important for a noble man, Lysimachus does not give up his sexual intent.

In light of these, after Marina tries to bring Lysimachus to name his improper behavior, to evoke Lysimachus's sympathy, and to make Lysimachus show his honor, she still fails to move him. Different from Desdemona and Isabella who fail to persuade men, Marina in the end successfully defends her chastity with the rhetorical power. After Lysimachus's "How's this" speech, Marina stresses her "ungentle fortune" again:

For me  
That am a maid, though most ungentle Fortune  
Have placed me in this sty, where, since I came,  
Diseases have been sold dearer than physic—  
That the gods  
Would set me free from this unhallowed place,  
Though they did change me to the meanest bird  
That flies i' the purer air! (4.6.98–105).

Here, Marina not only restates her miserable life ("ungentle fortune"), but also uses self-deprecating word "the meanest bird" to call herself. According to the *OED*, "meanest" refers to the most worthless thing. By saying "That the gods / Would set me free from this unhallowed place, / Though they did change me to the meanest bird / That flies i' the purer air!", Marina displays her unyielding mind: Although she now gets trapped into the "unhallowed" brothel, she will not give up escaping from the place and believes the day of free will always come. Marina's eloquence at this time gains a success. In Lysimachus's mouth, Marina speaks so well that her "speech had altered it" (4.6.110). The word "alters" implies he has been moved by her languages, who gives his money to Marina and withdraws from the brothel. Although Marina finally persuades Lysimachus to stop buying sex, her success is achieved after several twists and turns.

Above all, Shakespeare gives the rhetorical ability to the three women, while weakens the power of their language. Desdemona's father Brabantio agrees to her marriage with Othello not due to her eloquence but owing to the consent of the Duke; faced with a man who has desire for her, Isabella is transformed from a woman full of discourse to a woman full of sexual attraction; for Marina, the process of persuading Lysimachus to quit buying sex is not plain sailing but does experience some failures. The decrease in their rhetorical power displays Shakespeare's patriarchal thinking of women, so does his unequal treatment on the honor of men and women.

#### 4.2 Men's honor is more precious than women's honor

"Honor" is a general concept under which there are some concrete branches. In the sixteenth-century England, for an upper-class man, honor included the great esteem and high reputation achieved and maintained by military glory, public recognition, the marital fidelity of his wife, as well as the reliability of his spoken words. For an upper-class woman, honor had a close connection with her pre-marital chastity and marital loyalty (Stone 504). Especially for a married man, honor depended on the fidelity of his wife. If he got the reputation of being a cuckold, his honor would be severely damaged for "this was a slur on both his virility and his capacity to rule his own household" (Stone 503). In *Othello*, Shakespeare makes Desdemona fail to defend her honor of fidelity, sacrificing this woman's life to compensate for the supposed violation of Othello's honor. In *Measure for Measure* and *Pericles*, women's honor is a comic matter. Shakespeare makes Isabella's and Marina's honor questioned in public and nearly stained, while brings happy endings to the men who once tried to offend these women's honor of pre-marital chastity.

As a person who pays much importance to his honor, Othello is very sensitive to his wife's faithfulness. There are several lines indicating he values his honor in a great degree. Apart from the good faith, men's honor was best achieved and maintained by "vigorous, even combative, self-assertion, military glory" (Stone 90), which just corresponds with the way in which Othello achieves his honor. It can be assumed that Othello has served in the military for many years, from the speech:

For, since these arms of mine had seven years' pith,  
Till now some nine moons wasted, they have used  
Their dearest action in the tented field.  
And little of this great world can I speak  
More than pertains to feats of broil and battle. (1.3.83–87)

"Arms" together with "tented field" refers to the life in barracks, and the line "since seven years' pith, till now" indicates Othello has been in the army for many years since seven years old. In addition, Othello uses "broil and battle" to indicate that in order to safeguard his country, he has gone through many hardships and experienced lots of battles. It is noticeable that before and after this speech, Othello makes a kind of negative comment to himself that he is an ineloquent person, "Rude am I in my speech, / And little blessed with the soft phrase of peace" (1.3.82–83), "And therefore little shall I grace my cause / In speaking for myself" (89-90). Another thing worth attention is that the speech is said to the Duke. Othello making such ostensible self-depreciating remarks is to highlight the content of his military glory, to remind the Duke of what he ever contributed to this country. Othello's speech can display he takes pride in his "military glory", and the pride can also be seen in Othello's another speech.

At the beginning of the play, when Iago tells Othello that Desdemona's father is enraged by the secret marriage of his daughter with him, Othello replies with equanimity:

Let him do his spite:  
 My services which I have done the Signory  
 Shall out-tongue his complaints. 'Tis yet to know—  
 Which, when I know that boasting is an honour,  
 I shall provulgate — I fetch my life and being  
 From men of royal siege; and my demerits  
 May speak unbonneted to as proud a fortune  
 As this that I have reached. (1.2.17–24).

Here, Othello implies that one day he will tell everyone about the services he has done as the governing body of Venice (“Signory”), but only when “boasting is an honor”. This line displays a modest image who has never bragged about his noble social status. In addition, Othello exhibits the pride in his royal lineage, with words “from men of royal siege”. The other pride can be shown by his speech “and my demerits / May speak unbonneted to as proud a fortune / As this that I have reached”, which denotes he regards the marriage with Desdemona as a way to improve his merit. Othello uses the word “fortune” to substitute for Desdemona, which shows he does value her noble descent that can back his honor.

Aside from the speech above regarding his honor as a soldier, as a Signory and as a husband of Desdemona, the words he speaks after smothering Desdemona can also display how he thinks highly of the honor, “But why should Honor outlive Honesty?” (5.2.243). This line doesn’t simply mean honesty should outlive honor. According to Stone, in the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, male honor heavily depended on his honesty, and “the worst thing a man could say about another man was that he was a liar” (503). For this reason, “Honesty” here in Othello’s mouth can equal to the “Honor”, moreover, beyond honor.

As truth is revealed, Othello comes to know that Iago misled him with slick talk while Desdemona remained chaste. He finds that he himself has told a lie, slandering the faithfulness

of his wife in public. After Emilia finds Desdemona was killed by Othello, she has a quarrel with him. Then, the stage direction notes “Enter Montano, Gratiano, and Iago” (5.2.166), which indicates an originally private stage between Othello and Emilia has been enlarged into a public stage, where other characters enter. Under this circumstance, Othello echoes Iago’s unchaste allegation to Desdemona, “it is true indeed” (5.2.186). That is to say, Othello tells a lie concerning Desdemona’s fidelity in public, in front of the two noble Venetians Montano and Gratiano, along with Emilia. His honor has been maintained by the military glory and the good lineage. Although Desdemona’s “unchastity” nearly damages his honor, as Iago’s lie was exposed, the honor related to the faithfulness of his wife is recovered. Unfortunately, Othello’s honor is eventually destroyed by his dishonesty, even if it is not his original intent. Thus, it is not hard to imagine why his nervous breaks down twice. One is for Desdemona’s “unfaithfulness” that makes him become a “cuckold”, and the other is for his dishonesty that he makes a false statement on Desdemona’s fidelity.

“One’s honor was something worth fighting for, and even dying for to protect, which explains the code of the duel” (Stone 90). Why among the three plays is *Othello* a tragedy? Because Othello has gotten married while Angelo and Lysimachus have not married yet. Husbands’s honor is related to wives’s honor. In Othello’s mind, being a cuckold is the severest violation of his honor, which has been achieved and maintained by his military glory and noble parentage. As a man who holds his honor in high regard, Othello fights for his honor by smothering the “unfaithful” Desdemona, by wounding Iago, and at last, by stabbing himself with his sword. Finally Othello finds it is he that believes Iago’s one-sided story which leads to the detriment of his own honor, so he commits suicide, to protect his valuable honor. Before killing him-

self, Othello still tries to retrieve his honor, who speaks out to Lodovico, “I pray you in your letters, / When you shall these unlucky deeds relate, / Speak of me as I am; nothing extenuate, / Nor set down aught in malice” (5.2.339–42). He asks Lodovico to speak of him as he is. Despite the fact that he is a murderer, Othello keeps calling himself “an honorable murderer” (292).

Why aren't *Measure for Measure* and *Pericles* tragedies? Why don't these plays end in death? Because neither Marina nor Isabella has done something that really destroys men's honor, unlike Desdemona who in Othello's mind cheats on him has ruined the honor of her husband. For Angelo in *Measure for Measure*, and for Lysimachus in *Pericles*, the “honor” Isabella and Marina repeat to them merely means to do something fit for their exalted statuses, morally right or just, as well as a way to show worship (*OED*). Marina, for instance, persuades Lysimachus not to buy sex by stressing his honorable position, a governor of Mitylene: “I hear say you're of / honorable parts and are the governor of this place” (4.6.83–84). Her next speech is more significant to display Marina is asking Lysimachus to adhere to what a noble person should do: “If you were born to honor, show it now; / If put upon you, make the judgment good / That thought you worthy of it” (4.6.94–96).

Isabella, for example, emphasizes Angelo's “honor” in her opening line upon the first meeting with Angelo, “I am a woeful suitor to your Honor, / Please but your Honor hear me” (2.2.38–39). Then in the following dialogue with Angelo, she repeats the word “honor” in speeches such as “Heaven keep your Honor” (59) and “Save your Honor” (197). The repetition of “honor” in Angelo-Isabella encounter not only works like a deferential form of address to show respect for a person of higher rank (*OED*), but also aims to draw Angelo's attention to the

quality that he should behave as a royal man and do something “morally right”. In Isabella’s mind, the “morally right” thing is to spare her brother.

In the case of Angelo and Lysimachus, it is themselves that break the principles of an honorable person. In the sixteenth century, male pre-marital promiscuity mattered less culturally than female pre-marital sexual transgression. Though Angelo has an improper desire for Isabella and Lysimachus goes to the brothel to buy sex, the society will not strongly condemn them. What Marina and Isabella do is merely to constantly call their attention to the honor they should stick to. For men, in both plays, honor comes from position and virtue.

In the case of Desdemona, Isabella and Marina, most of their eloquent speeches aim at defending their honor. For Desdemona, the honor she defends against Othello’s suspicious is her marital fidelity; for Isabella and Marina, the honor they defend against Angelo’s and Lysimachus’s sexual overtures is their premarital chastity. However, Desdemona fails to defend her honor. Shakespeare brings Isabella’s and Marina’s honor to the brink of ruin and then saves their honor soon that enables the happy endings, in which the two women’s honor becomes a comic matter. For Angelo and Lysimachus who ever intended to offend Isabella’s and Marina’s honor, they also receive comic endings: The Duke marries Mariana to Angelo and Pericles promises to marry his daughter Marina to Lysimachus.

In general, when Desdemona’s honor of fidelity is stained, she dies on account of Iago’s slander and Othello’s distrust; when Isabella’s and Marina’s honor of chastity is tarnished though briefly and soon recovered, the Duke chooses to pardon Angelo, and Pericles marries his daughter to Lysimachus who once wanted buy sex from her. The three women in fact have done nothing to ruin their honor and are all honorable: Desdemona is always faithful to Othello; Is-

abella and Marina remain chaste before marriage. Nonetheless, Shakespeare defends men's honor while women's honor is offended by the way other people talk about them. Desdemona's honor is challenged by Iago's fabrication, Isabella's honor is challenged by the desire of Angelo as well as the bed-trick the Duke puts forward, and Marina's honor is challenged by the brothel and customers like Lysimachus. In all three plays, women's honor is called into question publicly, and they suffer because of it. In all three plays, men's honor is well defended by the social conventions that value male chastity and loyalty less than female chastity and fidelity.

## 5. Conclusion

Shakespeare does break the traditional idea of women as chaste, silent and obedient, but he also displays the cruel reality of women in the patriarchal society — no matter how eloquent they are, men cannot always be persuaded; when the honor of a man is violated, women could become the victims on which men vent their anger; faced with men's desire, women's honor is not worth a penny.

The advanced aspect of Shakespeare is that he intentionally stages rhetorically gifted women, with the sense of resistance to patriarchy, the expression of autonomy and the defense of chastity. Desdemona dares to pursue her own romantic love and rebel against her father's opposition; Isabella uses silence to express her rejection of the Duke's proposal; Marina also refuses to respond to the arranged marriage with Lysimachus, and does not kneel until gets reunited with her mother.

The patriarchal aspect of Shakespeare is that he still cannot shake off the conservative framework built in sixteenth-century England. In certain circumstances, the three women's elo-

quence cannot persuade men they confront. In terms of the honor, Shakespeare values men's honor more than women's honor. Othello smothers Desdemona at the time he believes she has cheated on him, then stabbing himself after finding he himself has told a lie about Desdemona's fidelity. When a man's honor seems to be violated, Shakespeare leads the play to a tragical denouement. In contrast, when women in fact do nothing to ruin their reputation, Shakespeare has their honor questioned in public, and brings comic ending to the men who ever tried to offend the women's honor. In *Othello*, Desdemona not only fails to defend her honor of faithfulness, but also falls prey to the supposed violation of Othello's honor; in *Measure for Measure*, the Duke pardons Angelo who once had sexual desire for Isabella; in *Pericles*, the prince Pericles marries Marina to Lysimachus who once intended to buy sex from her. Thus, as we have seen, multiple contradictions structure Shakespeare's portrayal of female figures, both proto-feminist and patriarchal.

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