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“Lay down my soul at stake”: Of Female Friendship in The Merchant of Venice, Othello, and The Winter’s Tale

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“Lay down my soul at stake”: Of
Female Friendship in *The Merchant of
Venice, Othello, and The Winter’s Tale*

by Audrey-Melody Cubas

April 27, 2020

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A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Laura E. Kolb".

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Abstract

In this project, I will not only shift a critical eye on both male and female friendship, but more specifically and extensively, I will examine how Shakespeare treats female friendship in three of his plays: *The Merchant of Venice*, *Othello*, and *The Winter's Tale*. The female pairs of focus, in play order, will be Portia and Nerissa, Desdemona and Emilia, and Hermione and Paulina. Additionally, I will give an overlook of the history of Renaissance friendship portrayal in both the literary and historical accounts. This historical background will serve to highlight the clear contrast between the emphasized and esteemed Renaissance portrayal of male friendship and the invisible and forgotten depiction of female friendship. And to better understand Shakespeare's divergent portrayal of same-sex friendships, I will also be looking at classical friendship theories from philosophers—such as Aristotle and Cicero—as it ultimately affected his writing of these friendships. In doing all these steps, I will demonstrate how essential it is to turn a more attentive eye to the female friendships of Shakespeare's plays, despite the emphasis placed on male amity by its focus in the scholarship, the literature, and in the writings of the Renaissance. Female amity in Shakespeare, despite the lack of emphasis it receives as an object of discussion, is as fulfilling, enriching, and important to not only the stories of the plays, but in its role as solace and constancy in the domineering and oppressive male-centric worlds of the plays.

Introduction

It is not hard to be able to find praise and desire for the male friendships of Shakespeare, even within the plays themselves. Whether it is the praise by male leads for the attributes of their “honorable” companions—such as Othello’s praise for Cassio and Iago—or even the admiring respect female leads express for male friendship—such as Portia’s spoken affirmation of the devoted amity her husband Bassanio has with Antonio—the positive value for male friendships in the worlds of the plays is constant. This pattern is evident throughout Shakespeare’s career; his late play, *The Winter’s Tale*, even goes so far as to start with a conversation that not only establishes the central friendship of the story, one between the two kings, Polixenes and Leontes, but also openly laud over such a lasting friendship whose love is so true that one character states they believe that “there is not in the world either malice or matter to alter it” (1.1.34-35).

Yet, within each of these plays, female friendship is also very much alive and well. For example, where we see the self-sacrificial love of Antonio for Bassanio in *The Merchant of Venice*, we also find the constant presence and sustaining support of Nerissa for Portia. Where in *Othello* we are directed to look at the true yet ultimately marred loyalty of Cassio to Othello, we can also discover the tenacious devotion and pure defense of Desdemona and Emilia in the face of male cruelty. And where in *The Winter’s Tale*, we examine the branching affection of Polixenes and Leontes, which inevitably snaps under the weight of toxic jealousy, we cannot also overlook the unyielding support of Paulina for Hermione, which stays true and constant throughout the whole play.

In this project, I will not only shift the focus from exclusively discussing male friendship to discussing both male and female friendships, but I will specifically look towards exactly how Shakespeare defines female friendship in three of his plays: *Othello*, *The Merchant of Venice*, and

The Winter's Tale. In doing so, I will demonstrate how essential it is to turn a more attentive eye to the underdiscussed female friendships of Shakespeare's plays.

In each of the plays I have chosen, female friends show support for each other in the face of adversity as well as provide a haven in a male-oriented society. These plays, then, stand in contrast to those with more well-known female friendships of Shakespeare, such as Hermia and Helena of *A Midsummer's Night Dream* or Rosalind and Celia in *As You Like You It*. In these plays, these female friendship makes up a central feature of girlhood, before fading into the background once both partners become adults and enter marriage. For instance, in the opening scene of *A Midsummer's Night Dream*, a place that once was refuge for Hermia and Helena, where they once laid upon "primrose beds" (1.1.220) and emptied their "bosoms of their counsel sweet" (1.1.221) is transformed into a spot of elopement for Hermia and her lover, Lysander. Hermia even departs from Helena by referring to her as "playfellow" (1.1.225), acknowledging their friendship in context of the past, a part of their youth. In contrast, in the first of my chosen plays: *The Merchant of Venice*, the pair of Portia and Nerissa both become engaged only in the middle of the play and the antics they have with each other continue until play's end. Similarly, in *Othello* and *The Winter's Tale*, both female duos (each member included) are already married at the start of each play. For the purposes of this project, I am not interested in focusing on adolescent amity. Instead, I will be turning my attention to female amity between adult characters who hold and manage these friendships with other female adults in conjunction with their marital relationships.

Female amity between adults in Shakespeare, despite the lack of emphasis it receives as an object of discussion within the plays and the near-silence on the topic in scholarship, especially compared to its male counterpart, is as fulfilling, enriching, and important to not only the stories of the plays, but in its role as solace and constancy in a faithless male-oriented world. Before I

dive into a full analysis of the texts, however, it is important to understand both the plays' historical background and the ways in which previous critics have analyzed their representation of friendship.

Classical Friendship Theory and its Influence

The portrayal of friendship in Renaissance literature, as we now understand it, was heavily shaped by the classical ideas and theories of friendship. Ciceronian and Aristotelian ideology, particularly, was a prominent influence. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle extensively discusses the workings of friendship, making a distinction between friendships formed for either the purpose of pleasure or that of utility. He also argues amity could be applied to many of the personal relationships we form, including the friendships between “relatives” or even between “fellow-citizens”. However, Aristotle also makes clear that despite all the nuances possible in friendship, there was only one ideal friendship type he deemed as “complete”. He claims a “complete friendship” is between good people “who are alike in their virtue” and “they each alike wish good things to each other” (Book VIII Ch.3). And while Aristotle states that this type of friendship is “rare”, he also affirmed it is “lasting” and is friendship “in its best form” (Book VIII Ch.3). To Aristotle, a pair of true friends share a “single soul” (Book IX Ch.8). Therefore, Aristotle denotes the sharing of virtues and character attributes as necessary components for such a model friendship. Likewise, he also mandates the sharing of physical goods between a pair by adding: “The proverb, ‘What friends have they have in common’, is correct, since friendship is based on community” (II55a-56a). In the essay *De Amicitia*, Cicero similarly matches Aristotle’s views, stating “friendship is nothing else than an accord in all things, human and divine, conjoined with mutual goodwill and affection” (131). He even defines the very desire to befriend is born when a person has “met someone whose habits and character are congenial” with their own (139). In fact, according to Cicero, a person who looks upon a “true friend”, is one who looks, “as it were, upon

a sort of image of himself” (135). Both Aristotle and Cicero heavily preached for true friendship rooted in equality.

These classical ideals touted by Aristotle and Cicero clearly affected Renaissance portrayals of friendship, both in the literature and the theories. For instance, the 16th-century French essayist Michel de Montaigne wrote the influential piece titled “Of Friendship”, expanding on the concepts of his Greek and Roman sources. He designated that those two qualities that Aristotle first brought up—the sharing of virtues and possessions—as being essential for a friendship to be true and a product of our free will, which Montaigne says is the only proper way for “affection and friendship” to form (137). Montaigne goes as far to state the extent of how friends share everything: “wills, thoughts, judgments, goods, wives, children, honor, and life” for their relationship, that he cites from Aristotle, is that of “one soul in two bodies” (141). Shakespeare himself drew on the ideal, also inspired by the Aristotelian ideal of sharing in friendships, in crafting pairs like Leontes and Polixenes—a clear cut example of the ideal bond. Two kings, kept separate and busy due to their duties, still manage to find the time to continuously arrange an “interchange of gifts, letters, and loving / embassies” (1.1.29). Words, possessions, and speech is constantly interchanged with the other’s, miles away, for the sake of their love and because they are but “one soul in two bodies”. Polixenes himself describes his childhood friendship with Leontes as one where they were carefree “as twinned lambs” frolicking in the sun (1.2.85). The use of the word “twinned” (1.2.85) calls back to the concept of befriending one who is your equal, but also to the Ciceronian sentiment of a true friend being “a sort of image of yourself” (135).

Like many other aspects of life, the portrayal of early modern European friendship in 16th-century literature was a male-dominated sector. Women did not fit into the mold. And that is because they could not—at least, not into the mold that had been shaped by the standards of

classical theorists. In fact, Montaigne also specifically excluded women from his friendship theory, writing that, “To tell the truth, the ordinary capacity of women is inadequate for that communion and fellowship which is the nurse of this sacred bond; nor does their soul seem firm enough to endure the strain of so tight and durable a knot” (138). And while this notion was in reference to a woman’s friendship with a man, her husband, this line of thought can be extended to other relationships of women (that he fails to mention). The possibility of women being friends with other women was not even directly touched upon, beyond a generalization of their “souls” being too weak to endure such a bond. It was beyond their capabilities, beyond their natural disposition in Montaigne’s mind. The qualities of “communion and fellowship” which is central to producing such a bond was not something a woman had the skill to do, so it would never even sprout to begin with (138). And in fact, this possibility was a surety to Montaigne as he claimed that there has been “no instance” yet where women have achieved this “sacred bond” and why by “common agreement of the ancient schools” female friendship is excluded from the classical model (138). Yet, while female friendship had not been recognized, let alone, idealized in the similar manner of the desire and pact (as the forever quoted variations of such state) for two men to live “two souls, in one body”, this collective thought by writers like Montaigne did not mean female amity was non-existent.

Modern Historical Scholarship of Friendship

Just as classical friendship theory influenced Renaissance theories on the subject, so too, did these theories influence the 20th-century histories of friendship in the period. The absence of acknowledgement of female friendship continues, this time, as an absence in the historical accounts of amity. It is necessary, therefore, to look at foundational materials for the topic of friendship in the period, especially Alan Bray’s 2006 book *The Friend*, which grounded its titular

theme of “friends”. Bray’s book explored how same-sex friendship worked in practice from the span of the year 1000 to the 18th and 19th centuries and how these bonds were seen across this long historical span. He writes about the difference between traditional and modern friendship: how much more in the public sector had been the friendship of the past. A key example Bray looks at, is the significance of friends’ joint funeral monuments, which leads him to investigate the implication of such an elaborate memorial, and to trace the similarities in the imagery on these tombstones to marriage. One Bray establishes that friends of the past shared everything: food, sleeping arrangements, and even funeral monuments. To be friends then, was to commit to always being by the other’s side at all times, truly, ‘until death do they part’. Friendship, very much resembled marriage—and perhaps, even rivaled against it. Bray illustrates how friendship has changed over the span of centuries, and argues, as a result, that the intimacy between friends has altered and lessened since the pre-modern times. And despite his focus on male pairs, Bray does make a point to mention female friendship in a brief section dedicated to acknowledging the silence surrounding it. Notably, he keeps this moment of recognition to only two pages of an almost 400-page book. Even so, the observations and reflections Bray writes reveal the clear contrast between the acknowledgement of female and male friends of the time.

The section, aptly titled “The Silence between the Lines”, highlights the notable silence about women, in friendship discussion by historians, despite being very clearly not absent from the same rites and traditions of male friends at the time. As Bray himself states, “Tables and beds were shared as much by women as men” (175). He goes on to detail the cause of this invisibility in recognition of similar friendship dynamics, pointing out to the lack of visibility and power women had in society as individuals, let alone, together in amity. Noting women’s relative invisibility in the historical record, he remarks that women “often lacked the property and influence

of which such records are often the law” (175). Because of their absence in the historical record, despite all the similarities male friends shared with female friends in the same period, such as the sharing of beds, only the male counterpart would receive recognition for the act.

Two points Bray makes at the end of *The Friend* illuminate the gap between the portrayal of male and that of female friendship. Bray tells his audience, most notably, that “women in stories of sworn friendship appear as not friends but enemies of friendship” (175). Women do not participate by having friends of their own in these tales, instead they work as obstructions to the central male pairings. This observation clears the way, therefore, to understanding how this type of dynamic plays out in Shakespeare’s works. However, this understanding only unfolds if you look at these portrayals of friendship at face value. In both *The Merchant of Venice* and *The Winter’s Tale*, two plays central to this thesis, Portia and Hermione are “enemies of friendship” in each story as they, though not directly or purposefully, end up threatening the friendships of Antonio-Bassanio and Leontes-Polixenes. In *The Merchant of Venice*, Portia and Antonio are in a constant but unspoken struggle for Bassanio’s affection. When Portia, having recently married Bassanio, dresses up as a lawyer to aid Antonio’s trial, she decides to test her husband’s fidelity by seeing if she can get him to give another man (her in disguise) her ring that he swore to keep forever. After Bassanio initially refuses to give up the ring to “Balthazar” (Portia), Antonio pushes him to do so and tells him to “let my love withal / Be valued ’gainst your wife’s commandment” (4.2.469-470). Bassanio doesn’t hesitate afterwards to send the ring off to “Balthazar”. Portia, however, ends up getting her revenge by the end of the play just before the air is cleared about the trick she played. As Bassanio scrambles to make amends with Portia, who is acting upset over the “loss” of her ring, Antonio offers up a proposition: “I dare be bound again / My soul upon the forfeit, that your lord / Will never more break faith advisedly” (5.1.270-272). Before Portia reveals

the truth, she unintentionally causes Antonio to bind his soul to her marriage with Bassanio. She gets the final sway as Antonio ultimately repositions the value of their marriage over the value of his friendship with Bassanio. Hermione, by contrast, from *The Winter's Tale* becomes an “enemy” to the amity between her husband and Polixenes involuntarily. She never actively tries to get in the way of Leontes’ companionship with Polixenes. In fact, she endorses it from the way she aids her husband by pleading with his friend to stay just a while longer in their company and wants to hear more about the two men’s friendship: “I’ll question you / Of my lord’s tricks and yours when you were boys” (1.2.76-77). And yet soon after, Leontes is seething over Hermione having successfully swayed Polixenes to stay after his own attempts failed. He burns with the jealousy Hermione has incited in him. When Polixenes sees his dear companion again, he is left confused by the change in Leontes’ attitude, noting that his friend now gives him “a lip of much contempt” (1.2.449). By the end of the scene, Polixenes, out of fear of Leontes’ jealousy, escapes the kingdom of Sicilia, leaving their bond in tatters. Hermione, though accidentally, has broken the “twinned” pair (1.2.85).

The claim that women are “enemies of friendship” in literature, as is the very thought and assumption of these literature, is fundamentally misogynistic: it places the blame on women for existing, rather than on the men who decidedly choose to break off each friendship. And Bray is not alone in the observation that, in Renaissance literature, a woman could be written as disruptive to friendship between men. Other scholars, including Lauren J. Mills, have also argued that it is a “*motif* of a woman’s urging a lover to kill his friend, thus putting in serious conflict love for a woman and friendship with a man” that is present in Renaissance stories of amity (179). And, indeed, the literary record on which these scholars base their arguments is full of examples. One such example of the female character being blamed for the dissolution of friendship is that of John

Lyly's 1578 *Euphues* (182). This early English novel centers around the friendship of the titular character and the character Philautus. In the story, Euphues, after meeting Philautus' betrothed, Lucilla, for the first time, falls madly in love with her. Eventually, after going back and forth in his head about the conflict of falling for his friend's love, Euphues ends up deciding to deceive him and steal Lucilla away. When Philautus finally finds out, he curses his friend in a letter, which contains the line: "Didst thou weigh more the enticing looks of a lewd wench than the entire love of a loyal friend?" (75). While Philautus does place the blame on Euphues, he is quick to turn on his former love and demean her repeatedly while more so trying to instill guilt in his traitorous friend. And to top it all off, when Lucilla eventually leaves Euphues just as quickly as she did with her former betrothed, Euphues is quick to curse and point fingers rather than realize his faults: "Oh the counterfeit love of women! Oh inconstant sex! I have lost Philautus, I have lost Lucilla, I have lost that which I shall hardly find again, a faithful friend" (84). To say the female character in *Euphues* is blameless would be incorrect, yet there is a clear disproportionate placing of blame onto Lucilla in contrast to Euphues in the story. The "inconstant sex" becomes the reason for the breakage between the two men.

In addition to the dynamic of women unintentionally breaking the bonds between men, literature of the period also displays the negative representation of women *actively* seeking to end idealized male friendships for their own selfish reasons, typically for the sake of love. We can see an example of this portrayal in action in Bandello's late 1560s story: "The Countess of Celant" (178-179). The story tells of a countess, Blanche Maria, who was so infuriated at how her former lover called out her selfish nature that she pressured her next paramour, Earl Sanseverino, to kill him, despite being his friend. Infuriated with the familiarity of her paramour and former lover, Blanche forbade Sanseverino from her house and began to work hard to manipulate the dissolution

of the two's bond. This story was based on a real countess—Bianca Maria—the Countess of Cellant who committed adultery herself. John Marston's 1605 play, *The Dutch Courtesan*, among many others, raises the very same conflict—the female lead humiliated by her past lover, seduces his friend to kill said former lover—as the central problem.

Like Mills, Bray investigates literary texts that illustrate this dynamic; throughout his book, he threads an investigation of the Middle English romance *Amys and Amylion*—in which the titular male friendship outweighs all other bonds, including marital and parental bonds. The male pair in the tale end up buried together, which Bray argues is a clear-cut example of the imbalance female characters cause in the stories of male friendship. After discussing the literary trend of writing women as enemies to male friendship, Bray addresses that there is a problem with having this lack of symmetry between friendship among women and men in these stories. Bray affirms that “This is not mere silence. This society does not, evidently will not, explain this lack of symmetry but rather asserts it” (176). Here, Bray is referring to the lack of visibility in the historical record as well as in recognition by scholars. He describes this failure as “an evident shadow across the world of friendship” (176). These remarks are worth dwelling on, since they not only shine a light on a clear imbalance between the portrayal of male and female friendship in historical evidence, but also state how this disparity has once asserted itself socially and “evidently will” keep asserting itself in studies of early modern society. However, merely shedding light on an obvious hole in the fabric of historical scholarship and literary criticism, does not seek to mend it. Instead, ironically, it only serves to make the gap seem even wider and larger as we can now notice its absence in the field of scholarship on early modern friendship—a field that emerged in the wake of Bray's study and continues to grow. In this thesis, I seek to take on his implicit challenge and try to explain the “lack of symmetry” between the literary portrayal of male and female amity, focusing specifically

on Shakespeare's plays, in hopes to speak against the silence about women in friendship in the past. Since Bray's significant work on the subject, the study of Renaissance friendship has largely identified and recognized female friendship through its inevitable absence, a distinction mistakenly and evidently made through a false understanding that a lesser presence correlates with lesser intimacy or significance to the text all together.

However, while Bray's account remains important to scholars of amity in the period, recently, historians have also looked beyond male, paired bonds at other structures of friendship. For example, Elizabeth A. Brown discusses in an essay titled "Companion Me with My Mistress", the friendships formed between Queen Elizabeth and her chamber women, that coincided with their relationship of servitude to the Queen. Brown also argues that these friendships were notable in how they were regarded in their significance in English society. A note-worthy parallel between the esteem for upper-class male friends at the time and upper-class female friends appears when one examines the similar use of titular references to their companion at death, on their burial epithets. While these instances contain different contexts and a lack thereof of joint burials for upper-class female friends like with prominent upper-class male friends in society, this similarity shows a distinct acknowledgment between the bonds with women, and a clear interest.

Overall, new works like Brown's challenge the expectation that only male friends could be esteemed in society, while at the same time opening female friendship—and friendship along vertical, unequal lines—as a possible object of new historical inquiry. Taking these as inspiration, this thesis serves to bring to light, as Bray phrased it, the significance and value of companionship between the women of Shakespeare's plays that have been hidden by "an evident shadow" (176). Women are more than enemies to male friendship; they form their own bonds. And friendships between women in these plays are just as loving, supportive, and enduring as the bonds between

men of the plays. Nerissa and Portia staying side-by-side for the entirety of *The Merchant of Venice*, Desdemona and Emilia constantly speaking up in defense of the other in *Othello*, and Paulina fiercely and doubtlessly fighting for Hermione in *The Winter's Tale* are all infinitely deep acts of love that deserve praise. Friendships between women, in Shakespeare's plays, are not only worth talking about simply because of their existence underneath the "shadow" (Bray 176), but for their value and role of empowerment for the female characters involved.

Shakespeare is evidently going against the dominant portrayal of friendship in literature at the time, which heavily leans towards following the classical ideal. While the playwright does acknowledge classical friendship theory in his writing, and even utilizes its attributes in his plays' portrayal of friendships, he goes a step further by inverting the traditional guidelines and expanding on them to include female amity. Shakespeare not only sheds light on female friends through his stories, but his positive portrayal of them, against the ideal, highlights the value these relationships serve in examining them further. And truly, choosing to further investigate female friendship through their portrayal in Shakespeare's plays, is only a starting point. Because if one of the most popular Renaissance playwrights has had his works misconstrued by scholars to only emphasize the male companions, through the male-oriented lens of friendship, the female companions of other plays and literary works might currently be blocked by the "shadow" as well (176). There is a need for a thorough reevaluation of female friendship in literature and history, to unblock all obstructions and let it shine.

Literary Criticism

Before turning to the plays, however, it is important to establish that a focus on male friendship has dominated literary critical accounts of Renaissance friendships, as well as historical ones. Scholars currently working on friendship in Shakespeare can be grouped into two categories:

scholars who continue to focus on male friendship and allow the invisibility of female amity to persist and scholars who not only challenge the model that says male friendships are more worthwhile to discuss over female friendships but lean away from classical theory when discussing Shakespeare's treatment of amity. To put it even more simply, I'd categorize the two groups into traditional scholars, who follow classical friendship theory, and inclusive scholars, who break away from the ideal friendship model, in order to consider friendships that would not fit the classical ideal, such as amity between female characters and characters of unequal class statuses.

In the traditional camp of thought, the general approach towards writing about friendship in Renaissance literature, particularly in Shakespeare, had been geared towards a critical eye and gaze on male amity and a passing glance of acknowledgement on the invisibility of female amity. Scholars, therefore, end up writing articles such as "Relationships in the Merchant of Venice" by A.M. Gagiano. Despite its seemingly inclusive title, Gagiano's work delves more into the minor male-male relationships than into the prominent friendship of Portia and Nerissa which it almost entirely overlooks. While Gagiano does bring up the two women in relation to the other, these mentions do not last long and are instead strictly used to make a point of another relationship. For example, Gagiano brings up the description of Portia by Nerissa as "one of those who 'surfeit'", one who becomes sick with excess, to discuss a link between Antonio and Portia (66). John D. Cox, referencing Alan Bray's "ethics of friendship", continues Bray's train of thought in his article: "Shakespeare and the Ethics of Friendship", a piece that, much like Bray's work, centers its sole attention of applying the ethics to *male* friendship as opposed to all types. Additionally, traditional scholars tend to either argue about the connection between politics and male friendship as in David Ruiters' "Shakespeare and Hospitality: Opening *The Winter's Tale*" or delve into the intimacy of such bonds in respect to the plays' predictably heterosexual endings, as in Scott

Colley's "Leontes Search for Wisdom in "The Winter's Tale". With two of my chosen plays, *Othello* and *The Winter's Tale*, critics such as Colley have homed in on how jealousy impacts the grounded friendships at the plays' start and thus inadvertently place women in the role Bray earlier defined as "enemies of friendship" (175).

In contrast, inclusive scholars such as Ruth Vanita and Lynn Enterline disagree with this notion and focus on the defending the victimized women in Shakespeare, typically wives, and how they deal with their relationships with their husbands through their own limited power and supportive friendship with their female servants. Penelope Anderson's article, in particular, "The Absent Female Friend: Recent Studies in Early Modern Women's Friendship", was a pioneering signal and call to the scholarly community, that a shift in focus must be made to the female-female relationships in Shakespeare. She argues that "this absent female friend", termed from her article title, must be noticed for scholarship to advance further in filling this discernible gap.

Between these two lines of thought, I align my work with inclusive scholarship as I wish to also examine female friendship and its place against the oppressions that can come from marriage. However, while I disagree with the approach of classical critics, I also wish to follow them in exploring how jealousy affects the breakage of male friendships in these plays, since it evidently plays a big part in these relationships.

But, most importantly, I am creating my work as a response to Penelope Anderson, who has not only similarly concluded with my desire to focus on female friendship but written a work that heavily echoes this project's purpose, though concentrating on the literary and historical scholarship of the field as opposed to individual literary works themselves. Therefore, I am seeking to fill said gap therefore by giving female friendship a critical, in-depth analysis on the relationships in three of Shakespeare's plays. As Anderson has argued, and as I also assert, female

friendship is just as fulfilling, rich and significant to the plays as male friendship. In fact, it may even be more so. Female friends, as I argue in the readings that follow, provide each other solace and constancy in the midst of the plays' constricting male-dominated societies.

THE MERCHANT OF VENICE

Despite the many uses of the word "friend" in the play *The Merchant of Venice*, the word is never once used to describe Portia and Nerissa's relationship. Regardless, the easy affection they share with each other throughout as well as the way they mirror the excessively expressed dear bond between Antonio and Bassanio, clearly indicate otherwise. But Portia and Nerissa do not form their friendship freely like Antonio and Bassanio can and do; This contradicts much like the parallelism suggests their bond is as intimate and significant to the other as the male pair. Like Antonio and Bassanio, the friendship with each other has been a constant in their lives. Additionally, each member of each duo shares a clear mutual desire for the other's happiness (primarily in their romantic lives) as well as providing support to help achieve the things that will make them happy. Though, for all the parallelism that is embedded with the two pairs of Portia and Nerissa alongside Antonio and Bassanio, focus on the female pair has fallen short, both in the criticism and even within the play. And yet, examining the companionship of Portia and Nerissa as a source for eventual female empowerment to the point of equality (or at least a very close semblance of such) within the boundaries of their final relationships as well as comfort in their past woes is significant and essential to closer analyze.

In truth, there is a myriad of friendships entangled with each other in the Venice of this play. It is an entanglement laid out right at the start. For this reason, I think it will be beneficial to begin by examining the first usage of the word: "friend" as it makes a lot of clear distinctions on the prominence of friendships within the play itself.

Its first utterance in the play comes from Salarino, a minor character as opposed to the play's leads, after his attempts to cheer up an Antonio, who is pained over a "want-wit sadness" (1.1.6), do not seem to help much despite his best efforts. The word "friend" comes fittingly after an act of friendship: the offer of comfort and a listening ear to Antonio's issues. Salarino (along with Solanio) even attempts to help Antonio identify the source of such pain, which he himself described as something he must "learn" (1.1.5) because he knows neither "what stuff 'tis made of" or "whereof it is born" (1.1.4). These efforts fail too, but their good intent is present. And yet, Salarino does not use the word in reference to himself or even to Solanio. Salarino, after seeing an approaching Bassanio and companions, exclaims, "I would have stayed till I had made you merry / If worthier friends had not prevented me" (1.1.63-64). It's not just "friends" he describes Bassanio and his company of Lorenzo and Gratiano to be, but "worthier friends". "Worthier", in this case, refers to partly their higher-class status in comparison to Salarino and Solanio but also partly to their personal and subjective value to Antonio. Antonio, at least, turns the word's meaning into such with his response calling their "worth very dear in my regard" (1.1.65). Plus, if we also account for Solanio's added descriptor of calling Bassanio, Antonio's "most noble kinsman" (1.1.60) in the previous line, there is a clear indication that this particular friendship is being exalted here. This gathering of friends narrows down even further to the expected pair when not only Solanio and Salarino take their leave but Gratiano and Lorenzo as well, as Bassanio has "found Antonio" (1.1.73). Shakespeare is clearly placing a heavy focus on the pair here with the set-up he has created.

However, it is important to take a step back and fully understand the web of friendships underneath the main pair to see the full scope of how friendship is defined in the play. Despite, the clear exaltation of the pair of Antonio and Bassanio in this scene, the amity shared by the group of

men is clear and present from the exchange between different pairs. Bassanio and Salarino have an exchange where Bassanio comments on feeling amiss over the two being “strange” (1.1.71) from having not seen each other for so long and Salarino in return, offers to “make our leisures attend on yours” (1.1.72) to plan for the two to see each other soon. Salarino’s offer is sweet, despite being a passing remark, as he tells Bassanio that he will adjust his schedule to fit his, when Bassanio is able to find the time to meet. The promise to see each other is not just a promise to see the other but also a thoughtful act. Gratiano then displays a show of concern over not only noticing Antonio’s sadness but commenting on his looking “marvelously changed” (1.1.80). Gratiano’s reasoning for this state of not feeling or looking like himself, relies on the perception, that Antonio has “too much respect upon the world” (1.1.79). Antonio, in response, states he only sees the world as the world and then places himself on a stage and compares the part he plays on it, as “a sad one” (1.1.83). Gratiano, continuing this metaphor in his next lines, responds by saying, “Let me play the fool” (1.1.84), which also unintentionally but notably parallels Antonio’s expression of feeling like a “want-wit” (1.1.6), a fool for being ignorant of the cause of his sadness. Though, it is a line delivered without knowledge of this previous sentiment expressed by Antonio, this moment is indirectly one of relatability. The expression spoken by another (in this case: Gratiano) makes his feelings more valid and acceptable, because the language is not uniquely his own. Moreover, Gratiano continues by attempting to console him through lengthy (potentially unwanted) advice which he backs with an “I love thee, and ‘tis my love that speaks” (1.1.92). Gratiano delivers tough love to Antonio throughout his speech, by trying to persuade him to dismiss his sadness all together, but there is a clear intent of wanting to make him cheer up, nevertheless. His “love” is what makes him speak, even if it may not sound like it.

Beyond caring for Antonio, this web of friends displays friendship for one another in multiple ways. For instance, Gratiano and Lorenzo, as well, joke around right before they part. Lorenzo, likely in relation to the length of the speech he just gave Antonio, jokes about how Gratiano “never lets me speak” (1.1.113) which gets returned with a wry self-chastising remark by Gratiano of how Lorenzo would not remember the sound of his “own tongue” the longer they spend together. While Gratiano makes the prospect of spending even “two years more” (1.1.114) with him as something negative, based on his remark, the phrase he uses, “Well, keep me company” (1.1.114) is a command. He does not phrase it as ‘Well, *if* you keep me company’, but instead phrases it as a statement, as a foregone conclusion. The familiarity in speech not only gives hint to the confirmation these two have known each other long, but the assumed premise that the other will stay by the other’s side is telling of their bond. And lastly, even before Gratiano and Lorenzo depart, Lorenzo addresses Bassanio that “we will leave you then till dinnertime” (1.1.111). This is a clearly one last reminder to Bassanio of the plans Lorenzo made sure to prod him about at the start of their arrival, “But at dinner time / I pray you have in mind where we must meet” (1.1.74-75). While Bassanio says nothing to the second reminder by Lorenzo, after the first, he swears, “I will not fail you” (1.1.76). The humor and comfortable ease in the scene go to showcase a strong sense of familiarity and union between the group as well as a lightheartedness in the wordplay they take part of. There is a clear sense of affection and intimacy between the men in this scene, despite the attention that falls to Antonio and Bassanio once they are alone. Even when the one instance of the word: “friends” is used to refer to Lorenzo, Gratiano, and Bassanio particularly, when exploring all the interactions in this scene, the affection between each pair and even among the whole network is shown off in this scene. Friendship in the play does not follow

the traditional model of two individuals who share but a single soul; the play's amity is spread across interconnected webs of people.

At the same time however, the specific interactions of Antonio and Bassanio, his "most noble kinsman" (1.1.60), sheds light on just why their whole group of friends exalts the bond these two men share with each other. Once Gratiano and Lorenzo do indeed exit the scene, Antonio and Bassanio are quick to poke fun at Gratiano's parting witty rebuttal to Antonio's sarcastic declaration that he will "grow a talker" (1.1.117) in playful response to his exchange about 'speech' with Lorenzo. Gratiano parts ways with a cheerful couplet, "Thanks, i'faith, for silence is only commendable / In a neat's tongue dried and a maid not vendible" (1.1.118-119), meeting Antonio's wittiness with mock gratitude; in his words, a silent tongue is only praiseworthy if it belongs to an ox that will be served or to an unmarriageable woman. As soon as they clear away from sight, Antonio turns to Bassanio and questions the value of such a sentiment by remarking, "Is that anything now?" (1.1.120). Bassanio, in turn, speaks back in prose, which is notable as it is a speech pattern—ordinary speech—that signifies a sense of Bassanio slipping into a state of easy intimacy now that he is alone with Antonio. Bassanio counters back, playing off his friend's use of the word 'anything' that no, "Gratiano speaks a great deal of nothing / more than any man in all Venice" (1.1.121-122). This passing moment of verbal banter playfully gives the two men the space to comfortably joke around with each other about their other friends as well as to enjoy their own mutual familiarity.

More important, however, is how their conversation continues after this moment of levity. Antonio, after the time for humor passes, steers their discussion to Bassanio's love life, prodding him: "Well, tell me now what lady is the same / To whom you swore a secret pilgrimage / That you today promised to tell me of?" (1.1.126-128). Shakespeare gives us a great deal of information

here: Bassanio is courting a lady, and he has sworn to take a secret journey to visit her. But another key detail seeps through these lines: Bassanio promised to tell Antonio of her identity “today”. Despite all the exaltation and closeness of their bond, displayed through the speech of their group of friends as well as the small moment of lightheartedness before this turn in topic, while Bassanio did tell Antonio about his romantic pursuit of a woman, Bassanio decided not to disclose her identity until later, until this scene. This act of disclosure could have occurred earlier, when it was implied Bassanio first told his friend about his declaration to set out on a “solemn pilgrimage” (1.1.127) to court the woman he fell for. The purposes of exposition and setting up the introduction for our leading lady in the following scene, for the audience’s sake, would have been sufficiently filled by Antonio, first, bringing up the courted lady’s name from prior knowledge. Instead, Shakespeare intentionally includes the moment of Bassanio revealing the name of the object of his affections to Antonio to show several things about the relationships of the play, particularly the two men’s friendship. First, remember, that this scene starts off with a myriad of friendships interacting all at once, Antonio with Salarino and Solanio listening to his woes before then Gratiano and Lorenzo arriving with Bassanio. While Salarino and Solanio do leave the scene when the second group arrives, it is not before egging on Bassanio playfully about making plans to hang out sometime since it had been a while. Gratiano then advises Antonio lengthily, speaking for so long because “’tis my love that speaks” (1.1.92) before he goes to banter with Lorenzo about his complaint of speaking too much before exiting the scene as well, prodding Bassanio to not forget their dinner plans later that day. And yet, this secret is not shared with the whole group but instead, only with Antonio. Yet, again we see the difference in intimacy and the degree of closeness between the pair of Antonio and Bassanio as opposed to the other pairs we saw interact at the start of the scene. The bond between the two is so dearly praised because it is so dearly shared.

The scene continues and the choice in showing Bassanio tell Antonio the identity of the woman he loves also does something for their relationship. It sets up an exchange between the two. It is a small exchange, for sure. It is also an unequal one because we do not know what Antonio will exchange in return. But this is an exchange nevertheless, a secret from Bassanio is swapped for, as we later read, support in Bassanio's endeavor for love. Additionally, this small exchange only prefaces the element of exchange that truly defines their relationship, on top of their closeness. We see this immediately in Bassanio's response, which is pointedly not an answer to the question Antonio posed to him. Instead of quickly fulfilling his promise, Bassanio starts by reminding his friend about all his trouble in his lack of finances, a problem when needing to pay off the many debts he owes. Antonio is more than just familiar to his troubles, he is one of the people Bassanio owes the most to as Bassanio expresses, "To you, Antonio / I owe the most in money and in love" (1.1.137-138). Here, we learn about the element of exchange between the two men, in the form of monetary exchange, as opposed to sole focus on emotional intimacy the scene had initially set up them with. We learn that not only does Bassanio owe Antonio money, but he is the one he owes the "most" to. But, again, this does not mar their relationship as Bassanio does not end the line there with "owes the most in money" (1.1.138). Instead, Bassanio continues and pairs this statement with sentiment to Antonio, who he also owes the most "in love" (1.1.138). The fact that Bassanio phrases this expression the way he does perfectly defines the friendship he has with Antonio.

Their relationship is one where he owes the most in love and in money which calls back to the classical ideal model of friendship that Shakespeare is clearly echoing through this pair. Friends who share what "they have in common" is right because "friendship is based on community" (*Nicomachean Ethics*, II60a). In this case, Antonio's love and money are Bassanio's at his whim

and use because of their friendship. And this is only strengthened through Antonio's response to Bassanio's request to hear out his plan to repay all his debts. He responds, devotedly, that if his plan is as honorable as he knows Bassanio to be then, "Be assured / My purse, my person, my extremest means / Lie all unlocked to your occasions" (1.1.144-146). Without even hearing anything about Bassanio's plan to pay him back, Antonio offers not only more of his money, but everything he has and everything he is: not only his purse, but his person. All 'lie unlocked' to 'his occasions'; all before he knows what Bassanio will say. Antonio demonstrates a huge display of trust not only in the generous offer, but in what he expresses as the hypothetical to gaining all that Antonio is offering, which turns the offer into more a promise, than left up to chance. The hypothetical Antonio expresses is that if Bassanio's plan stands "within the eye of honor" (1.1.144), then all will be 'unlocked'. But Antonio does not just state that plain hypothetical with no modifiers no, he adds to his statement and relates the stability of honor to Bassanio. That if his plan stands as "you yourself still do", with honor, all is his (1.1.143). The addition Antonio is quick to insert turns this hypothetical into actuality, as "you yourself still do" acknowledges Bassanio for his virtues and so, pre-emptively Antonio knows what he offers to give to him, is indeed a given. This line and action not just underscore the endless support Antonio has for Bassanio but just how far their relationship is one of akin to Aristotle's ideal of a "complete friendship" (*Nicomachean Ethics* Book VIII ch.3). The scene ends with Antonio fulfilling this promise of support for Bassanio; lending his lovestruck friend his name for credit, Antonio assures Bassanio, the extent of how much of his credit can be used. Demonstrating just a taste of his "extremest means" (1.1.145) in action, Antonio sends him off stating that his credit, "shall be racked even to the uttermost / To furnish thee to Belmont to fair Portia" (1.1.188-189). Antonio, yet again, promises the most he is able to do for Bassanio by assuring that his credit will be "racked even to

the uttermost” (1.1.188) in order to aid his friend in his quest to win over the “fair Portia” (1.1.189). To the extent of his abilities, and then some, the scene ends on a show of unmatched support of one friend to another, in the pursuit of love. The set-up of male friendship in the play concludes as it moves on to the next scene. At this point of the play, male amity is defined as an entanglement of links with the idealized bond of our main pair at its center.

Once Shakespeare establishes the terms of male friendship, in the scene immediately following, he introduces the play’s female lead with a female companion. This scene, in turn, establishes the terms of female friendship in *The Merchant of Venice*. Looking at this scene, like previously, we can identify how friendships with women look as well as how they work. The scene starts amid the conversation between Portia, the beloved woman who Bassanio discussed about in the previous scene, and Nerissa, her waiting-woman. With an introduction of how male friendship in the play’s Venice works followed by an introduction of two women having a discussion, this scene is potentially set-up to be a direct parallel of sorts, which as you read on, becomes firm. After all, the scene not only starts with our main female lead in *The Merchant of Venice*, but it starts off with her feeling depressed and having to confide to her friend: Nerissa (much like Antonio to Salarino and Solanio at the start of the first scene). Granted, unlike the male friendships of the scene prior, the actual title of “friend”, or anything akin to it, is never spoken between the two or about their relationship. Nevertheless, as the scene unfolds, this parallel between the previous scene’s depiction of male friendship and this one’s portrayal of friendship between the two women becomes increasingly clear and purposeful.

First, let us start with exploring the dynamic of Portia and Nerissa so we can understand how their friendship is defined (at least at the start). Unlike the numerous threads of friendship that was explored in the first scene with the men, this scene starkly contrasts by starting off with the

two women in conversation with only each other. In fact, until the end of the scene, where another servant comes to deliver a message to Portia, the two women basically share the whole scene and conversation that unfolds to themselves. And when one reads the rest of the play, you discover that the only true friendship is with each other, again contrasting against the multiple connections the men of the first scene share together. Immediately, the female bond differs from the Antonio and Bassanio pair, in that there is a quality of solidarity in their singular bond to one another. It is a quality that has been much attributed to the classical ideal of male friendships, as “classical examples are always pairs” (Mills 8). Yet here, this quality is clearly attributed to the female pair of Nerissa and Portia. Shakespeare evidently plays with how the friendships of this play reflect the idealized characteristics of classical amity. Instead of folding his male friendships into fitting neatly into the attributes needed to be considered ideal, he not only shifts the way these relationships work with these classical traits but also makes female friendships, appear in some ways, *more* like the classical ideals. He places both friendships on the same scale and affords both the same level of significance and intimacy.

Jumping into the two women’s relationship dynamic in the scene itself, we find ourselves immediately with Portia, unhappy, expressing her distress to her ever-faithful companion: “By my troth, Nerissa, my little body is aweary of this great world” (1.2.1-2). She starts off her expression of ‘weariness’ strong by using the phrase “By my troth” (1.2.1) which “expresses strong affirmation and assertion” (OED). Portia hits hard in voicing her unidentified anguish by not just proclaiming her feelings but swearing a mild oath to these feelings. These feelings she goes on to detail, that make her feel small and tired from being so “little” from living in such a “great” and expansive world (1.2.1-2). The usage of the word and feeling of being “aweariy” (1.2.1) heavily calls back to the sadness that Antonio expressed in the past scene and admitted: “wearies me”

(1.1.1). This language as well as the very same acts of a character expressing their tired feelings to their companion in each scene starts calls for the two scenes to parallel. After all, while Portia only uses a single line to express her anguish (unlike Antonio's paragraph of expression), the feelings there are both clearly negative and have been pent-up. The stressors of Antonio and Portia's pains are, evidently, different. This means the way their feelings of distress manifest and work in both characters differ, and we see this in Portia's language. While Antonio is lost in sadness to the point he feels "want-wit" (1.1.1) for not understanding himself, Portia knows clearly what she must be sad and tired about (despite not revealing this information to the audience yet). In fact, in addition to being weary, Portia comes off as annoyed and frustrated. The emphasis of her "little body" to the world calls attention that her stature is not only small, but that her state of mind is as well. And when her stressor is revealed, this bit of cold anger she feels makes sense. There is also a definite sense of dramatization and exaggeration in invoking this comparison of herself to the rest of the "great" world. And such antics only make the annoyance flow freely, tinging the statement in dryness. This reading especially comes into play when Nerissa replies.

Through her language, Portia both vents yet also seeks humor in the situation. And to the best of her abilities and with a bit of tough love, Nerissa returns both to her by giving her advice in changing the way she thinks about it. Instead of agreeing with her, Nerissa corrects her, "You would be, sweet madam, if your miseries / were in the same abundance as your good fortunes are" (1.2.3-5). Nerissa sets up her response as one commiserating with her lady's feelings, by addressing such feelings head-on with the phrase "You would be" (1.2.3) as if agreeing, 'yes, of course, your situation would make you feel that way'. It comes off as initially directly supportive and feeding into her dramatization of her 'weariness'. Additionally, she also tries to temper her following speech by addressing Portia as "sweet madam" (1.2.3) as opposed to using a simple

‘madam’. This is notable because while Nerissa does refer to her lady by “madam” several times in the play, even later again in this very scene, she never uses a modifier with the title ever again after this scene. It makes the first half of the line set up to be consoling as well as empathetic to her plight. But then, Nerissa continues and much like Gratiano in the previous scene, she advises Portia to think otherwise. Again, while we do not know what Portia is tired over at this point, Nerissa clearly knows because she continues by presenting Portia a hypothetical in which her troubles would rightly receive such distress. *If* Portia’s miseries were in the “same abundance” (1.2.4) as her good fortunes are, Portia *would* be rightfully worn out by this predicament. But, in that statement is a bit of a slight, or at least a reaffirming of the facts. Here, Nerissa is straightforward with her words, if Portia experienced misery in the same quantities as the amount of her overabundant wealth is, then she would be indeed, “awearied of this great world” (1.2.1-2). Nerissa highlights her wealth and continues by stating that those who “surfeit” suffer just as much as those who “starve” (1.2.6). Nerissa then advises her to achieve happiness by being seated “in the mean” (1.2.8) which entails finding the balance between excess and scarcity. She also plays with language here by punning on the word “mean”, saying that to live “in the mean” (1.2.8) is “no mean happiness” (1.2.7), implying that finding this moderation in desire will not return you a moderate sense of happiness. Nerissa seems to mean well and implores Portia to change not only her tune, but her way of viewing the situation.

Portia, in response, plays with wordplay of her own. Both jokingly complimenting the syntax of the content as well as pointedly commending Nerissa’s “sententiae” for being well-stated but not addressing the advice itself, she remarks, “Good sentences, and well pronounced” (1.2.10). Nerissa, in turn, gives her a witty retort with another hearty bout of wordplay, taking her mistress’ use of the word “well” to turn it on her, “They would be better if well followed” (1.2.11). There is

a clear comfortable energy between the two of them that is evidenced in this scene from the way they banter back and forth with their language. This energy echoes the way the male friends of the first scene playfully argued, with a particular echoing of Gratiano and Lorenzo's exchange about not being able to "speak". In addition to their bouts of wordplay in this back-and-forth, there is something so important to note about their speech pattern as well. The entire time they talk to one another in this private setting, both women speak in prose. Despite their contrasting class statuses, both women speak in the same speech pattern. This shared speaking pattern indicates a strong sense of closeness much like when Bassanio uses prose with Antonio to joke around once the two are left alone. It also indicates Portia truly does not speak with Nerissa simply like a mistress and her serving woman, instead she speaks to her as an equal: as her friend.

As the scene continues, Nerissa also continues to give Portia the space to openly express her feelings of affliction. When Portia responds again, to Nerissa's comment chiding her to follow the advice given, she finally vocalizes the cause of her pain, "But this reasoning is not in the fashion to choose me a husband. O, me, the word 'choose'! I may neither choose who I would nor refuse who I dislike" (1.2.21-24). After Portia goes off about her own thoughts on the difficulty of following rules, how youths like herself "skip o'er meshes of good counsel" (1.2.20), she remarks about how this reasoning does not help in helping her choose a husband for herself. The word "choose", however, prompts her to interrupt her train of thought to cry out "O, me" about the usage of the word. She corrects herself and lays out her dilemma: she *cannot* choose for herself in her search for a husband. She cannot choose who she "would" desire and even worse, she has the potential to not be able to refuse a candidate she *dislikes*. The contrast she makes at the start of the scene, of her "little body" to the "great world" starts to make sense (1.1.2-3). This distinction only becomes clearer as she goes on to explain why she is in this position of having a lack of choice,

“So is the will of a living daughter curbed by the will of a dead father. Is it not hard, Nerissa, that I cannot choose one, nor refuse none?” (1.2.24-26). By the end of her speech, Portia reveals that it is the literal “will” of her deceased father, that has created stipulations that affect her lack of “will” for herself to be able to choose her own marriage partner (1.2.24-25). Yet again, Portia plays with the dual meanings of words in her rhetoric. However, unlike the playfulness the wordplay earlier in the scene provided, the verbal antics here invite a serious comparison of her very “will” to her father’s last “will” and testament for her. The usage of the same word to detail this act, emphasizes her lack of power over her situation: a dead man has control over the actions of her life. And with this sentiment, she again pleads by asking Nerissa, “Is it not hard” (1.2.25) that she is unable to make her choice on this matter, on her own terms? Again, Portia’s situation, is one Nerissa is aware of, as they have evidently known each other for quite some time. The way the two women speak, is marked by familiarity. This is also made clear in Nerissa’s response, which highlights her knowledge about the details of the will itself.

With this awareness in mind, Nerissa has a quandary of her own to solve in her response to her companion. If Portia, her mistress, is under the controls and whims of her dead father, then it is a given that her serving woman—Nerissa—would have to follow and respect the wishes of her father just as dutifully, if not more so. Despite her own feelings, whatever they may be, Nerissa cannot straightforwardly agree with Portia on this matter because it would go against her position. She is a subordinate, twice over, by being both a woman and a waiting woman too. This pressure left on her by a patriarchal society buffers her, but it does not prevent her from delivering comfort in a way that circumvents the system. For a second time, Nerissa attempts to reassure her lady about the process, left by her father’s will. She reaffirms the “virtuous” (1.2.27) nature of Portia’s father, again confirming Nerissa is not new to this family, and that because of such virtues, the test

he has created will not fail her. She goes on to describe this test, revealing her father has set it up like a “lottery” of sorts (1.2.29). With every suitor that comes by to woo Portia’s hand in marriage, they must first attempt a trial where they must choose between three chests: gold, silver, and lead. And the one who “chooses his meaning” in this test, “his” referring to Portia’s father, then “chooses” Portia (1.2.20-31). The one to ‘choose’ Portia, therefore, will be one who has been vetted to be as virtuous and honorable as possible. Nerissa, assures, that the person chosen will “no doubt never be / chosen by any rightly but one who you shall rightly / love” (1.2.31-33). Here, while Nerissa defends her master’s machinations, she does so in a way, meant more to reassure Portia as opposed to upholding the reputation of her dead master. She tries to spin the test as something not completely hopeless and a place for love, nevertheless.

And Nerissa does not stop there, with her efforts to cheer Portia and give her solidarity in her time of anguish. When she then asks for Portia’s opinion, if there is any “warmth” (1.2.33) in her affection for the suitors they have met so far, Nerissa’s care and attention for her friend becomes even clearer. By showing interest in Portia’s thoughts about her suitors, Nerissa not only acknowledges her feelings as something, indeed, subjective, she allows Portia another space to vent once more. This time, openly and freely, Portia can vent or express her honest feelings about the suitors she has been forced to meet under the casket guidelines. This move not only aids in helping to air out any thoughts Portia has been forced to suppress, but it also returns their conversation to a much lighter air. It is a successful move by Nerissa as her friend eagerly takes her up on her proposal and even turns it into a bit of a game. Being playful, Portia, dictates to Nerissa that “she will describe them, and according / to my description level at my affection” (1.2.37-38). The exchange that follows, returns the easygoing energy of their opening banter, as Portia humorously describes the men with vigor and brutal honesty from calling the Neapolitan

prince a “colt” (1.2.40) for talking incessantly about his horse to casually admitting that if she was married to the Duke of Saxon’s nephew and he suddenly met his demise, she would “make shift / to go without him” (1.2.90-91). Granted, Nerissa does more listening, as opposed to adding anything more or playing with her language like earlier in the scene, but it fits as she is giving Portia the space to freely speak and express herself right now. She truly is attentive, that by the end of the game, Nerissa reassures Portia that she “need not fear” (1.2.100) of any of these undesired suitors as they have told her that they will trouble Portia “with no more suit” (1.2.103). Portia counting her blessings, hearing that news, only continues to become more and more alleviated.

Nerissa’s final of kindness and support for her lady, in the scene, is giving Portia hope for the future and the potential of her own choice in the casket test. Much like how the previous scene ends on Bassanio and Antonio discussing about Portia (Bassanio’s desired woman), the topic of Bassanio becomes their ending conversation. However, unlike the previous scene, Nerissa is the one who brings up his profile to Portia because this is partly her way of devoting her all in aiding Portia’s love life and her happiness. Unlike Antonio, Nerissa cannot give her friend aid in monetary terms. But, comforting speech and optimistic feelings, Nerissa has plenty to give. So, when she prods Portia to “remember” (1.2.112) a Venetian, who out of all the men, “her foolish eyes looked upon, was best deserving a / fair lady” (1.2.118-119), Nerissa clearly has Portia’s best interests in mind. The implication of presenting Bassanio to Portia, who is best deserving of a “fair lady”, not only highlights Portia’s significance but highlights (that despite the constrictions of the casket test) Portia does deserve to choose and to choose the best for her husband. Nerissa wants nothing but the best for her friend, especially after hearing all of Portia’s disappointed and grumpy descriptions of the men she has met before. And so, by placing this thought and this man as a potential for

Portia, Nerissa gives her a sense of authority and hope, even if right now, it is only a daydream. In return, Portia confirms her remembrance of such an esteemed man and commends him as “worthy of thy praise” (1.2.121), which not only details that Portia holds Nerissa’s opinion in high regard, but that Nerissa’s advice can truly reach her, after all.

Part of the reasoning for the parallelism between male and female friendship comes from a clear intent in setting up the fated encounter of the lovers of Bassanio and Portia in the following scenes. The set-up for the romance in the play is visible to grasp. However, I argue that there is another intended set-up embedded in the contrasting scenes, and that is in the significance of the two main friendships that slot themselves right beside the central romance of the play. And this establishment of the deep amity behind each of the respective lovers-to-be is just as important to the love story between Portia and Bassanio, if not more so, as evidenced clearly in the final act and ploy of the play: the orchestration of the ring trick.

At the start of the play, the friendship of Portia and Nerissa is constricted by the male-constrictions of a father’s domineering last will. It is a will that controls Portia’s free will in choosing her own romantic partner and a will that confines Nerissa in aiding her friend in her romantic quest beyond recommending Portia’s dream husband in the form of Bassanio (a successful suitor-to-be). By the latter half of the play to the end, Portia and Nerissa find themselves in new constrictions: their dual marriages. Bassanio, having successfully wooed Portia with his appearance and with his charming “company” (3.2.3), not only ends up winning the casket test, but the more than willingly given affection of the lovely Portia. Gratiano, who as per his “suit” (2.2.177) to Bassanio, tags along with him to Belmont and ends up falling for Nerissa who he wins over “with oaths of love” (3.2.209).

With a joint wedding performed, the two women once constricted by the restrictions of a dead man's will, are now wives, newly bound but willingly to their beloved new husbands. Shakespeare depicts a shift once these two female friends become unrestricted from the burden of Portia's father's last testament. A relationship once centered around support and solace from a constrictive lack of freedom now becomes a bond that actively fights against male structures of power. Particularly, Portia and Nerissa assert themselves against the primacy of male friendships in the play. This is a dominance that becomes evident even the moment the two women become engaged. Even before they can start to plan out any arrangements, news of Antonio arrives to kill the jovial mood of the room. Antonio, having lost his trading ships at sea, cannot afford to pay back a debt he made to Shylock for the sake of Bassanio's quest of love. Antonio, believing it "impossible" (3.2.330) that he will live past the "pound of flesh" (3.4.36) he now owes Shylock in return, writes to Bassanio persuading for his presence as his last wish. Antonio pushes his friend for his immediate return, for "if your love do not persuade you to / come, let not my letter" (3.2.333-334). Bassanio, with his wife's approval and even insistence, rushes to the side of his (as Portia puts it) "true friend" (3.2.321). This is a common theme that begins from this moment onward (until the play's very end) where Portia, though now married to Bassanio, must uphold her husband's bond to his friend Antonio as opposed to his bond with her.

However, Portia does not let this trend persist forever as she teams up with Nerissa to reposition their marital bonds with their husbands, over their husbands' amiable bonds to each other and the bonds of their group. At first, this plan of action seems like the language and behavior of a female "enemy of friendship", as Portia strives to assert herself between the male friendships of her husband, especially with him and Antonio (Bray 175). But Portia never actively tries to break apart his friendships. In fact, Portia always endorses the true bonds Bassanio shares with his

friends, particularly with Antonio. She even spouts the classical ideology of friendship that requires it to be between two men who have “a like proportion / of lineaments, of manners, and of spirit” (3.4.14-15). However, this praise does not forgo her connection with Bassanio. If anything, she simply understands these bonds are in conjunction, as evidenced by her next line of logic in explaining why she is so determined to help Antonio. If Antonio is much like Bassanio in every way, in souls even, then to Portia, she thinks “how little is the cost I have bestowed / In purchasing the semblance of my soul / From out the state of hellish cruelty” (3.4.19-21). In helping Antonio, she helps the “semblance of my soul” which is Bassanio now. Even here, Portia is actively subverting and going against the classical ideal of friendship to repurpose the language to herself instead. It is these subtle moments of language and play Portia utilizes throughout the last half of the play, with her friend Nerissa, that gives her and Nerissa the power they had been denied from under the will, for so long.

And indeed, by play’s end, Antonio has not only repositioned and reemphasized Bassanio’s marital bond with Portia over the two men’s amical bond by placing his “soul upon the forfeit” (5.1.271), but Bassanio himself, no longer associates classical friendship ideology with Antonio. When Bassanio, jokes around with Portia, telling her, “Sweet doctor, you shall be my bedfellow / When I am absent, then lie with my wife” (5.1.304-305), he characterizes Portia as both her male lawyer persona and her true self. Her true self is Bassanio’s wife, a bond that has again been re-emphasized, while her male persona now takes the place of the role of Bassanio’s “true friend” (3.2.321). The act of sharing beds, and even wives, was a common expectation of ideal male friends that shows Portia has asserted her importance to Bassanio through the help of Nerissa in her playful schemes. Much like Portia says, though part in acting (but part in truth, overall), “Nerissa teaches me what to believe” (5.1.223). The play ends on the security of the faithfulness

of Portia and Nerissa's husbands, due to their ingenious plans, in Gratiano's final couplet, that truly speaks for him and Bassanio: "Well, while I live, I'll fear no thing / So sore as keeping safe Nerissa's ring" (5.1.328-329).

OTHELLO

Unlike the entanglements of friendship spun with the males of *The Merchant of Venice*, the friendships with the men of *Othello*, are much harder to track. Male friendship in this play tends to either go through a constant state of fluctuation which ends when the bond eventually dissolves, or it is an act of friendship—performative and used to instrumentalize a means to an end. Othello and his lieutenant Cassio form one of the closest bonds of male friendship in the play that is marked by the trust and esteem Othello has in him at the play's start. It is a bond beyond simple co-workers as Othello admits he does "love" him as an individual separate from his position (2.3.264). Desdemona, Othello's wife, herself recognizes how Cassio does "love my lord" (3.3.11) right back and that he has "known him long" (3.3.12). After all, Othello does purposefully choose him for the role of his second-in-command instead of his ancient Iago, who he also holds in such high regard as being "most honest" (2.3.7), that he cannot help but refer to him constantly as "Honest Iago" (1.3.36). And yet, even so, this friendship inevitably collapses once Iago manipulates Cassio to be cast in a dark light in Othello's eyes. It is a bond that fails to recover at all, by play's end, even when all truths are unveiled. And if the truest male bond of the play could not stay true by the end, then the other male pairings are in worse shape. Roderigo and Iago form a bond of utility which is as false and fake as their personalities which yet again, by play's end, ends abruptly by Iago's final ruse on his dear "fool" (1.3.426). Even minor friendships of the play, such as Brabantio and Othello, face the fate of dissolution. Brabantio, who in Othello's words "loved" and "oft invited" (1.3.149) him once, switches his tune upon hearing his marriage to his

daughter to utter hatred. This love turned hate burns so angry in Brabantio for Othello now, that he rebrands him as “a foul thief” (1.2.80) who must have used “witchcraft” (1.3.77) to seduce his daughter away from him. Or even whether it is the artificial affection Iago provides to Othello in his long con of the play, who he follows not for Othello’s sake but for “himself” (1.1.64), true and stable amity between males is difficult to find. Therefore, when we shift our attention to the female amity in the play, we unveil a significant feature. One of the only friendships in the whole play to last for its entirety, is the one between the female pair of Desdemona and Emilia. With all the fluctuation and performance present in male friendships in *Othello*, the genuineness and constancy of the female pair stand out. It is not only a bond that sticks once introduced but one that progresses and grows throughout the story. The friendship of Desdemona and Emilia becomes defined by a constant back-and-forth of playing the role of defense for the other until by play’s end, where a reversal of power cements Emilia as Desdemona’s literal final line of support.

First, however, let us go back and fully track how male friendship works in *Othello*. It is necessary to go over how the continual fluidity of male amity in the play because it not only brings emphasis to the constancy of the friendship of Desdemona and Emilia, but it speaks to general treatment of friendship of the play. It becomes notable that one of the lasting pairs of the play is that between two women. But, first, what do I mean when in my claim that there is a lack of durable friendships between men in *Othello*? Well, much like what we did with *The Merchant of Venice*, let us examine the first instance of friendship in the play, to understand how male amity here works differently than in our last examined play. There are two instances of male friendship in the very first scene (three, if you count the false good will Iago states that he is required to show to Othello). These two main instances of unstable male friendship include the bond between Iago and his pawn Roderigo, and that between Othello and his lieutenant, Cassio—a bond Iago describes with scorn.

The very first example of male friendship in the play, the interaction of Iago and Roderigo, is the most significant to look at, however, as it perfectly sets-up the way male friendship works in the play. Right away, Roderigo and Iago establish the classical quality of sharing goods (particularly monetary) in their friendship in Roderigo's opening remark. "That thou, Iago, who hast had my purse / As if the strings were thine" (1.1.2-3). While the play opens with Roderigo scolding Iago for an act unnamed yet, Roderigo also acknowledges the relationship between the two as close enough for his purse's strings to be "thine". Shakespeare's choice in having the first association of the classical ideal, with the pair of Roderigo and Iago, is telling of the way male friendship operates on a whole. As the scene continues, Shakespeare makes evidently clear that the relationship between Roderigo and Iago is not one of "complete friendship". It is not even close. One of the main attributes that Aristotle claimed was necessary for a true friendship was that it must be between two people "who are alike in their virtue" (*Nicomachean Ethics* Book VIII). Roderigo and Iago have no virtue; in fact, they "alike" both lack such goodness. Iago says so much, later in the act, when he mocks the very concept of "virtue" as "a fig!" for it is up themselves whether "we are thus or thus" (1.3.361-362). This immorality is also evident in their shared and malicious hatred for Othello. In fact, their kinship in mutually hating Othello, is part of the reason who their argument at the scene's start. Roderigo, miffed that Iago had learned the news about Othello's newly appointed lieutenant without telling him, expresses suspicion over Iago's relationship with Othello. Roderigo, needing assurance of the truth, frustratedly spits, "Thou toldst me thou didst hold him in thy hate" (1.1.7). Iago quickly and bitterly asserts, "Despise me / If I do not" (1.1.8-9). But their virtues are tainted even beyond hating another man, with more power over them. Their virtues are marred by using racist rhetoric when discussing about Othello as well as employing their schemes to undermine the general at any given chance. In private, Roderigo

caricatures the dark-skinned Othello by branding him “thick-lips” (1.1.72) while in public, Iago goes a step further and dehumanizes the man by referring to him as “an old black ram” (1.1.97), to Othello’s father-in-law, no less.

To Aristotle, their friendship would instead be categorized as one of “utility” where each individual loves, “the other not in himself, but only in so far as they will obtain some good for themselves from him” (*Nicomachean Ethics* Book VIII). There is no love or genuine goodwill between the two men; their relationship is built upon the very essence making themselves ‘useful’ to the other. When Iago calls reference to their ‘friendship’ in the end of the act, he does so by assuring that “I could never / better stead thee than now” (1.3.381-382). They are bound together by hatred of the same man; Roderigo receives ‘advice’ from Iago from a man who ‘understands’ and has his best interest at heart while Iago unapologetically finds the “sport and profit” (1.3.429) of making “fools” like Roderigo his purse (1.3.426). This type of ‘false’ friendship that goes against the ideal friendship Aristotle pushed everyone to strive towards was looked down upon in his writings as this sort of amity was “incidental” and ones “easily dissolved” as when “one party is no longer pleasant or useful, the other stops loving him” (*Nicomachean Ethics* Book VIII). Literary portrayals of false friendships during the period were also common as they were meant to serve as warnings of the types of men that one should avoid in forming relationships with. After all, virtue was an essential quality for true friendship. Shakespeare is being purposeful in portraying this friendship between Roderigo and Iago as false; Iago, as a whole, is indeed a character that completely goes against the ideal of friendship for his two-sided façade that would be branded as being a “flatterer” as opposed to a friend. A “flatterer” is identified through their superficiality and how they modify their personality and behavior towards certain individuals to gain something they want. Iago, with his dual nature to Roderigo, his ‘fool’, and who to Othello,

a man most worthy of “honor and trust” (1.3.323), Iago is indeed the text-book definition of flattery. After all, Iago states it best, “I am not what I am” (1.1.71). Cicero himself, clearly noted that “nothing is to be considered a greater bane of friendship than fawning, cajolery, or flattery” (*De Amicitia* 201). Flattery was rooted in vice and threatening to the ideal of forming one soul from many as “how will that be possible if not even in one man taken by himself shall there be a soul always one and the same, but fickle, changeable, and manifold” (*De Amicitia* 201). Any friendship with Iago, therefore, is marred through his vice of flattery. But, this portrayal of corruptive male friendship is not an outlier to the play, only an example.

To begin looking into the friendship of Desdemona and Emilia, it is necessary to start where the bond is established. Much like Nerissa in *The Merchant of the Venice*, Emilia serves as Desdemona’s attendant in the play. It is a role suggested by Othello who first brings up both Emilia and her connection with his wife in this request to Iago: “I prithee let thy wife attend on her” (1.3.338). Unlike Portia and Nerissa, however, the amity between Desdemona and Emilia at the start of the play is quite stunted. There is an indication to be made that the two have known each other for some bit of time, but it is not noticeable in the lack of ease between the two. This comes from not only a clear articulation of difference between the two in their introductory scene, but the way Emilia’s character acts and behaves at the start of the play. Her introduction frames her immediately as someone present in the play yet one set to be in the background. There is a lack of agency emanating from Emilia at the start, and her submissiveness to those around her, at least in public, seems to stand out. A part of it evidently comes from the fact she must serve her lady Desdemona first and foremost. Therefore, when Cassio and other gentlemen waiting for the arrival of Othello and his company, focus their first greetings on Desdemona as their “lady and the grace of heaven” (2.1.94) instead of her, it is only natural. There is nothing she needs to say in this

opening moment, despite arriving alongside her lady, her husband Iago, and even Roderigo. However, even when Cassio kisses Emilia in greeting as a result of his ‘courtesy’, she still says nothing in response. There is not even an indication that Emilia even really reacts, as the lieutenant does not acknowledge her response (if any), and instead jumps to jokingly reassuring the intentions of his actions to Iago instead: “Let it not gall your patience, good Iago / That I extend my matters” (2.1.109-110). And this lack of speech from the attendant of Desdemona, that Shakespeare establishes, is very purposeful as it is a quality quickly pointed out to set up the baseline for a genuine friendship between the two ladies as well as insight into their characters. Emilia, who is at the start, defined through a lack of voice, becomes a staunch vocal defender of Desdemona later in the play. An attribute Emilia learns, much like Portia from Nerissa in the previous play, from Desdemona’s vocal round of support in this very scene. Speech becomes a central feature of their relationship, specifically as rhetorical support.

A line of choice that highlights this rhetorical support firsthand is when Iago first begins his railing against his wife Emilia. It starts off mild, but still telling of his vitriol for women as it characterizes his wife as a typical ‘nagging wife’ stereotype, as he insists to Cassio that if she should “give you so much of her lips / As of her tongue she oft bestows on me” then he too would have grown tired of her (2.1.112-113). In response, at first, Emilia gives no response and remains silent. This prompts Desdemona to retort back for her, crying and seemingly trying to vouch for her, “Alas, she has no speech!” (2.1.114). It is a literal moment of Desdemona speaking up for Emilia in this scene and one we get before Emilia delivers any lines of her own. This response indicates both an acknowledgement by Desdemona in Emilia’s lack of speech at these remarks but that the two have spent time together (though unseen on stage). There is a sense of familiarity established here that Desdemona knows Emilia well enough to argue against the painted rantings

creates of his wife. The way it comes as very reactive also aids in the reading that Desdemona is not just saying this without knowledge of Emilia. Her “alas” comes from a place of pain over hearing Iago demean his own wife, and her very own friend (2.1.114). The reaction coming from Desdemona as opposed to Emilia herself in this moment also very much echoes the ideal of a “single soul”; As Desdemona speaks for Emilia, as if it was a slight against Desdemona herself instead of her friend, Emilia’s silent heart becomes alleviated. This immediate response by Desdemona is also a reassurance to Emilia that even if she cannot feel like she can defend herself, Desdemona will always step up for her.

But what exactly is the cause of such silence by Emilia? Even when hearing such horrid things by her own husband, Emilia does not argue back with him on those points. In fact, what finally prompts Emilia to respond, is not a complete slight against her but a slight against her relationship with Desdemona. When Iago insinuates that Emilia, when in front of Desdemona, “puts her tongue a little in her heart” (2.1.118), and that she still chides him but “with thinking” (2.1.120), Emilia murmurs back in disagreement, “You have little cause to say so” (2.1.121). She disagrees with him, though submissively, by phrasing her refutation with “little cause” as opposed to ‘no cause’. Nevertheless, she still speaks up because Iago in saying that sentiment is not just simply attacking her marital relationship with him, but now her personal relationship with Desdemona too. Iago by marking Emilia as hiding her true self with Desdemona, attempts to mark their relationship as artificial as if they are not presenting their true selves to the other, how different are they from a bond like him and Roderigo. It is an attack on Emilia’s sincerity as a friend to Desdemona as well as also marring their interactions as simple business (a lady and her attendant) where even with her “Ladyship” (2.1.118), Emilia is focused on not her companion, but only on chiding her husband in her thoughts. Iago’s forceful insertion of himself into the private

sphere of their relationship through this line of attack, where Emilia feels reprieve and comfort, is a direct disruption that effects more than just herself but her *and* Desdemona. Therefore, her response, though spoken cautiously and passively, is a defense for her and for her friendship. Now there might be some truth to these lines. After all, as this moment and the rest of the scene shows, Emilia does hide some of her speech, her very tongue, inside her heart. It begs the question, what the stressor behind Emilia's submissiveness? Well, evidently, her husband Iago is clearly the one to force her to shove her tongue inside her heart.

Iago, as a husband, much as he is as a 'friend', is horrid. He speaks the most misogynistic and women-hating rhetoric out of the all the plays I examine in this project. This becomes especially evident in his spiteful response delivered wryly after hearing Emilia attempt to argue back with him. Expanding on his stereotyping of his wife as a nag at the start, Iago broadens his scope to stereotype all women and reduce them to "pictures out of doors" (2.1.122), "wildcats in your kitchens" (2.1.123), and even "huswives" (2.1.125). With how vitriol Iago gets with women as respectable and loved as Desdemona, the amount of such bitterness Iago must show to his own wife is easily inferred. Emilia, who lets Desdemona take the stand again in speaking out against her cruel husband by cursing him out as a "slanderer" (2.1.126), stays silent in response to his reply. When she manages to find her voice, another dry comment later, she notes that Iago will not ever "write my praise" (2.1.129) which Iago easily agrees with her stating, "No, let me not" (2.1.130). The emotionally abusive element of their marriage is highlighted clear as day through this scene from the way Emilia hides an essential tool of hers (her voice), close to her heart even in spite of the innumerable amounts of verbal abuse Iago slings at her throughout. And yet, nevertheless, Desdemona continues to speak for Emilia, in her defense and support, throughout the rest of his railings and even makes a point to assert to her friend, that she needs not "learn of

him, Emilia, though he be thy / husband” (2.1.177-178). Desdemona remains constant in looking after her companion with her best interests at heart.

Against male oppression, from her abusive husband of all places, Emilia starts off the play in her friendship as present but reserved in her returning her affection and support vocally with Desdemona. In contrast, Desdemona is free-spirited and fierce in her unrelenting support and comfort for her friend, evidenced by the strong efforts she makes to defend Emilia herself against Iago when she would not do it for herself. It is in Desdemona’s nature after all, as she also swears to speak to her husband on Cassio’s behalf when he has fallen from Othello’s graces in the latter half of the play. Resolutely, Desdemona swears that if she does a “vow of friendship”, she will “perform it / to the last article” (3.3.23-24). But, at this point in the play, Emilia does not have the same luxuries of confidence in her rhetoric or the ability of directly speaking out against her husband even if it would be for her friend. Her duty to her husband, outweighs her duty to Desdemona as evidenced by her role in Iago’s malicious plans.

The toxicity of a male-centric world, which affects its male friendships to be diluted and not keep steadfast, does end up infecting the female friendship of Desdemona and Emilia, though temporarily, for a crucial point of the play. Iago, now in the midst of his scheme to permanently rid Cassio of his lieutenancy and to push the role onto himself, has relied on stirring up a key source of conflict that will ultimately crush, not only, the friendship of Cassio and Othello but the marital bond between Desdemona and Othello. This conflict is the induction of jealousy in Othello, over his wife’s show of courtesy (as being an intermediary) for Cassio. And while the sparks of jealousy are still kindling, at this point, Iago has been manipulating every next action perfectly in stirring the pot. One of his biggest moves, which ends up being key in Othello succumbing to his envy, is Iago needling Emilia to bring him Desdemona’s precious handkerchief, a token of love

from Othello. This is a request he makes “a hundred times” over, according to Emilia (3.3.336). Emilia is placed in a moral quandary here. Steal her mistress’ beloved possession or refuse and fall victim to her husband’s railings once more? While Emilia is unaware of what purpose Iago would have for a token like Desdemona’s, something she is more than well-aware of, is just how dear the handkerchief is to her lady. She knows deeply about the personal history and sentiment behind the token such as how it was “her first remembrance” from Othello and that Desdemona loves the cloth so much, “she reserves it evermore about her / To kiss and talk to” (3.3.339-340). In this moment, it is truly a question of choosing to uphold her bond with Desdemona or her bond with her lawfully wedded husband.

Emilia ends up choosing to present the misplaced handkerchief by Desdemona to her husband as she notes, “I nothing but to please his fantasy” (3.3.343). It seems almost like a betrayal because, disregarding intentions, it is. Why would she make this choice then? This is because, at this point in the play, Emilia is so seeped into following the orders and wishes of her husband, she cannot imagine performing an act opposite to what is expected by her in this society. As she states, she is nothing but a person to “please” his fantasies (3.3.343). But Emilia’s intentions in choosing to give the handkerchief to Iago are more nuanced than what is simply stated as well. When she picks up the neglected cloth, in how she phrases, to her “advantage” (3.3.357), she does so with consideration to her friendship with Desdemona. At first, when she talks to herself about giving the cloth to her husband, she plans it in a way where she will be able to both fulfill Iago’s request and return the token safely in Desdemona’s hands. Emilia, initially, states that she will “have the work ta’en out / and give ’t Iago” (3.3.340-341). What she means is that she would copy the embroidery pattern and give that to Iago in the original’s stead. Now, she does not know that is indeed not what Iago wants, but regardless, in this line of thinking, Emilia places Desdemona’s

feelings first over her husband's command. However, Emilia quickly switches into presenting the whole original cloth to Iago when he runs into her unexpectedly and immediately begins to deride her by calling her a "foolish wife" (3.3.348). Emilia deals with a lot of back-in-forth sway in trying to appeal to both her husband and her friend in this scene. She goes back to being considerate of Desdemona before her exit, asserting that if Iago does not have a "purpose of import" (3.3.364) for the handkerchief, to give it back to her promptly as she notes how her lady will "run mad" (3.3.365) when she learns its disappearance. Yet ultimately, Iago pushes her to leave, insisting that she tells no one she knows anything and insisting, he does indeed have "use for it" (3.3.368). She follows his instructions, leaving immediately, without a word. And when Desdemona later asks Emilia if she knows where she might have lost her handkerchief, Emilia lies simply, "I know not, madam" (3.4.24). The poisonous effect that this patriarchal society has on friendship contaminates all kinds of amity, including, unfortunately, female amity. But, unlike the male pairs who fail to recover from such toxins, the female pair of Desdemona and Emilia remains resilient past it.

Resilience between female friends in this society becomes clear in the following scene, after Emilia witnesses Othello's now flaming jealousy (and his subsequent cruel treatment of Desdemona as a result), in full action. When Othello asks Desdemona to produce the handkerchief he gave her, already informed of its absence from his wife's possessions, he speaks more and more "startlingly and rash" (3.4.92) to her, the longer she is unable to produce the impossible item. He leaves in an enraged huff, leaving Desdemona to question his anger and express how she feels "most unhappy in the loss of" (3.4.119) her beloved's handkerchief. At this, Emilia responds in the most open manner she has spoken since the play began, with first a dismissal of men how, "'Tis not a year or two shows us a man" (3.4.120). She then pairs this derisive statement against men, by relaying how women only know men's true nature after a year or two, with a metaphor

comparing men to “stomachs” and women as “food” (3.4.121). She describes that when men are hungry, men will indulge in women eagerly but once “they are full / They belch us” (3.4.122-123). This is a clear indication of the pain and suffering she has felt from men abusing her, particularly from her husband Iago. Through seeing her friend go through a similar toxic marital conflict as herself, especially after watching the now combative Othello, who was once a loving husband who joked their “greatest discords” (2.1.216) would be over the surplus of kisses they have shared. The pained revulsion she feels for herself in aiding Iago, and for Desdemona for the brunt she has taken from the aggression of Othello, manifest perfectly in the metaphor she uses. The violent physicality that the act of a stomach belching food (of a man expelling a once ‘satisfying’ woman) invokes, also relays Emilia’s feelings of anger for the situation for her and her mistress. It is an anger that only festers.

For instance, Emilia’s fiery anger on behalf of Desdemona, once a spark, becomes ignited when she witnesses Othello’s behavior deteriorate in the following act when he starts repeatedly assailing his good wife with names of “strumpet” (4.2.94) and “whore” (4.2.99). She recognizes this pattern of vicious jealousy, and its harmful effects on the spouses who must endure their suspicious spouses, as it is a pattern she has recognized in Iago. When Emilia curses out the “base notorious knave” (4.2.165) that must have tricked Othello into marring his trust of his wife, she compares the person who “devised this slander” (4.2.156) to the same man who poisoned Iago’s mind about her once. She expresses this comparison to Iago himself, swearing, how much this offender of Desdemona is like the one “that turned your wit the seamy side without / And made you to suspect me with the Moor” (4.2.172-173). Emilia’s anger at this remembrance as well as seeing the slander against her lady particularly culminates in this scene. Her aggression manifests in her language throughout the scene, especially in stark contrast to her gentle lady. While

Desdemona cries in sorrow and keeps peace with her words, blaming not Othello but her “wretched fortune” (4.2.150), Emilia curses furiously and wishes for violence against the ones responsible for this change of heart in Othello. She repeatedly brands this mystery offender by terms like “villain” (4.2.153), “rogue” (4.2.154), and “slave” (4.2.155). A peak example of this contrast of Desdemona’s and Emilia’s language occurs when Iago attempts to disregard Emilia’s theories of an evil ‘slanderer’ poisoning Othello’s mind by saying that “no such man” exists (4.2.157). While Desdemona chimes that if there was ever a man, “heaven pardon him” (4.2.158), Emilia interjects differently by twisting her lady’s reserved response, “A halter pardon him, and hell gnaw his bones!” (4.2.159). Here, we see a reversal of their scene together. Desdemona, with her tongue in her heart, submissively letting injustice continue in her rhetoric while, Emilia is the one to stand up and express the anger and offense of the scenario that Desdemona has been dealt with. Overall, seeing Othello treat Desdemona the violent way he does hereon becomes a turning point for Emilia; from this moment forth, she no longer holds her ‘tongue’ in her heart. She not only begins to openly and candidly speak with Desdemona about all her thoughts, but she chooses to act, with no inhibitions, upon her concern for her friend in now mutual support. It is time for Emilia to return the favor.

Emilia’s turn in defending Desdemona arises, finally, after Othello confronts Emilia on her own and questions her on her mistress’ relationship with Cassio. He badgers her relentlessly to every detail, whether Cassio and Desdemona ever spoke in “whisper” (4.2.6) or have ever sent her out of her way to “fetch her fan, her gloves, her mask, nor nothing” (4.2.10). Emilia’s answers are consistent and true to the virtue of her lady, and by her choice to ultimately lean towards female solidarity instead of further ‘feeding’ the jealous men of the world. When Othello, consumed by the “green-eyed monster” (3.3.196) of jealousy after all, comments how “strange” (4.2.12) it is the

hear such chaste answers of Desdemona, Emilia steps up her levels of defense for Desdemona to the maximum. She rebukes him that if he is thinking Desdemona acting faithfully is strange, to “remove your thought” (4.2.15). She insists, that if she “be not honest, chaste, and true / There’s no man happy” (4.2.19); Emilia, therefore, characterizes the ideal and epitome of honesty, chastity, and truth as Desdemona. But, most importantly, Emilia backs up her belief and surety in her friend’s honesty with a solemn pledge that yet again, calls back to the classical ideal of a singular soul. Emilia vows with the wager that Desdemona is indeed “honest” (4.2.13), and that Othello and whoever else bets against her, may “Lay down my soul at stake” (4.2.14). Emilia offers down her very soul, as the bet she is willing to offer in upholding Desdemona’s chastity. She swears upon her entire life, on the surety that her friend is truly honest. Emilia has come a long way, from offering up support and defense with passive and watered-down rhetoric such as “You have *little* cause to say that” (2.1.121). Now, she speaks without hesitation and no faltering. She offers up her life, her *soul* as a guarantee for Desdemona just like that. This not only shows how much faith Emilia has in Desdemona, but how much more willing Emilia is able to act upon said faith and belief in her companion. At the start, Desdemona’s move to fight back an insult flung at Emilia by Iago, as if she had been the one insulted, showcased the good will performed as if they were one individual, formed from two women. Now too, Emilia speaking resolutely in Desdemona’s name and offering her very soul in the name of Desdemona’s virtue, does the attribute of classical friends sharing a “singular soul” fully spark association with these two female friends. And Emilia’s pledge to lay down her soul for the guarantee of Desdemona’s soul is not full of empty words. Indeed, it is a promise that gets called upon and fulfilled in the final act.

By play’s end, Othello’s jealousy, and Iago’s trickery to fuel that jealousy, hits its peak culminating in Othello’s decision to kill his ever-faithful wife, “else she’ll betray more men”

(5.2.6). It is an action, though full of conflict in Othello's words and hesitations, that is powered by Othello's unbending stubbornness. Even in the face of Desdemona's desperate efforts to persuade her husband otherwise, he stands unmoving. Desdemona's repeated expressions of fear for the "fatal" look (5.2.44) in Othello's eyes and her persistent begging for Othello to "banish" (5.2.98) her instead of killing her or to postpone her death by a night, a "half an hour" (5.2.102), or even a single "prayer" (5.2.104) longer, fails to prevent the inevitable. Before Desdemona can say anything more, Othello attempts to smother the last remaining words out of her. He is interrupted, unintentionally by Emilia, who has been searching for her lord to inform him of the news of Roderigo's murder. Ultimately deciding Desdemona is near death and so will no longer be able to speak in defense to her friend, Othello hides her behind the curtains of her bed to talk to Emilia. However, amid Emilia's relaying about "foul murders done" (5.2.132), Desdemona cries out with a dying perseverance, "O falsely, falsely murdered!" (5.2.144). Emilia immediately reacts with concern questioning on the cry's source. But Emilia also attuned to her lady's voice, quickly realizes it is indeed her, and finding her, cries in return for her to "speak again!" (5.2.148). Emilia, mournfully acknowledging the cureless state she finds her friend in, passionately repeats, "Sweet Desdemona, O sweet mistress, speak!" (5.2.149).

Desdemona, in her final moments, expresses two main sentiments to Emilia. First, she reiterates one last time in defense of her virtuous chaste spirit by proclaiming her death as a "guiltless" one (5.2.150). Secondly, after Emilia prods her companion for her murderer's identity, Desdemona uses her dying words in defense and complete exoneration of her husband, "Nobody. I, myself. Farewell / Commend me to my kind lord. O, farewell" (5.2.152-153). In Desdemona's final moments, her last words and last action of her life, was in honor of her husband. Even after everything Othello has put her through, even in spite of all the pain and sorrow she has carried

from the experiences her husband has incited, and even in spite of her own desperate desire to live that was cruelly ignored by Othello, Desdemona still chooses to dedicate her final words in truth of her love for her husband. It is a clear reference to the now fulfilled words she spoke an act earlier, that “his unkindness may defeat my life / But never taint my love” (4.2.189-190). While there is emotional value in Desdemona upholding her love for Othello, above all things, there is no justice in this choice. Despite everything, Desdemona still chooses to not only absolve him of any crimes, but her final line before her second ‘farewell’, “Commend me to my kind lord” (5.2.153) yearns for her husband’s approval, even still, on her literal death bed. The duty to stay loyal to a husband, much like it did when Emilia chose to unwittingly aid Iago in offense to her friend, reigns superior here yet again. But, in this moment, Desdemona not only places her husband above her friend, by answering falsely to her friend’s question (asked for her sake), Desdemona places her husband over justice for herself. While Desdemona remains faithful in repeating her guiltlessness to the slander preached by her husband, she still protects her murderer with her life, and there is no righteousness for her sake alone in her actions.

Yet again, when one friend cannot stand up for themselves in a society dominated in this concrete-bound duty of following one’s husband, the other friend must speak for the first. After all, Emilia has a promise to keep, regarding that duty of female friendship. So, when Othello ruthlessly even dismisses Desdemona’s last act of kindness for him, by branding his wife as a “liar gone to burning hell” (5.2.159) and it was he “that killed her” (5.2.160), an infuriated Emilia goes on the offensive. Yet again, in contrast to Desdemona’s polite submissive speech earlier, Emilia does not hold back in reprimanding Othello. From repeatedly calling him a “devil” (5.2.163) in contrast to Desdemona’s “angel” (5.2.161) to even branding their marriage as a “filthy bargain” (5.2.192), Emilia expresses all the rage and fire Desdemona was unable to express when she was

alive and now even in her death. She fully commits to fulfilling the sworn promise she made to Othello, to 'lay down her soul at stake' for her lady's virtue. She swears to speak nothing but the truth, in honor of her lady, and so she does. Even when Othello pulls out his sword in response to Emilia's comment about his marriage, Emilia stands her ground and taunts him instead to "do thy worst!" (5.2.194) and even declaring to "care not for thy sword" (5.2.201). She makes it clear to Othello that "I'll make thee known / Though I lost twenty lives" (5.2.201-202). 'Twenty lives lost' she states, is in evident reference to the promise she made an act earlier yet again as well as simply acknowledging that she will die for speaking the truth. But, additionally, I argue that phrase "lost twenty lives" must also account for Desdemona's death (5.2.202). After all, the life most recently lost of personal significance to Emilia is that of her "sweet mistress" (5.2.149). Though, Desdemona dismissed her own death by prioritizing Othello's life over hers, Emilia does not continue that trend. By stating this line, she is upholding Desdemona's death as a significant loss, worthy of not just one life but: twenty.

When all is revealed to be the work of Iago, who finally arrives on scene, Emilia presses him to admit the validity of Othello's claims against Iago being the slanderer in question. She pleads with her husband, one final time, to "disprove this villain" (5.2.208) and to "Speak, for my heart is full" (5.2.211). And when Iago doubles down and stingily admits to her line of questioning of whether he ever told Othello that Desdemona "was false" (5.2.514), all hell breaks loose for Emilia. One last time, it is a choice to uphold her bond with her husband (through thick and thin like Desdemona had) or to uphold her bond with her friend. It is a duty she directly addresses in this scene, acknowledging that it would be "proper I obey him", but definitively decides "but not now" (5.2.233). Emilia chooses the path of justice; she fights for the justice of her beloved mistress. She gets to work in straightening the facts out, in revealing the truth, despite her husband Iago's

persistent demands to Emilia to “charm your tongue” (5.2.219) and even charges to “get you home” (5.2.231). She bites back against her husband, finally in full force, by proclaiming how she is “bound to speak” (5.2.220) for Desdemona’s sake and even suggesting to Iago that she may “ne’er go home” (5.2.234) at all. Surrounded by men, with no one left on her side and all above her in status, Emilia stands her ground in confessing to the crimes of her husband and even in her unintentional role through being the one who “found by fortune” (5.2.269): the controversial handkerchief. She cements this determination to speak in her declaration to “Let heaven and men and devils, let them all / All, all, cry shame against me, yet I’ll speak” (5.2.262-263). Heaven, devils, and men can shame Emilia and yet, she will speak. As taught to her by Desdemona, Emilia will speak until her dying breath. This is also a direct expression of resistance to the patriarchal society of the play, that she *will* speak against. Emilia has no more room to put “her tongue a little in her heart” (2.1.118) anymore, her “heart is full” (5.2.211).

When Iago eventually does strike his own wife dead, for unmasking his true malicious self to the room of gentlemen, Emilia cries asking to be laid “by my mistress’ side” (5.2.584). And now, having completely defended her lady’s honor and avenging her death, she follows Desdemona in dedicating her last words for another. But, in this case, Emilia’s final speech is solely for her friend, her true other half. She first, speaks to her directly, asking first about a song Desdemona had sang in the act prior. “A song of willow” (4.3.30), Emilia references in asking what had “thy song bode, lady?” (5.2.295), tells the story of a woman in love whose lover “proved mad / and did forsake her (4.3.29-30). Emilia then asks Desdemona if “canst thou hear me?” before swearing to “play the swan / And die for music” (5.2.296-297) and sings a bit of her friend’s willow song. In choosing Desdemona’s song, as her ‘swan song’, Emilia truly acts for the sake of her mistress by continuing her speech even in music. But, despite her own words, Emilia does not end

up singing the song until her last breath. She interrupts herself after only one line of song, “*willow, willow, willow*” (5.2.298), to truly fulfill Desdemona’s one dying request: “Commend me to my kind lord” (5.2.153). In spite of her own feelings of the “cruel Moor” (5.2.299), Emilia, for Desdemona’s sake does as she asks. Emilia, once more, reaffirms to Othello of her friend’s chastity and that “she loved thee” (5.2.299). Sealing this truth again, on ‘her soul’ as ‘stake’, she confirms with her dying breath, “So come my soul to bliss, as I speak true / So speaking as I think, alas, I die” (5.2.300-301). Her promise fulfilled, which does end up triggering Othello to repent for his sins and thereby repent to Desdemona, Emilia dies by her mistress’ side. Desdemona ends the play, lying next to the two most important people in her life: her husband Othello and her friend Emilia.

THE WINTER’S TALE:

Out of all three plays, the main friendship pairs in *The Winter’s Tale* work distinctly different from the past two through its portrayal to the audience, or lack thereof. Polixenes and Leontes’ amity is represented and defined using public speech while Hermione and Paulina’s friendship is hidden and kept closely to themselves, conducted using private speech—so private, in fact, we the audience never truly see the two even interact directly on stage. This distinction is significant, though Shakespeare depicts both friendships as important, that indication in turn, is what makes the portrayals stand out. These friendships are either told to us from dialogue of characters outside the pairings or are required to be inferred from the speeches of the characters within the pairings. Therefore, the way we analyze these bonds leads to a different structure as the previous plays evaluate, but what we can garner from these pairs, remain the same. Male friendship by play’s end is a source for affection turned true through forgiveness and reunion while female friendship still becomes a source for solace and empowerment for both characters involved. However, with both Hermione and Paulina yielding the most agency and power against the other

previously discussed female pairings, an amendment must be made. The relationship between Paulina and Hermione is therefore not only centered around the role as support for the other or empowerment, but both: a true interconnection of the two.

Once again, before we can dive into discussing about our female friendship pairing, we must first analyze how the main male pair of the play is represented. The way Leontes and Polixenes' amity is portrayed using public speech affects our impression of their bond as readers. Right from the start, the play makes the closeness of the two's relationship abundantly clear through the opening praise of such a long friendship by Camillo, a Sicilian courtier, to Archidamus, a Bohemian courtier. I mention the two men's titles and occupations as they hold significance when you consider their conversation, which in the end is about the two kings, but in a larger sense, is also about the two regions as evidenced by Archidamus' own opening words "you shall see, as I have said, great / difference betwixt our Bohemia and your Sicilia" (1.1.3-4). In this case, I mark this speech as public not in the sense that Camillo and Archidamus are delivering these words to a crowd but instead they are carrying this conversation in a broad sense of the manner as courtiers of their kingdoms. Their actual discussion is indeed private, but their intended topic is public indeed. But here Shakespeare introduces his primary friendship of the play through the delivered exposition of Camillo.

In this opening dialogue with the Bohemian courtier, Camillo also admits how the friendship between the two monarchs has, currently, been defined through public acts as opposed to one-on-one interactions (having lost the time to do so once accepting their roles and duties as kings). Through the exchange of gifts, letters, and messages, even regardless of the impersonality of either long-distance interaction or the requirement of an intermediary between the two, Camillo remarks, "that they have seemed to be together / though absent, shook hands as over a vast, and /

embraced as it were from the ends of opposed / winds” (1.1.31-33). The emphasis on their true affection and bond for the other is strong here, through this contrast. Even though they cannot afford to meet as much in person anymore, like in their childhood, through these constant exchanges, the feelings and sensation of affectionate physicality such as shaking hands and embracing can be felt between the two even from opposite ends of winds. Distance is cut through by not only the strength of their bond, but their determination to preserve it. Another point worth noting is how Camillo is the one remarking this feat, adding onto to the indirectness of the metaphor and yet also the deep effect of their friendship on others. This immense and intense affection between the two kings can even be seen by Camillo, courtier to only King Leontes. And with such great affection, is fear for such great dismissal of so-esteemed affection. Fear that derives from, at least, the audience’s side that is. Because the two speakers finish this topic centering around their amity with an ironically charged exchange that only sparks of foreshadowing. Camillo prays for “The heavens continue their loves” (1.1.33) and Archidamus returns with a reassured declaration that: “I think there is not in the world either malice or matter to alter it” (1.1.34).

As stated at the start, unlike the copious amounts of public acknowledgement the play makes about the Leontes/Polixenes pair, the bond between Hermione and Paulina is starkly difficult to find. In fact, much like in *Othello*, there is not an overt connection between the two mentioned until the second act of the play, which is when Paulina herself is introduced. Paulina’s introduction, at the jail cell demanding to see her unfairly treated lady, becomes particularly significant immediately as it highlights right from the get-go, the extent of Paulina’s role as support for her Queen. Like before, the way to analyze the bond between the two comes not from direct interaction, but from the way Paulina speaks about and in defense of Hermione in this scene. Because for all that the scene seems to indicate at the start, we never see the two unite in the jail.

Instead, Paulina must work with an intermediary between the two in the form of Emilia, another waiting woman of Hermione. It is significant therefore to analyze her verbalized reaction to hearing the status of her Queen since being jailed, and especially after hearing about Hermione's premature birthing as a result. Her first line before spewing into a fierce monologue, "I dare be sworn / These dangerous unsafe lunes i'th' King, beshrew / them!" (2.2.37-39). Immediately Paulina expresses her rage over Leontes' actions, to the extent of cursing them out: "beshrew them!" (2.2.38-39).

But, amid her scathing speech, she works to make light of his 'serious' allegations by denouncing them as "lunes", a fit of insanity in the King. The strength of this conviction, in her dismissing of the King in all his power is evident through her language and particularly in the way she dares to be "sworn" (2.2.37) by this thought. Paulina's strength in will and authority, despite her status, yet again shines in this moment. Again, however, as a friend of Hermione, she's quick to also step up for her lady's sake. With a plan settling into mind as she rants, she pleads: "If she dares trust me with her little babe / I'll show 't the King and undertake to be / Her advocate to th' loud'st" (2.2.46-48). Here Paulina makes a powerful declaration to not only take on the role of Hermione's defender, but to be her "loudest" one. It fully establishes the extent of the devotion and loyalty she has to her Queen (despite the brief mentions earlier in this scene). Furthermore, Paulina outlines a course of action to defend Hermione, in the form of speaking in her place and even, if "she dares trust" (2.2.46) her, show her newly born as an image of "pure innocence" (2.2.50) to persuade "when speaking fails" (2.2.51). This proposal Paulina presents is particularly significant; for all she demands and declares in this scene, she still frames this concept as such: a concept to only be enacted if Hermione "dares trust" in her. Emilia is quick to reassure and admit herself that "there is no lady living / So meet for this great errand" (2.2.55-56) because, again, of

the high prestige in Paulina's reputation. But the most important approval, is the one from Hermione, of course, and so Emilia reveals something that speaks volumes to the relationship of the two (even despite a formal interaction). After Emilia promises to relay this plan to the Queen, she also reveals that Hermione "who but today hammered of this design / But durst not tempt a minister of honor / Lest she should be denied" (2.2.59-61). This is notable because this line unearths that Hermione concocted a plan of the same "design" but was not prepared to even ask about it, in fear that she would be denied from the get-go. Not only does Paulina seemingly already begin her self-designated role as Hermione's 'loudest advocate' by incidentally coming up with the same plan her Queen herself thought of to enact, but she proclaims that she'll work in getting it done in her stead. She makes a point to tell Emilia to tell Hermione that she will "use that tongue I have" (2.2.63) and that she will "do good" (2.2.65). Paulina declares yet again that she will use her "tongue" to persuade for and in the Queen's name to enact the actions to set Hermione free from her unjustly circumstances. But her use of her tongue, in terms of the plan, is not the only way she plans to use her language and wit to serve the Queen.

And by using her rhetoric, Paulina also makes a point to provide comfort for the future and for the present Hermione. What I discussed previously was that of future comfort, her promise to defend her Queen against Leontes as well as her course of action to do so. But, as a friend, understanding the trauma and how powerless Hermione must feel in the present moment, especially after hearing about her diminished status from Emilia, Paulina must also serve to deliver a message of support while she can. Therefore, it is significant to look back at her speech where she first swears to be Hermione's advocate. The promise and declaratory support on its own are comfort enough in these times, because while her greatest love might be against her, at least her greatest friend is not. But, for all the frenzy Paulina begins the speech where she denounces the

words of the King with, there is a careful consideration once she directs her next words to be delivered to her Queen. Particularly, she directs to Emilia to “Commend my best obedience” to her (2.2.45).

The use of the word of “obedience” is very striking even beyond the proclamation of loyalty in it. “Obedience” as defined in the OED describes the now-expected meaning of “submission to the rule or authority of another”. It seems to make sense, as it places this newly introduced character of the play as of a lower status to Hermione, which is not new as seen with Emilia’s relationship with the Queen. This unequal status between the women as friends is also not new as it is much like how Nerissa was to Portia in *The Merchant of Venice* and Emilia to Desdemona in *Othello*. All pairs are friends, despite one being in servitude to the other. However, Paulina purposefully chose that word for another reason. With how much confidence she lays out about her own status and honor in this society in the previous lines, Paulina’s act of submitting unfolds with a dual meaning. Not only is it demonstrating the depth of her feelings of allegiance to Hermione in this unfolding situation, I argue it is an attempt to give back some of the power her queen has lost by the actions of Leontes. In this case, the word’s second definition which states how it could also be used to describe “the action or fact of yielding to some actuating force or agency”, is in play here.

Hermione’s reputation has gravely been attacked by the words by her husband Leontes. Disregarding for a moment, his role as a king in making false accusations against his queen, her beloved husband for seemingly (and truly) no reason has not only accused her of falsities but also of marring the pure and good soul she knows she has. It calls back to her single expression of pain and vulnerability after hearing Leontes’ scolding in the previous scene: “That honorable grief lodged here which burns / Worse than tears drown” (2.1.135-136). That line not only references

her acknowledgement of her honor once more but aligns it with the “grief” she feels too in this moment that she remarks is even worse to experience than sobbing her eyes out like in her own words, typical women are prone to do. The amount of internalized mournful feelings and stress she feels in this moment (which is only demonstrated further in this scene) is worse than the physical sensation of crying tears over sorrow. Even further than the internal suppression of these feelings, Hermione stands strong in the face of her waiting women who come in, to support their queen. In the faces of *their tears*, she holds herself upright and confident again or at least in appearance to console their sorrow: “Do not weep, good fools / There is no cause” (2.1.143-144). She goes on to even include another reaffirmation of her innocence by stating that her women should only be in tears if “you shall know your mistress / has deserved prison” (2.1.144-146) which she assures is an impossibility. These actions of allowing herself to be jailed and put on trial, will only make her virtue stronger, as she affirms this “is for my better grace” (2.1.148).

She seems to be able to keep it altogether in the face of her waiting women before her, but her composure is quickly proven to be a mask in the following scene. Because after she is then ordered to be jailed for her imaginary crimes, Emilia informs Paulina and thereby the audience, that the bulk of the distress Hermione has been carrying over this trial has manifested in her baby’s premature birth. She affirms, “On her frights and griefs / Which never tender lady hath borne greater / She is something before her time delivered” (2.2.29-31). In this very moment of the play, Hermione, for all her strength so far, is suffering fear and sorrow beyond anything she has ever faced, to the point of giving birth prematurely. With this premature birth as well, she has also lost the possibility of a picturesque birth in the comforts of her home, with her husband and son at her side to greet their new family member. Instead, she gave birth in a rotten old jail cell, with only presumed her waiting women who helped her conceive (while only initially being there as

support) and a jailer forced to keep guard. And while Emilia states she receives “much comfort” (2.2.35) from her baby daughter’s presence, the tail ends of sorrow still seem to seep through in some of Hermione’s first words to her baby: “My poor prisoner / I am innocent as you” (2.2.35-36).

So, with being jailed, distressed and fearful beyond belief, caring for a baby girl in the space of a cold cell, and the knowledge and endurance of her husband’s berating abusive speech against her honor, Hermione to say the least is powerless and vulnerable at this point of the play. The power and status she seemed to exhibit at the start of the play seems to have vanished almost completely. Hermione, at the beginning, who was once spurred on by Leontes himself to “speak” (1.2.36) in his aid, used her rhetoric masterfully to persuade Polixenes to stay longer with her and her husband. Polixenes, who even in the face of Leontes’ pleas for him to stay, had refused until Hermione spoke. Once, Hermione utilized her language to position herself as a “jailer” (1.2.75) as opposed to a hostess to Polixenes, so she could represent the choice of staying as more appealing. And indeed, with the choice instead being “my prisoner or my guest” (1.2.69), Polixenes conceded to her ingenuity. Leontes too, at the time, impressed by her successful efforts, could only praise her as “thou never spok’st / with better purpose” (1.2.112). The Hermione, who was once not only able to command authority with her language but was even praised by her husband Leontes for such power, has now lost it completely. The former “jailer” (1.2.75) is now the jailed. Paulina recognizes that loss. While she might not truly know the depths of pain Hermione is going through, she can empathize with her to that degree nevertheless because that is not only how much she trusts her queen but her friend. So, by using her stable and standing power as one honorable lady to another (despite the trial at hand) and yielding it with her “best obedience” over to Hermione (2.2.45), she is not only demonstrating immense levels of faithfulness but overwhelming amounts

of care and support for the political *and* (most importantly) emotional status of her queen. She takes the role as her defender and her ever-faithful supporter with all the sincerity stowed in her heart for Hermione. Her parting line by scene's end, serves to assert this promise. Though spoken to the jailer, after hearing all she has said about Hermione, there may be an addressal to two at play when she swears, "Upon mine honor I / Will stand betwixt you and danger" (2.2.79-80).

Then, in the following act, Paulina has the difficult task of both giving and showcasing her full advocacy to her Queen while also remaining cordial and respectful enough to the 'raging' king Leontes to manage to keep an audience with him. We see this with her first line to the King, after she finally gains the mild support of her husband. This aid comes in the form of her husband's explanation that he knows when she takes "the rein" (2.3.61) in speaking her mind, she will not "stumble" (2.3.61) in telling nothing but the whole truth as well as delivering her words with intention. She then addresses Leontes directly, with this sparse form of backup at her side, "Good my liege" (2.3.64). Now, it is not entirely or even necessarily surprising to look at, at first glance because she has been acknowledging Leontes' authority with her use of "lord" since the very start of her arrival. However, it is significant for two things. One, this is re-establishing and probably comforting Leontes on her knowledge and awareness of his power. Whether it is her speaking to his servants (which likely, he probably does not hear properly because he asks later to confirm who is speaking at the entrance) and telling them "to be second to me" (2.3.31) or even the fact it is revealed Leontes had told her husband Antigonus to order her not to come, because he knew she would plan to do so and assumedly speak against him, Paulina with her very entrance disrupts the power dynamic in the court Leontes finds comfort and strength in. It even provokes the line of Leontes to her husband in irritation yes, but if we read closer, potential fear, when he spits out,

“What, canst not rule her?” (2.3.56). This reading becomes firm when we remember Leontes’ desire to control the chaotic situation he has created himself from his jealousy.

After all, Leontes feels security and favor in his control of power, and it is this power which he fully plans to use to avenge his heart from the sickness of jealousy. He muses at the start of the scene about such desire for control and revenge. When left alone and thoughts about Polixenes start to intrude, he brushes them away, as he acknowledges any plans to directly gain revenge against his former friend will falter as he rues how Polixenes “in himself too mighty / And in his parties, an alliance” (2.3.23-24). He dismisses him until a time that he can later pay him back for his ‘crimes’. Instead, he marks, for “present vengeance / Take it on her [Hermione]” (2.3.25-26). He, of course, then goes on another delusional tangent about how Polixenes and Camillo must be laughing at him for successfully tricking him as ‘they did’ in his mind. But then he also muses, making crystal clear the intent of his deeds, “They should not laugh if I could reach them, nor / Shall she within my power” (2.3.28-29). Here, Leontes assures that if he could “reach” Polixenes and Camillo, in terms of authority as well as distance, he would utilize every inch of his power to pay them back in full for their ‘trickery’. But, since the two men are out of his realm of control, he has instead turned his attention to someone well “within” his power, Hermione, who shall not and truly has not ‘laughed’ since he has employed it on her. Leontes, who once strived to send his love across immeasurable distances to his friend Polixenes, now grasps for what little control he has left in his “reach” (2.3.28).

Returning now, to the latter part of the scene, Paulina confronting Leontes, we see this effect on Leontes fully in play. The phrase “rule her” to Antigonus, Paulina’s husband, even particularly calls attention to his desire for Paulina like Hermione to be “ruled” over (2.3.56). And yet, even though Paulina is addressing Leontes like a subject to a ‘ruler’ would by referring him

as “lord” (2.3.47) and “my liege” (2.3.64) and herself as “loyal servant” (2.3.66) and even “most obedient counselor” (2.3.67), he feels disrupted. Paulina even begins her imploring rhetoric for Leontes to hear her out, by calling him “Good my liege” (2.3.64) and yet Leontes is still unsettled by her power. This disruption in Leontes becomes fully illuminated when we realize it is both the first time in the scene Paulina refers to him as a king, and in talking about him, her first time using the descriptor of “good” (2.3.64) in front of the title. Paulina compliments him, positions herself as his subordinate, and reaffirms his regal title. What more could Leontes want? Perhaps, to not finish her speech, for the latter half is where Paulina confirms where her loyalties truly lie. Not only does she assert, that although she *is* his “loyal servant” (2.3.66), she is *not* here for “comforting” (2.3.69) his evils as other servants might do, but she also finishes by stating, “I come / From your good queen” (2.3.69-70).

And when the only thing Leontes takes from that lengthy declaration is a question back of “Good queen?” (2.3.71), it is evident that Shakespeare is referencing Leontes’ thoughts in the start of the act when he expresses the start of disbelief and dissatisfaction in the term to describe Hermione when first publicly accusing his wife of her ‘infidelity’. After all, Leontes makes it clear that if anyone calls Hermione “a goodly lady” (2.1.84), the “justice of your hearts will thereto add / ’Tis a pity she’s not honest, honorable” (2.1.85-86). But Paulina does not falter as she lets her heart ‘correct’ herself. No, she continues forward with emphasis now, “Good queen, my lord, good queen, I say “good / queen” (2.3.72-73). She does not back down from the bafflement of Leontes in questioning her usage, she only doubles down. Because as Antigonus mentioned earlier, she does not “stumble” when she takes control of a room (2.3.61). With her repetition of the descriptor of “good” with “queen”, she is both undermining Leontes’ maliciously marred thoughts of Hermione as well as uplifting and presenting the truth of Hermione’s “goodness” as inherent fact.

To the point that the word, or any address to her as “queen” must have the descriptor of “good” attached as well. As if there is no other way to describe her because she simply is such, good.

Yet despite Paulina’s best efforts, to convince Leontes to believe the truth of his Queen’s virtue “for she is good” (2.3.80), Leontes fails to be moved in his opinion which is “rotten / As ever oak or stone was sound” (2.3.114-115). Instead, he only becomes further enraged by Paulina’s antics. When she presents him his baby, he reaches his tipping point, and curses Paulina out with names like a “mankind witch” (2.3.84) and insists for her to be forced out of his sight. And Leontes, ever stubborn to his beliefs, desperately affirms that the baby is a “bastard” (2.3.93), and spews about how the baby is nothing more than a “brat” (2.3.119) that should be burned alongside its false mother. And when Leontes threatens to do the same to Paulina, she dismisses him and states, that if he does, “It is a heretic that makes the fire / Not she which burns in ’t” (2.3.148-149). She exits the scene, criticizing his servants for following Leontes’ orders without any complaint, and assures him that his faulty path will only serve to make him “ignoble” (2.3.154) and even “scandalous to the world” (2.3.155).

At Hermione’s trial, Leontes still carrying with him the burning rage from the act prior, remains unrelenting in being persuaded of the truth, that his wife is indeed honorable. Even with Hermione’s turn in finally being able to speak for herself again, in defense of her name, her honor, her best efforts make no change to her husband’s attitude. For all of Hermione’s rhetorical prowess, she finds herself incapable of making sense of Leontes’ delusional ravings, spoken as she says, in a “language I understand not” (3.2.85). Her last-ditch effort has her call upon the oracle to leave the truth that must be upheld and the very consequences of her fate in Apollo’s hands. All seems to be righted at once by the oracle’s words that affirm the truth: that “Hermione is chaste” (3.2.142) and “Leontes a jealous tyrant” (3.2.143). However, when Leontes attempts to adamantly dismiss

the oracle's messages as falsities, a servant rushes in to deliver tragic news: the King and Queen's son "is dead" (3.2.159). Hermione, once again, overwhelmed with intense stress and grief, manifests her expression of such severe feelings, physically through fainting. At this point, Hermione feels like she has truly lost everything: her husband's trust and favor, the baby she birthed in her cell, and now even a reunion with her son (who was kept from her as soon as Leontes' accusations were made). After every tribulation and trial, even after the oracle cleared her name, Hermione has lost her whole family, and so falls speechless to this "mortal" news (3.2.163).

And with the loss of any family by her side, Hermione's friend, Paulina steps up to alleviate her pains and support her in their place. She follows her Queen to attempt to, partially by Leontes' plea, "apply to her / Some remedies for life" (3.2.168-169). This is the turning point in the play as Paulina enacts another plan to save and even avenge her Queen. While Leontes does finally start to recognize the errors of his actions at this point, that he has truly "too much believed my own suspicion" (3.2.167), this acknowledgement is no apology. This realization is simply the bare minimum to-be achieved by Leontes; there are no reparations behind such an act. Even if Leontes does make plans to redeem himself, to "reconcile me to Polixenes / New woo my Queen, recall the good Camillo" (3.2.172-173), these proposals were only made after seeing Hermione swoon from an excess of grief. Grief, that Leontes played a huge part in scarring her with. Leontes wised up much too late for him to have everything righted for him so easily. He does not deserve to have both control over the creation of the chaos and control over its peaceful resolution. Paulina firmly recognizes this sentiment with all her heart. And in an off-stage scene between her and Hermione, that cannot even be considered or recognized by the audience until the end of the play, they enact a plan to allow reconciliation to take place, but only after receiving necessary time for Leontes' redemption and Hermione's healing.

From this point in the play onward, Paulina speaks resolutely in Hermione's stead because as she announces to Leontes and the rest of the bystanders, "the Queen, the Queen / The sweet'st, dear'st creature's dead" (3.2.219-220). This lie becomes a part of an elaborate ploy formed by Hermione and Paulina that only gets clarified at the play's end, when years later, Paulina presents to Leontes a 'statue' of Hermione that mimics life as much as "still sleep mock'd death" (5.3.23). But, for now, Hermione has just been proclaimed as dead, much to the sorrow of the King. In a first read-through, or if one is not aware of the 'resurrection' Hermione is able to achieve by the end of the play, Paulina's desperate displays of grief and anguish over her Queen's death strikes home to an audience beyond the King. From her very first expressions of pain when she re-enters the scene, begging for her bodice to be cut open so "lest my heart, cracking it / Break too!" (3.2.191-192), to frantically confessing the extent of "the love I bore your queen" (3.2.253) to Leontes, Paulina's language is seeped with pain, frenzy, and desperation. While a part of this ploy, derives from a determination to garner trust in Paulina's proclamation and to distract from anyone checking Hermione's body to be sure of her death, another part of this play of language is solely for Hermione. After the Queen is taken off stage when she collapses, she does not speak again until the very end of the play. Her 'final' reaction to all the pain that she has endured, at that point, is a silent act of fainting. It is an act that keels her over to the near point of death. Yet again, Hermione is unable to verbally express the pain she feels deep in her heart, to communicate this level of heartache to her cruel husband who was its source. I argue that although the context of Paulina's words, reacting to Hermione's 'death', is fabricated, the pain that Paulina expresses in her frantic reaction to acknowledging her Queen's death, is very real and very much felt. Paulina, yet again, performs an act for two people: herself and her good Queen.

And finally, once Leontes relents his control of the situation over to Paulina, who not only concedes that Paulina speaks the best “when most the truth” (3.2.259) but asks to be led to “these sorrows” (3.2.269), the off-stage plan is officially enacted. Hermione, pretending to be dead, will hide and wait until Leontes has first fully made reparations for his terrors and until her lost child (her prematurely born baby) is found again. The first part of that reasoning can be inferred by how much Paulina pressures Leontes to change and reform himself after the Queen’s ‘death’ before she even sets phase two of the plan, ensure the King swears to not marry another woman without Paulina’s approval which she states won’t be until “your first queen’s again in breath” (5.1.105). Hermione, herself, makes the second reasoning clear in her first returning words which are also her final words of the play, reassuring to her reunited daughter that she had “preserved / Myself to see the issue” (5.3.160-161). And indeed, when the time does come, Hermione is brought back to life by a ‘magical trick’ by Paulina, transforming her from ‘statue’ to woman reborn. But there is a lengthy gap in the play while this ploy goes on. After all, while we do see Paulina in the play after the queen’s death, Hermione herself becomes absent and left be until the ending. One of the questions, in fact, Leontes wants everyone to answer as they walk off the stage in the play’s end is an “answer to his part / Performed in this wide gap of time” (5.3.190-191).

Hermione’s “part”, although never directly explained, is evident; she stayed with Paulina in her house. Paulina says just as much by creating the ‘statue story’ that spreads from her servants to Leontes and even to his subjects, of having commissioned a lifelike statue of the queen in her honor. The extent of the personal attribute of this ‘statue’ becomes apparent, however, when one gentleman gossiping about the affairs of the King and his counselor, comments how Paulina “hath privately twice or / thrice a day, ever since the death of Hermione / visited that removed house” (5.2.113-115). To go to such lengths for a statue, seems excessive for Paulina to do. The key part

of that line is the mention of this routine being formed immediately after the “death of Hermione” (5.2.114). This detail serves to cement that Paulina despite her later assertions of the opposite to Leontes, that she keeps this ‘statue’ “lonely, apart” (5.3.21), that she never left Hermione by herself to wait for the extent of this plan. She made sure to visit her often, multiple times a day, to check on and update her on the world around her, such as the search for her daughter Perdita. This is affirmed by Hermione when she acknowledges in the end: “knowing by Paulina” (5.3.159). But, beyond, performing simple business, Paulina also gave Hermione refuge from a male-dominated world that shunned her. While there is no direct evidence of exactly all the contents of their conversations, during the long unseen gap, Paulina most likely gave Hermione hope, comfort, and reassurance in her power again. This is evident from the way Paulina talks about Hermione to other people, particularly Leontes. Even before she presents the ‘statue’ to Leontes, she remarks when Hermione was ‘alive’ that she was one who “lived peerless” (5.3.17) and so, much like her “dead likeness” (5.3.18), it “excels whatever yet you looked upon / Or hand of man hath done” (5.3.19-20). Paulina, constantly, even after her queen has ‘passed’, never relents in praise and admiration of her one-a-million friend. Her friend’s virtue, when placed in Paulina’s defense, has never been tarnished and only upheld in truth. Paulina provides Hermione sanctuary in her home, sanctuary from the outside world that had once been tormenting her, the world that brought her to the brink of death if not, the death of her past self. And both literally and metaphorically, through her efforts and machinations, Paulina manages to resurrect her friend and give her a new life with her family, a second chance to be happy, once more.

Conclusion

When I first began this project, I stated the work I would be doing throughout, would be in service of filling the gap in scholarship centered around female friendship in Shakespeare. By now,

I have done my part and filled this gap with my own thorough investigation on the topic. So, it is now also important to look back and understand what we have learned about female friendship by facing it with a more discerning approach as well as how our perceptions have shifted on how male friendship works in Shakespeare's plays.

Regarding male friendship, though Shakespeare evidently references and even utilizes elements of classical friendship theory with his male pairs, Shakespeare also does not always perfectly fit these male pairs into the ideal model touted for them at the time. For instance, while Antonio and Bassanio from *The Merchant of Venice* potentially match the model the best, out of all the other male pairs, male friendship is not limited to their bond. The bond between the two men is one out of an entire network of friends, contrasting the ideal friendship being best kept to two individuals. Additionally, in the society of *Othello*, where male friendship is constantly being corrupted and dissolved, the pair of friends that most aligns with classical theory is *not* any of the male pairs but the resilient female pair of Desdemona and Emilia. Though *The Winter's Tale* contains the "twinned" (1.2.85) pair of Leontes-Polixenes, who follow the classical model fairly faithfully, Shakespeare places a heavier emphasis on the female pair of Hermione-Paulina by play's end. His portrayal of male friendship in that play is also marked more-so through the dialogue of other characters as opposed to their own interactions.

My central focus in female friendship in Shakespeare's plays has not only highlighted their existence, hidden by its invisibility in scholarship, but has evidently been defined as a source of support and empowerment. Though each portrayal differs from play to play, as well the extent of how each relationship develops and ends up, the female pairs of *The Merchant of Venice*, *Othello*, and *The Winter's Tale* share a sense of solidarity formed within the male-oriented societies of these plays. In *The Merchant of the Venice*, Portia and Nerissa form a bond that is defined through its

mutual support of the other's successes and happiness as well as a space for empowerment within their once submissive positions in society. In *Othello*, Desdemona and Emilia form a bond defined through support rooted in speech in the other's name as well as a space of courage against the toxic marital bonds they each find themselves in. And in *The Winter's Tale*, Hermione and Paulina unite in a relationship never fully seen on stage yet marked in private intimacy and unbreakable support and care for a friend in distress. Each female friendship is full of love and unending compassion for the other, with a resilience that outshine even the male friendships of the same plays. Though none of these female pairs would be considered in the ideal model of friendship, their bonds outweigh such an outdated and rigid fantasy.

Montaigne once said, in discussing whether women have even ever been recorded to have achieved a true friendship like men can, that "this sex in no instance has yet succeeded in attaining it" (138). If plays are truly a mirror of reality, then Shakespeare's bonds of Portia-Nerissa, Desdemona-Emilia, and Hermione-Paulina must surpass what Montaigne would have ever expected (or even accepted). Their lights outshine the darkness of invisibility.

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