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Virtues in Common: Women's Work, Ethics, and Collective Life in Chaucer and Shakespeare

DISSERTATION

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in English

by

Sarah Goeppner

Dissertation Committee:
Professor Julia Reinhard Lupton, Co-Chair
Professor Elizabeth Gage Allen, Co-Chair
Professor Rebecca A. Davis

DEDICATION

To

Every woman
who wants
to talk about it.

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¹ Gillies, John. “The Conversational Turn in Shakespeare.” *Etudes épistémè*, vol. 33, 2018, <https://doi.org/10.4000/episteme.2336>.

² *Middle English Dictionary*, s.v. “*conversen*,” sense 2(a), MED9633.

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Virtues in Common: Women's Work, Ethics, and Collective Life in Chaucer and Shakespeare

by

Sarah Goeppner

Doctor of Philosophy in English

University of California, Irvine, 2026

Professor Julia Reinhard Lupton and Professor Elizabeth Gage Allen, Chairs

This dissertation offers a history of women's work as told through stories of women's virtue. Through Chaucer's and Shakespeare's representations of serving, laboring, and economically vulnerable women, I examine scenes in which women imagine, negotiate, and discuss their emotional, sexual, and domestic obligations to men in the company of other women. Methodologically, the dissertation combines feminist materialist historicism, histories of women's labor, affective and social reproductive labor theory, rhetorical history, and Aristotelian virtue ethics to ask how capacities identified as virtue are produced through historically specific forms of work and social relation. To consider the political possibilities of these scenes, I treat literary representation as part of a record of the forms of discourse in which women participated in the production of political and ethical argument. Read alongside these traditions, the conversations among Chaucer's and Shakespeare's women become legible as literary sites where historically available forms of women's reasoning are represented, appropriated, constrained, and sometimes imaginatively extended. Across the dissertation, I argue that refusal belongs within this history of virtue. Aristotelian virtue ethics provides a vocabulary for understanding virtue as situational judgment, arguing that conduct is virtuous because a person judges what response is fitting to particular circumstances. The women examined here repeatedly encounter situations in which conventional feminine virtues would require unreasonable, exploitative, or violent forms of availability to men. Their refusals, I argue, constitute consummate exercises of

practical judgment. At the same time, these texts repeatedly relocate both these refusals and the practices of care, counsel, vulnerability, trust, and dependence within relations among women, making female community a site for the collective production of ethical knowledge. In recovering these forms of judgment, I join feminist scholarship on women's friendship, vulnerability, labor, and political thought while insisting upon the importance of class and status in ethical reasoning. I ultimately argue that medieval and early modern literature makes visible a history in which women's ethical and political capacities emerge not from transcendence of dependence, but from collective efforts to distinguish between relations that sustain lives and those that constrain human flourishing.

INTRODUCTION: Women's Work and the Political Imagination

What do we do with stories of women's suffering? Particularly when these comprise so many of the stories we tell? What might female readers find that looks beyond suffering and toward a refusal of the world that produces it, or even the possibility that this world might be otherwise? In her essay on the political imaginary of Emilia Lanyer's poetry, Barbara Bowen opens with an address to the reader. She says, "My question is how to recognize moments in early modern writing when revolutionary change is imagined. Without assuming that we know in advance what form that change would take or that its understanding of class, gender and other social relations would be automatically recognizable, I am struck by how difficult it has become to ask that question, particularly about women's writing."³ This dissertation asks how we might recognize moments in late medieval and early modern literature when working women try to imagine new forms of social organization, ethical life, and political authority through conversation about their work. Without assuming in advance the language or form that working women's estimations of their work might take, I am struck by how often literary criticism continues to encounter women's labor only after it has already been translated into other categories—virtue, domesticity, counsel, patience, constancy, or care. Much criticism treats the maid as a purely sexual or moral type, forgetting that the category was unintelligible apart from the prescribed forms of domestic labor through which maidservants became socially legible. In *Othello*, Bianca signals that her needlework is not merely technical or manual, but social, sexual, and emotional when she responds to Cassio's request to copy the needlework of another woman's handkerchief:

³ Barbara E. Bowen, "The Rape of Jesus: Aemilia Lanyer's *Lucrece*," in *Marxist Shakespeares*, ed. Jean E. Howard and Scott Cutler Shershow (London: Routledge, 2001), 104–27.

Let the devil and his dam haunt you! What did
you mean by that same handkerchief you gave me
even now? I was a fine fool to take it! I must take
out the work? A likely piece of work, that you
should find it in your chamber and know not who
left it there! This is some minx's token, and I must
take out the work! There, give it your hobbyhorse.
Wheresoever you had it, I'll take out no work on 't.

(4.1.148-55)

Suspecting Cassio has obtained this handkerchief from another woman, Bianca's jealousy indicates her sense of anger and injustice that her work as mistress, seamstress, and companion, does not receive proper recognition from Cassio. Chaucer and Shakespeare depict communities of working women who are considered morally incapable of participating in the civic spaces that formally determine the principles and practices for collective well-being in England even as their social and working relationships generate trust, cultivate judgment, determine and enforce community norms, and sustain the households upon which men's formal civic participation socially, culturally, and materially depended. Their labor is productive both of material life and of the trust, judgment, memory, and the habits of cooperation through which communities reproduce themselves, their everyday labor generating the ethical capacities through which social life becomes possible. Across late medieval and early modern stories of exemplary women, these virtuous capacities are detached from the female labor and women's communities that produce them and yoked to the edification of men, abstracting this work from its social and economic importance. In this process, working women's virtues become available as a cultural resource

through which aristocratic households and emerging lay readers exercise ethical authority while overlooking the deeply social forms upon which that authority depends.

Recent scholarship has transformed our understanding of medieval and early modern political culture. Susan Nakley and David Wallace have illuminated new forms of vernacular political participation and counsel. At the same time, scholarship of women's work and informal economies—including that of Sharon Farmer, Marjorie McIntosh, Andrea Denny-Brown, and Natasha Korda—have demonstrated the centrality of women's labor to late medieval and early modern social and economic life. Scholars of women's rhetorical practice, including Valerie Wayne, Lynette Hunter, Josephine Donovan, A. Lynne Magnusson, and Carole McKewin, have recovered traditions of women's counsel, defense, and conversation that challenge older accounts of women's silence and passivity. This dissertation builds upon the feminist scholarship that has recovered women's resistance, friendship, and rhetorical traditions, but asks a different question. Rather than locating political possibility in the mere fact of societal dependency upon women's work, in implicit moments of resistance, or in personal choices, I consider the radical potential of women's conversations, in Chaucer and Shakespeare, about of the meaning of their work and explicit attempts to collectively re-evaluate the social importance of their virtue. Recognizing the significance of the work behind women's social roles as mothers, innkeepers, mistresses of the house, daughters, maids, domestic workers, cousins, friends, sex workers, alewives, and many other manner of caregiver, how might current feminist scholarship take inspiration from what we can glean from women's conversations about the social and political value of their patience, constancy, cooperation, collaboration, and caregiving? Bowen invites feminist criticism to go further than it has in the past while “recognizing that such a discussion is enabled by the work of the past two decades that it hopes in some ways to challenge.” She writes, “I want to start by

taking seriously the proposition that the literature produced at the period of transition to capitalism would bear, in addition to the deep scars of consciousness that capitalism still delivers, some openings for resistance to its already visible oppressions, some imagining of collective agency.”⁴ My concern, therefore, is less with recovering isolated or symbolic acts of resistance than with recognizing the forms of labor, association, and mutual recognition through which women imagine themselves as a collective capable of social change and resistance in Chaucer and Shakespeare. Whereas much scholarship analyzes women’s choices, these chapters seek to understand moments when women work to create the social and rhetorical conditions to imagine and even make different choices. Taking Bowen’s challenge seriously, this dissertation asks how literary representations of working women preserve not only the traces of historical labor but also unrealized political imaginaries grounded in the historical circumstances of women’s collective cultivation of virtue and social life through working relationships.⁵

Virtue, Labor, and Political Authority

In “The Imaginary Society” Sylvia Federico argues that women who engaged in collective political resistance became “imaginary” in scholarship not because they were absent

⁴ Bowen, “The Rape of Jesus,” 104.

⁵ For the scholarship surveyed in this paragraph, see Susan Nakley, “Sovereignty Matters: Anachronism, Chaucer’s Britain, and England’s Future’s Past,” *Chaucer Review* 44, no. 4 (2010): 368–96; David Wallace, *Chaucerian Polity: Absolutist Lineages and Associational Forms in England and Italy* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997); Sharon Farmer, *Surviving Poverty in Medieval Paris: Gender, Ideology, and the Daily Lives of the Poor* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002); Marjorie Keniston McIntosh, *Working Women in English Society*; Andrea Denny-Brown, “Povre Griselda and the All-Consuming Archewyves,” *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 33 (2011): 153–89; Natasha Korda, *Shakespeare’s Domestic Economies: Gender and Property in Early Modern England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002); Valerie Wayne, “Refashioning the Shrew,” *Shakespeare Studies* 17 (1985): 159–87; Lynette Hunter, *Humanism, Capitalism, and Rhetoric in Early Modern England: The Separation of the Citizen from the Self* (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2022); Josephine Donovan, *Women and the Rise of the Novel, 1405–1726* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1999); A. Lynne Magnusson, “‘His Pen with My Hand’: Jane Anger’s Revisionary Rhetoric,” *English Studies in Canada* 17, no. 3 (1991): 269–81, <https://doi.org/10.1353/esc.1991.0011>; and Carole McKewin, “Counsels of Gall and Grace: Intimate Conversations Between Women in Shakespeare’s Plays,” in *The Woman’s Part: Feminist Criticism of Shakespeare*, ed. Carolyn Ruth Swift Lenz, Gayle Greene, and Carol Thomas Neely (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1980), 100–17.

from scenes of revolt, but because subsequent scholarship obscured their participation. Reading poetry, judicial records, and chronicles together, she recovers women as organizers, neighbors, instigators, maintainers of rebel bands, accomplices, victims, and leaders whose participation shaped both the revolt itself and the narratives produced to explain it. As the majority of the population and as indispensable participants in the labor that sustained households, villages, and agricultural production, peasant women were central both to social order and to any possibility of social transformation. Even when they did not lead revolts, their labor reproduced the communities upon which collective action depended. To recognize their work is therefore to recognize the historical conditions that made political change imaginable in the poems, plays, and literature of the time.⁶

Stephanie Jed's account of "chaste thinking" further clarifies the political work performed by literary representations of the value of women's suffering. Writing of Renaissance humanism, Jed argues that masculine civic identity repeatedly grounds itself in representations of female chastity, sacrifice, and self-abnegation, making women's suffering the social precondition for men's ethical and political formation.⁷ In this way, the literary history of working women is also a history of rhetorical strategies that devalue women's civic and political capacities in order to sustain aristocratic privilege through texts that burden working women with the symbolic weight of social order their labor reproduces, making them bearers of an ideological system organized around controlling the meaning and value of their work. Yet the texts in this study do not simply convert women's suffering into occasions for masculine moral reflection. In the *Clerk's Tale*,

⁶ Sylvia Federico, "The Imaginary Society: Women in 1381." *Journal of British Studies* 40, no. 2 (2001): 159–183.

⁷ Stephanie H. Jed, *Chaste Thinking: The Rape of Lucretia and the Birth of Humanism*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989.

Chaucer describes the work through which Griselda sustains her household, disciplines desire and preserves social relations before his Clerk reinterprets those practices as signs of innate feminine virtue. Her suffering, I argue, does not acquire exemplary force because pain is inherently generative of moral or political meaning, but because the labor that has already produced ethical order becomes detached from its material conditions and reappears as the moral spectacle through which lay readers are instructed in judgment, moderation, and governance. In *All's Well That Ends Well* and *Othello*, vulnerable women take courageous and strategic action to withhold their duties as wife or mistress from men in active attempts to avoid their devaluation by disingenuous men. This formulation thus reveals that the political efficacy of female suffering depends upon a prior transformation in the cultural meaning of women's work. Chastity, I demonstrate, is not the origin of political authority but one of the literary forms through which the social productivity of women's labor is appropriated into the ethical education of men. Given the current resurgence of interest in the meaning and value of women's reproductive work, an awareness of the history of representations of women's care work proves instructive for current debates over women's political rights.⁸

Rosemary Kegl has traced the power that rhetorical gesture has had in early modern literature to “make unimaginable any sort of collective struggle for social change.”⁹ To build upon this scholarship, I both analyze rhetorical and narratological attempts to foreclose collective political possibilities available to women and ask what rhetorical gestures break through these to make collective life recognizable. Where do literary texts preserve articulations of cooperation,

⁸ For the theoretical vocabulary of reproductive labor, see Silvia Federici, *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2012) and Nancy Fraser, “Crisis of Care? On the Social-Reproductive Contradictions of Contemporary Capitalism,” in *Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentering Oppression*, ed. Tithi Bhattacharya (London: Pluto Press, 2017), 21–36.

⁹ Kegl, *The Rhetoric of Concealment*, 63.

dependence, reciprocity, and shared labor that exceed the hierarchical orders they socially and materially sustain? What kinds of political imagination become possible once women's work is understood not simply as domestic service but as the reproduction of social life itself? The women considered throughout this dissertation each recognize, in different ways, that marriage organizes and extracts their reproductive labor for patriarchal households, and they all reject the personal and social value of matrimony in some important way. Griselda rejects her status as a noblewoman, relegating herself to less than her husband's servant, "I never heeld me lady ne mistresse, / But humble servant to youre worthynesse" (IV.823-34), in a move that undoes the conflation of lady, servant, and mistress so crucial to women's exploitation and the husband's hermeneutic authority. In *All's Well That Ends Well*, Diana rejects marriage outright after discovering that the warnings of older women describe not individual misfortune but a shared social condition, and in *Othello*, Emilia calls women to reject the moral economy that asks wives to bear responsibility for men's conduct while denying them mutual care and acknowledgement. By the end of the play, and in response to her friend's misogynistic abuse, Emilia, too, will reject the authority of the husband, declaring "Perchance, Iago, I will ne'er go home" (5.2.234). Each woman is represented as explicitly undermining the one-sided marriage contract that coercively binds wives in dynamics of undignified social and living conditions, and each woman imagines alternatives to domestic service in the patriarchal household through community with other women. These refusals are not framed as personal preferences; instead, working women in these texts refuse men's attempts to control the meaning of their care work as women. Although these refusals differ historically and formally, each emerges from communities of women who collectively recognize the conditions of their exploitation and imagine alternative forms of association. The language through which they speak is consistently the language of women

understood not just by their relationships to men but as a social group whose virtues produce the worlds they inhabit. In this way, women's refusal of the terms of matrimony and recognition of social economic and political grounds of exploitation of their care work appears as central to the rhetoric of women as a group, class, or collective.

What can these representations of working women in Chaucer and Shakespeare teach us about our own historical moment? In 2001, Barbara Bowen warned that the contraction of higher education would produce an accompanying contraction of our political imagination, "As the traditional university melts into air, we face deepening epistemological loss: fewer and fewer questions about radical possibility will be asked if half a century of expansion in higher education is reversed and the university excludes the populations of students who have historically demanded and produced new knowledge."¹⁰ Twenty-five years later, the demographic shrinkage of the university shows no signs of improving. At the same time, women's responses to the intensification of economic precarity and patriarchal violence continue to recognize the importance of reproductive labor. The core refusals of the "4B" movement in South Korea target the pillars of the work through which women are economically exploited—Bihon: (No) heterosexual marriage, Bichulsan: (No) childbirth or motherhood, Biyeonae: (No) dating or romantic relationships with men, Bisekseu: (No) sexual relationships with men. Meanwhile, a resurgence of traditional family values and "tradwife" culture has taken root in a new generation of young American and European women disaffected with a movement that has been pushed from social sites of activity and into private, online corners of individualized social media consumption. The popularity of these "new" forms of gender essentialism and naturalized

¹⁰ Bowen, Barbara E. "The Rape of Jesus: Aemilia Lanyer's *Lucrece*." In *Marxist Shakespeares*, edited by Jean E. Howard and Scott Cutler Shershow, 104–27. London: Routledge, 2001.

forms of labor among downwardly-mobile, middle class white women reveal the continuing ideological struggle over the meaning and value of women's work. The value of medieval and early modern literature, then, lies in accessing earlier histories of women's collective recognition under conditions of unequal social organization. Chaucer and Shakespeare reveal both the possibilities and the limits of imagining women's labor as the basis of ethical and political community, even as their own texts participate in the work of subordinating that labor to patriarchal and aristocratic authority. Reading these representations today enables us to recognize a historical system of valuation that repeatedly secures the value produced by women's virtues by defining familiar feminine ideals—the patient wife, the obedient servant, the self-sacrificing caregiver—as well as their corresponding figures of deviance and disorder. The persistence of these gendered types across centuries, I argue, suggests that contemporary struggles over marriage, domestic labor, care, sex work, and women's bodily autonomy are neither unprecedented nor historically isolated. By tracing the historical production of misogynistic ideals alongside the communities of women who contested them, this dissertation argues that the past can offer new generations of women alternative political imaginaries that have not been exhausted by history. Learning to recognize those imaginaries is not an antiquarian hobby but a necessary condition for recognizing the limits of our own inherited assumptions about histories of women's work, political agency, and collective life—and, in doing so, for imagining new possibilities for the future. In Chaucer and in Shakespeare we can see the importance of the female community to women's access to meaningful work and dignified living conditions, even as the authors also represent the primacy of the patriarchal household. Learning with and from their representations of women's frustrations and class antagonisms can provide future

generations with the generational and historical knowledge needed to deconstruct new social and cultural forms of misogyny and learn to recognize the value of women's work.

Method: Reading for Virtue

My hope is to bring together feminist literary history, the history of women's care work, and studies of lay political culture by asking a different set of questions about women's work. What if we read scenes of female friendship, household labor, domestic service, and private conversation not as marginal episodes supporting the political life of men but as literary representations of the labor through which political and ethical life itself is produced? What if patience, constancy, prudence, and counsel are understood not as essentially feminine virtues but as historically situated capacities cultivated through repeated forms of relationally-embedded work? And what if we understood Chaucer's and Shakespeare's awareness of the importance of women's communities not as proof of their feminism but as a historically specific feature of literary projects that depend upon recognizing the social and political value of women's work precisely in order to appropriate its ethical force for aristocratic and emergent lay forms of masculine authority rather than for women's own economic justice or collective liberation? Writing within literary cultures sustained by aristocratic patronage and increasingly addressed to an expanding literate public, Chaucer and Shakespeare repeatedly represent women's labor as foundational to ethical and political life while withholding from women the authority that such labor might otherwise warrant. Instead, the virtues cultivated within women's communities become cultural resources through which elite and aspiring male audiences are invited to imagine their own capacities for judgment, governance, and civic participation.

Chapter Summaries

To describe this process in the *Clerk's Tale*, I draw on recent theories of social reproduction and affective labor, particularly the work of Silvia Federici, Michael Hardt, and Nancy Fraser, not to claim that Chaucer or Shakespeare anticipated modern capitalism, but because these frameworks provide a vocabulary for recognizing historical operations already prominent in literary representation. Rather than reading affective labor as a modern phenomenon projected backward onto premodern texts, I use the concept heuristically to illuminate how literary works transform the social productivity of women's labor into a language of feminine virtue that serves male readers. What later political theory identifies as the production of social relations, trust, ethical dispositions, and collective life is already being represented—and simultaneously obscured—in the Clerk's veneration of a peasant woman's patient suffering.

My second chapter expands upon the social production of virtue to consider problems of recognition across class difference. My reading of *All's Well That Ends Well* asks what kinds of women become legible as virtuous subjects and what forms of labor must disappear to make that recognition possible. Helena's ascent into aristocratic marriage depends not only upon her own intelligence and determination but upon the symbolic, sexual, and affective labor of other working women whose vulnerabilities are redistributed to secure her exemplary status. Rather than treating Helena simply as an exceptional heroine, this chapter situates her within a hierarchy of women's work to show how Shakespeare represents Helena as materially dependent upon the labor, reputations, and social risks borne by poorer women. The play therefore reveals recognition itself as a classed process when some women become recognizable as virtuous only

because others are rendered recognizable as sexually available, expendable, and socially disposable.

Moreover, in dramatizing a scene of counsel in a community of working women, recognition occurs as an interpretive practice cultivated amongst women in *All's Well That Ends Well*. Shakespeare transmits political knowledge not through the privileged knowledge of an exceptional heroine but as a protective social practice that is found in ordinary conversations among family and neighboring friends. Over the course of the play, Diana gradually learns to recognize what her widowed mother and neighbor Mariana communicate from a shared understanding of marriage, service, and women's work that is initially only partially intelligible to her. Female-directed speech in this way teaches Diana how to interpret her social world differently. Helena's scheme ultimately depends upon this working community of women, even as it redistributes the risk of dishonor onto Diana herself, transforming women's collective knowledge into the means of producing aristocratic legitimacy. Recognition therefore emerges as a contested social process as women learn to perceive structures of exploitation together, even as those structures threaten to fragment the very communities through which such recognition becomes possible.

The final chapter asks what happens when women attempt to transform recognition itself into a collective political practice. In *Othello*, we shift from scenes of the social organization of women's labor to the rhetorical conditions under which gentlewomen might recognize one another as members of a shared social world. Reading the willow scene through the traditions of women's defense narratives and Erasmian *sermo*, I argue that Emilia's conversation with Desdemona is not a defense of retaliatory behavior but an attempt to generate a new ethical framework grounded in women's shared experience of misogyny. Emilia's speech asks

Desdemona to recognize herself as more than an individual wife; as part of a social group whose experiences reveal the cultural logic of patriarchal violence. The tragedy of the play, I argue, lies not only in Emilia's silencing at the hands of her husband but in a prior failure of recognition between women to become socially operative. Shakespeare thus represents both the political affordances and the historical limits of women's conversational communities, showing that the possibility of collective action depends first upon the difficult work of recognizing shared conditions of exploitation across differences of class, status, and experience.

The chapters that follow build upon the historical misrecognition of women's work in search of moments of women's collective valuation of their labor. My reading of Chaucer's *Clerk's Tale* begins by asking readers to recognize the forms of reproductive, affective, and communal labor that the Clerk systematically translates into the individualized virtues of patience, obedience, and constancy. Turning to *All's Well That Ends Well*, I argue that Shakespeare represents an aristocratic hierarchy predicated upon the misrecognition of women's care work while locating the possibility of political recognition within a community of working women whose generational knowledge equips Diana with the interpretive skills necessary to perceive the rhetorical obfuscations of a dissembling nobleman. Finally, *Othello* asks what becomes possible when women attempt to transform that shared recognition into collective ethical and political action. Through the rhetorical practices of *sermo*, Emilia invites Desdemona to recognize herself as a member of a broader community of women whose shared experiences reveal the social nature of patriarchal violence. If the *Clerk's Tale* dramatizes a Marquis' refusal to recognize the work behind women's virtue and *All's Well* stages a young woman's process of recognizing women's collective wisdom, *Othello* reveals the tragic consequences when women fail to recognize both their shared social position with other women and invitations to

collectively reevaluate social scripts. Together, these chapters argue that medieval and early modern literature preserves not just histories of misogyny but also histories of women's attempts to make one another—and the social conditions of their lives—recognizable, leaving behind political imaginaries that retain their relevance for new iterations of feminist inquiry.

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CHAPTER 1: Lay Authority and the Politics of Virtue in “the Clerk’s Tale”

The *Clerk’s Tale* opens with a popular expression of collective political desire. Walter, the Marquis of Saluzzo, is approached by the Saluzzan “peple,” who, in collective distress over his prolonged bachelorhood, arrive “flokmeele” to his court. An anonymous leader emerges from the crowd to exhort Walter to observe his duty to secure the nobility’s succession—“Boweth youre nekke under that blisful yok/ Of soverayntee, noght of servyse,/ Which that men clepe spousaille or wedlock. . .” (IV.113-15). This scene initiates the tale’s sustained meditation on the powers and constraints of the political subject—one who is here introduced as a nobleman engaged in a dynamic of reciprocal obligation which reflects a late medieval conception of sovereignty as “a hierarchical mode of shared ownership and judgment that is never absolute, always measured.”¹¹ For much of the later Middle Ages, political authority was increasingly understood less as the exclusive possession of the monarch than as a capacity cultivated among the men who surrounded him. Across mirrors for princes, vernacular poetry, and exemplary literature, political judgment emerged as a social practice exercised through counsel, deliberation, and ethical evaluation among an increasingly diverse, although still very small, group of men. This opening scene figures a shared authority that is distributed among elite groups through formal and informal decision-making, representational election, and group identity. David Wallace identifies a political consciousness in the people’s formalized petition, one that navigates feudal obligation and nascent civic identity through ritualized expressions of counsel.¹² Susan Nakley argues, “Their sovereignty parallels marriage: both structures yoke sovereign with subject such that the ruler must coordinate with the ruled to make movement

¹¹ Susan Nakley, “Authority (Familial, Political, Written) in the Clerk’s Tale,” 127.

¹² David Wallace, *Chaucerian Polity*, 261–98.

possible.”¹³ The people’s appeal seeks to reproduce, rather than challenge, Walter’s authority through marriage, framing sovereignty as a shared investment in social order.

The narrator offers no definitive explanation for how this spokesperson is chosen, but instead suggests several possible sources of his authority—his wisdom, his persuasiveness, or the lord’s favor:

And oon of hem, that wisest was of loore –
Or elles that the lord best wolde assente
That he sholde telle hym what his peple mente,
Or elles koude he shewe wel swich mateere –
He to the markys seyde as ye shul heere:

(IV.87–90).

Authority appears here as an emergent and negotiated process, marked by ambiguity in both origin and function and achieved through ongoing social practice and rhetorical performance. Unlike Walter’s exercises of unilateral power, this representational voice suggests a model of lay authority grounded in civic participation and reciprocal obligation—where social authority arises from the ongoing, situated practices of a politically engaged nobility.

Larry Scanlon’s account of Chaucer’s use of exempla in the cultivation of a late medieval lay authority helps clarify the social location of this political subject. Scanlon argues that the Chaucerian tradition’s preoccupation with the figure of the monarch and with the public morality of kingship was not a universally available political discourse but one that served, and was legible to, a specifically constituted ruling class whose composition, while expanding, remained

¹³ Nakley, “Authority (Familial, Political, Written) in the Clerk’s Tale,” 127.

extraordinarily narrow. Those scholars who have argued for a "middle class" reading public in late medieval England concede that this stratum amounted to "no more than one-twentieth of the total population" (144), a group that consolidated its emerging authority not by challenging the values of the court but by entering them, making "common political cause with the nobility" (144). The textual dispersal of monarchical authority across exempla, *Fürstenspiegel*, and vernacular poetry operated, according to Scanlon, in the name of an "ideal concentration" rather than against it, as the singular figure of the monarch remained the point toward which all political meaning converged (141). Chaucer's engagement with exemplarity participates in this historical transformation by relocating the moral work once concentrated in the figure of the sovereign into the interpretive practices of an expanding lay elite. While this expansion of lay political culture has often been understood as one of the defining achievements of the later Middle Ages, marking the emergence of new forms of secular ethical reasoning and civic participation beyond exclusively clerical institutions, the very narratives that authorize these newly empowered subjects also delimit the social boundaries within which political judgment becomes intelligible. The capacities of prudence, deliberation, moderation, and the ability to subordinate private interest to the common good that are celebrated by Chaucerian exempla are presented as the distinguishing attributes of those who are recognized as fit to participate in public life. Exemplarity enlarges the community capable of political reasoning to a specific audience, extending ethical authority to an emergent lay elite while leaving unexamined the material conditions that sustain those capacities. The history of lay political authority has in this way largely been written as the history of those who deliberate, counsel, and judge, with less attention given to the social labor through which the political capacities of a rising class of men are materially and socially produced. Contrary to this scholarly tradition, this essay argues that

Walter's moral authority depends absolutely upon Griselda's work—her care, judgment, endurance, and continual management of the household and its social relations—yet it can appear sovereign only by refusing to acknowledge that dependence. The tale thus dramatizes a constitutive contradiction of aristocratic mastery, the desire to depend on another while disavowing the vulnerability and reciprocity that make such dependence possible in the first place. Such recognition would frame sovereignty as a relation rather than a position of singularity, revealing such authority to be sustained by forms of care, cooperation, and reproductive labor that require others.

The new literary forms through which elite men imagined themselves as ethical actors were part of an increasingly intensive effort to determine the social meaning of women's domestic and economic activity. Much scholarship has traced the proliferation of conduct literature addressed to wives to social investments in interpreting the household as the foundation of social order. Glenn D. Burger locates in the long fourteenth century the moment of an “invention” of the good wife, as sacramental marriage, vernacular devotion, and household manuals increasingly represented feminine virtue as a positive moral force capable of shaping husbands, families, and communities.¹⁴ In order to prescribe feminine conduct and behavior, these texts transformed the everyday practices of household management, frugality, constancy, prudent speech, marital counsel, and the disciplined regulation of desire into privileged signs of moral character. Produced for a readership of literate men and women, advice manuals and conduct literature encouraged readers to evaluate women's work less according to its material consequences and political importance than according to a newly expanding lexicon of domestic

¹⁴ Glenn D. Burger, *Conduct Becoming: Good Wives and Husbands in the Later Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018), 1–27.

virtues. Thomas Chobham's *Manual for Confessors*, for instance, attributes to wives a uniquely efficacious pastoral authority, insisting that "no priest is able to soften the heart of a man the way his wife can," while *Le Ménagier de Paris* culminates its lengthy instruction in chastity, obedience, and domestic management with a treatise on advising one's husband well.¹⁵ Such texts acknowledge women's capacity to shape the moral life of others through moral reasoning and wise counsel, but only insofar as that capacity is embedded within the household and detached from formal political authority or significance.

At the historical moment when commercial expansion and urbanization opened new possibilities for women's participation in civic and economic life, literary culture increasingly defined women's contribution to that changing world through the language of domestic virtue. Joan Kelly famously argued that the social and economic transformations associated with the Renaissance "opened the possibilities for the social and cultural expression for which the age is known," even as they "affected women adversely," narrowing rather than enlarging their access to those same developments.¹⁶ Recent criticism has shown that a late medieval bourgeois became preoccupied with regulating women's relationship to material goods, clothing, and household consumption, recognizing women's economic behavior was quickly becoming a privileged site for middle-class women to negotiate the social instabilities created by an expanding market economy. For Andrea Denny-Brown, the Clerk's celebration of Griselda's poverty, constancy, and indifference to material goods is inseparable from a polemic against the expanding authority of prosperous bourgeois women. In praising Griselda's humility, the Clerk appropriates her

¹⁵ Thomas of Chobham, *Summa Confessorum*, ed. F. Broomfield; *The Goodman of Paris (Le Ménagier de Paris)*, trans. Gina L. Greco and Christine M. Rose.

¹⁶ Joan Kelly, "Did Women Have a Renaissance?" 20–21.

virtues to authorize an aristocratic mode of judgment while discrediting the growing social and economic power of prosperous merchant wives, casting their consumption, domestic authority, sartorial self-fashioning and public visibility as moral excess rather than legitimate forms of household and community governance.¹⁷ Griselda's virtues become the rhetorical means by which Chaucer's Clerk delegitimizes the emerging household power of merchant wives, redirecting admiration away from women's managerial competence and toward an ideal of self-abnegating service. Farmer's work on poor women in late medieval Paris has similarly demonstrated how ideologies of feminine poverty, chastity, and patient suffering rendered women's domestic labor available to elite households in the form of domestic service while denying its economic status by representing it as the natural expression of feminine virtue.¹⁸ She argues, "in some contexts propertied women were associated with spiritual and intellectual aspects of the domestic and affective realms while lower-status women were associated with bodily, sexual, and irrational aspects of those realms."¹⁹ Read together, these accounts of late medieval cultural forms suggest that the textual production of the "good wife" constituted one of the cultural mechanisms through which new forms of a male lay authority established themselves, translating women's participation in household economies into a moral language that simultaneously acknowledged the indispensability of their work while redefining its value according to the political needs of a rising class of men.

Thus the real meaning of the story of patient Griselda for fourteenth-century audiences lies within the different versions of the Griselda story in circulation in Chaucer's time, all of

¹⁷ Andrea Denny-Brown, "Povre Griselda and the All-Consuming Archewyves," 153–89.

¹⁸ Sharon Farmer, *Surviving Poverty in Medieval Paris*, 105–30. See pages 117–30 for her discussion of the ideological treatment of women's voluntary manual labor as penitential rather than productive.

¹⁹ Farmer, *Surviving Poverty in Medieval Paris*, 106.

which “share one essential characteristic: the tension between the woman’s double role as loving bedfellow and dutiful servant.”²⁰ For many, it is Walter’s “treatment of his wife as a servant” that embodies the “‘emotional core’” of the story. In a salient example, Kelly reminds us that “Castiglione understood the relation of the sexes in the same terms that he used to describe the political relation: i.e., as a relation between servant and lord” (121). The *Clerk's Tale* exposes the violence of such sovereignty through Walter’s “merveillous desir his wyf t’assaye,” (IV.454), his claim to determine the truth, or meaning of her efforts as well as his rights to them. Rather than undoing this contradiction, however, Chaucer redistributes it by inviting an increasingly lay readership to deliberate over Griselda’s conduct and to evaluate the moral meaning of her labor, in this way diffusing the prerogative of judgment beyond the sovereign figure. What Walter exercises as sovereign authority becomes available as a mode of ethical spectatorship through which elite male readers imagine themselves participating in practices of prudent self-government and, by extension, in the government of women and social inferiors, even as the relations of dependence upon which such authority rests remain concealed.

To describe this process, I draw upon theories of affective and reproductive labor to contribute to scholarship on the meaning and function of Chaucer’s representation of Griselda’s exemplary virtues. Recent scholarship, including *Female Friendship in Medieval Literature*, edited by Karma Lochrie and Usha Vishnuvajjala, and Vishnuvajjala’s *Feminist Medievalisms: Embodiment and Vulnerability in Literature and Film*, consider the importance of female friendship and women’s emotional lives to medieval cultural history. In her essay on female friendship in Arthurian romance, Usha Vishnuvajjala writes, “This essay examines literary

²⁰ Richard Firth Green, *Griselda in Siena*, 15.

representations of women's friendship by asking what a community of supportive women can make possible for a female character. Going beyond the intimacy between two women friends, I consider what a space populated by women might allow, particularly with respect to the expression of emotion and the experience of bodily affect."²¹ I join this recent development in medieval scholarship to read Chaucer's translation of Griselda's body as a historically distinct and class-specific inscription of gendered labor. While much of the recent scholarship on women's friendship in medieval literature focuses on aristocratic and gentlewomen and separates women's work from studies of emotion and affect, I attend to Chaucer's unique situation of the cultivation of Griselda's work capacities within a laboring community of female friends. Formulations of affective labor as work that produces social relations, trust, and dispositions provides a language for recognizing the social productivity of her virtues.²² Though her labor creates a harmonious household, stabilizes social relationships, disciplines desire, and ultimately enables the moral formation of others, the poem persistently translates these socially productive practices into the language of innate feminine virtue, obscuring the process of the literary production of historically situated forms of domestic labor. This chapter considers how emotional expression and bodily affect are produced by and productive of social relations and political order, arguing that Chaucer's *Clerk's Tale* participates in a broader late medieval effort to reinterpret the material practices of women's household lives as exemplary moral qualities available for the ethical education of an emergent lay readership. In doing so, the tale transfers the value of women's work away from the site of its production, appropriating women's work of

²¹ Usha Vishnuvajjala and Karma Lochrie, eds. *Women's Friendship in Medieval Literature*, "Women's Communities and the Possibility of Friendship in the Stanzaic *Morte Arthur*," 115.

²² On affective labor see Michael Hardt, "Affective Labor," 89–100, on reproductive labor see Silvia Federici et al., "The Means of Reproduction," 55–59.

co-operation, self-management, and care work and converting its social productivity into a cultural resource through which a rising lay readership comes to imagine and authorize its social and political authority.

This emphasis on the situational exercise of feminized virtues places my project in conversation with Holly Crocker's account of vulnerability in *The Matter of Virtue*. Crocker draws upon the affordances of Aristotelian virtue ethics to recover the legitimacy of medieval women's vulnerability and openness against critical traditions that too readily understand vulnerability as evidence of women's subordination or lack of agency. My project retains Crocker's insistence that vulnerability can constitute an ethical capacity rather than merely register injury, while placing greater pressure on the Aristotelian requirement that virtue be fitted to circumstance. If virtue consists in judging what response is appropriate to a particular situation, vulnerability cannot itself function as an invariant good. The women examined in this dissertation repeatedly confront circumstances in which openness to aggressive or coercive men would expose them to violence, exploitation, or demands upon their sexual and affective labor. Their refusals to make themselves available under such conditions may therefore constitute exercises of practical judgment rather than failures of openness. At the same time, these texts repeatedly locate possibilities for chosen vulnerability in relationships among women, where disclosure, trust, attention, and dependence can be exercised more prudently among those capable of creating the conditions for reciprocity. Vulnerability, from this perspective, acquires ethical value through judgments about where, when, how, and with whom one ought to risk vulnerability.

Affective Labor: Where Social and Spiritual Values Mesh?

Griselda's vow of obedience to Walter—"as ye wole yourself, right so wol I . . . / In werk ne thought, I nyl yow disobeye" (IV.361–63)—has long been treated as the defining ethical

problem of a tale in which a peasant woman submits to a nobleman's sustained and deliberate abuse. Helen Cooper's account represents this dominant critical approach—"The consent of both spouses had been laid down in the twelfth century as the essential criterion for legitimate marriage, but Grisilde's formulation *goes beyond* that, and indeed beyond what Walter requests. Having given her sworn word, she follows her vow through in ways that test her to the limit. Her submission will be absolute."²³ Like Cooper, many scholars read Griselda's response as a departure from the scene of political deliberation that opens the tale. Walter presents Griselda with a choice between deliberation (avysement) or agreement (assent), which he places in opposition with each other. Trembling with fear, Griselda answers Walter without rebuttal or negotiation—"Lord, undigne and unworthy / Am I to thilke honour that ye me beede, / But as ye wole yourself, right so wol I" (IV.359–61). Carolyn Dinshaw and Linda Georgianna argue that this assent operates in a register fundamentally different from the political agreement enacted by Walter's male subjects, with Georgianna arguing that the poem moves from the public to the private sphere, and in the process "the very values the poem has seemed to promote—prudent insight, discerning judgment, and the common profit—come under closer investigation as they collide with Griselda's unconditional assent to Walter's will."²⁴

Acknowledging how Griselda's promise differs from the spokesperson's, but overlooking the material conditions that produce these social and political differences, Georgianna, like many scholars, overlooks the social value and political significance of the work that goes into Griselda's show of subjection, including the prudence, judgement, concern for the common profit (including the well-being of her father) and the politically-charged, representative function

²³ Helen Cooper, "The Clerk's Tale," 189.

²⁴ Linda Georgianna, "The Clerk's Tale and the Grammar of Assent," 794.

of her demonstration of obedience as a peasant subject. Just as the spokesman's petition exemplifies deliberation, prudent judgment, and representation undertaken for the "commune profit," Griselda's assent requires and evidences the diplomacy, deliberation, and calculated display of humility befitting a peasant subject. In response to the spokesperson's address, Walter requires of the nobility the same affective posture of silent submission and unconditional "assent," "this shal ye swere: that ye / Agayn my choys shul neither grucched ne stryve... And but ye wole assente in swich manere, / I prey yow, speketh namoore of this matere" (IV.169—175). Here Walter is concerned as much with the *manner* of assent as with assent itself, recognizing that the affective disposition of his subjects shapes the stability of the polity by regulating how agreement circulates, whether obedience is publicly affirmed, and whether dissent may arise. Resonating in the rhyme of *manere* and *matere*, the poem suggests that the form of agreement is itself a political matter.

Bereft of any scene in which poor women might participate in political representation, Griselda's agreement is detached from civic negotiation and recast as an expression of spiritual faith rather than as the product of historically situated forms of labor. This transformation occurs within the tale as well as in a critical tradition that has often reproduced its underlying logic. In defending his choice of bride, Walter invokes the familiar discourse of *virtus non sanguis*, insisting that "Bountee comth al of God, nat of the streen / Of which they been engendered and ybore" (IV.157–58). His claim severs virtue from aristocratic lineage, but it also obscures the material conditions through which Griselda's virtues have been cultivated. As Linda Georgianna observes, "the narrative neither probes nor clarifies the origins of Griselda's virtue. Instead, social and spiritual values simply mesh, as though poverty and goodness go naturally hand in

hand.”²⁵ In this chapter, I argue that it is this unexplained convergence that demands historical explanation. Rather than representing Griselda's goodness as the product of the forms of work demanded by her social position, the poem individualizes dispositions that are socially cultivated through the repeated practices of peasant labors of patience, constancy, thrift, bodily discipline, practical judgment, and household competence. These are not private moral qualities but socially productive capacities that materially sustain the manorial household and help reproduce the conditions upon which elite political authority depends. Because the social and legal fiction of voluntary agreement that structures Walter's relationship to his male subjects is unavailable to Griselda, her participation in the polity is made to occur elsewhere—not in deliberation or counsel, but in the labor through which the moral and material conditions of political life are continually reproduced. The capacities that enable Walter's nobility to deliberate, counsel, and pursue the “commune profit” thus rest upon Griselda's socially reproductive labor, even as the poem persistently redescribes that labor as a species of feminine virtue designed for specific forms of evaluation. David Wallace describes this means by which women's participation in political deliberation frames her as an object of reflection rather than a reflecting subject: “in the Clerk's Tale, such deliberate gazing at a female object is presented as the legitimate outcome of a consultative political process” (294).

Griselda performs similar mental labors as the self-effacing nobleman, and she does so under the stress, duress, and immediate threat of violence that is systemically spared the nobility at the expense of the peasantry. When Walter enters Janicula's hovel and proposes he marry his daughter, the poorest villager in Saluzzo, Griselda kneels with a “sad countenance,” in the same

²⁵ Georgianna, “The Clerk's Tale and the Grammar of Assent,” 798.

“sad wyse” Walter first observes while spying on her. Once Walter’s proposal has been announced, however, Griselda’s astonishment and “ful pale face” are foregrounded. Both father and daughter are “astonyed” and “quakynges” with “drede,” Griselda and Janicula’s fears revealing the visceral and psychological impact of confrontation with a political power that they have little choice but to metabolize, overcome, and transform into meaningful speech and courteous behavior. Rather than wondering at the composure, grace, and skill of these peasants who are absorbing the full shock and violence of Walter’s intrusive presence and “sodeyn,” extreme demand, the Clerk represents this reaction as natural and practically inevitable—“No wonder is thogh that she were astoned”—in a narratorial gesture that teaches the reader how to dismiss the affective labor of the peasants, acknowledging their terror only to dismiss it as an instinctive consequence of social difference, such that the labor required to discipline that fear disappears almost as soon as it appears.

The Clerk repeatedly associates Walter’s calm demeanor with thoughtful judgment rather than with the security afforded by political power. “This thoughtful markys spak unto this mayde / Ful sobrelly,” he tells us, presenting his terms to Griselda “softely” and leaving the home “with a ful sobre cheere” (IV.295-323). Here calmness becomes the visible sign of prudence, moral self-command, and deliberative capacity. Yet Walter’s composure is possible because he controls the encounter, entering the peasants’ home without invitation, dictating the terms of the exchange, and facing no comparable threat to his body, livelihood, or social standing. Griselda’s disciplined management of fear, uncertainty, and humiliation renders Walter’s domination intelligible as virtue and transforms an act of coercion into the appearance of consensual social order. Walter’s own capacity for avysement—his prudent political deliberation concerning Griselda as a prospective wife—is dependent upon Griselda’s labor of affective regulation:

Upon hir chiere he wolde hym ofte avyse,
Commendynge in his herte hir wommanhede,
And eek hir vertu, passynge any wight
Of so yong age, as wel in chiere as dede.

(IV.238-41)

By managing the social distress generated by Walter's assertion of sovereign authority (first in his neglect to marry and then in his choice of bride) and rendering that violence socially acceptable, she creates the very conditions under which Walter can recognize the social value produced by her “chiere” and judge her worthy of marriage. In the peasant’s home as elsewhere in the tale, Walter’s equanimity thus read appears less as a personal virtue than as an affective privilege produced by sovereignty. When he presents his intentions to Griselda’s father, Walter says it is because “I neither may ne kan / Lenger the pleasance of myn herte hyde” (IV.305), in a telling remark that reveals both his ability and intent to indulge in a lack of emotional control at the expense of others. Griselda's fear, by contrast, warrants none of the elaborate commentary granted her in her calmer moments, or the evocative detail with which Walter’s demeanor is described, even though it marks the place where the greatest emotional work and social management occurs.

Drawing on Spinoza's account of affect as the body's interactivity in social exchange and encounter, Michael Hardt and Silvia Federici understand affective labor as the socially productive work of sustaining relationships, cultivating dispositions, and reproducing life through practices such as service, childrearing, elder care, and other forms of reproductive

labor.²⁶ According to Federici, Spinoza's theory of affects frames them as "modifications of the body that increase or diminish its capacity to act... "Affect" does not signify a feeling of fondness or love. Rather, it signifies our capacity for interactivity, our capacity to move and to be moved in an endless flow of exchanges and encounters, presumably expanding our powers and demonstrating not only the infinite productivity of our being but also the transformative and thus already political character of everyday life."²⁷ Scholars have long been perplexed over Griselda's apparently unprompted decision to promise never to even imagine disobeying Walter, when Walter asks only for her compliance. But when her promise is read in light of the deeply entangled relationship between work and thought, Griselda's vow not to disobey Walter "in werk ne thought" (IV.363) appears to name what Walter does not by describing the inward activity that is required to fulfill his oath *as well as* the outward activity by which obedience is socially recognized. She does not, therefore, separate work from thought but describes the importance of her thought in the activation of her work. When Griselda observes her promise to obey Walter, she does the mental work of managing, regulating, mobilizing, and executing her social and physical capacities in the cultivation of the desired emotional environment and production of the resulting relationships as resources for the manor. The peasant girl's thought thus appears as a site of productive activity, where judgment, desire, memory, and emotional response are subjected to the ongoing labor of socially-oriented self-government. Importantly, this labor materially benefits Walter, relieving him of the intensive and politically significant work of managing social conflict, dissent, and uncertainty. Griselda undertakes the continual regulation of her own affect so that the Marquis' authority may appear to be the result of his own effort.

²⁶ Hardt, "Affective Labor," 89–100; Silvia Federici, *Revolution at Point Zero*, 61–73.

²⁷ Silvia Federici, *Revolution at Point Zero*, 65.

Walter's sovereignty depends not just upon Griselda's compliance but upon her capacity to anticipate, absorb, and reorganize the affective consequences of his decisions before they become social conflict. Her interior discipline thus functions as a form of governance, producing the emotional stability and appearance of consent to male authority upon which Walter's political power, and the social and legal fictions of sovereignty, ultimately rest.

Women's Labor and the Reproduction of the Polity

When Walter intrudes upon the tranquil scene of pastoral harmony figured in Chaucer's description of Griselda's housekeeping, he interrupts the peasant girl's thoughts about her friends just as she is about to cross the threshold to join them. I argue that this original addition of a scene of female fellowship to Chaucer's version of the tale provides a crucial framework for understanding the hidden labor needed to reproduce and sustain the manorial system. While women were excluded from formal political participation, the domain of formal citizenship was produced and sustained by an informal economy of service and uncompensated labor built upon the relationships between poor women. In having Griselda imagine this scene of working women, Chaucer reveals the women workers who labor to produce the social economy that forms the basis for elite political maneuvering between noblemen.

While Griselda disavows the higher status attached to household service—"I ne heeld me nevere digne in no manere, To be youre wyf, no, ne youre chamberere" (5.818-819)—she expresses a willful attachment to her work and to the social identity it gives her within an imagined community of working girls. Before Walter selects her as an exemplary individual, the tale places her within a fellowship whose shared labor, leisure, and habits of mutual attention produce the social capacities the Clerk will later identify as her singular virtue. Just before she

meets Walter, we find Griselda imagining a fellowship of peasant women to which she belongs.

While Walter plots, Griselda plans her day:

She thoghte, “I wole with othere maydens stonde,
That been my felawes, in oure dore and se
The markysesse, and therefore wol I fonde
To doon at hoom, as soone as it may be,
The labour which that longeth unto me,
And thane I may at leyser hire biholde,
If she this wey unto the castel holde.

(IV.274-87)

Griselda’s desires are entangled with her household labor, revealing the social world in which the capacities later recognized as virtue are fostered and practiced. Here the labor that “longeth” unto Griselda implies a reciprocal belonging: she belongs to the work as much as the work belongs to her. “Longeth” binds necessity to attachment, naming an ongoing relation to the persons and places whose continued existence depends upon her work. Hurrying home to catch a glimpse of the marchioness, hoping to stand with her friends—this complex site of social belonging envisions a scene of female sociality inflected by gender, labor, and status. The primary verbs of this passage are “wole” and “doon,” signaling Griselda’s future-oriented desires and organizing her time around the temporal landscape of this social event. In this scene of imagined belonging, Griselda’s language is full of willing, although willing appears as the practical coordination of obligations and socialized pleasures rather than sovereign prerogative. The scene presents self-government as a socially embedded capacity before the Clerk abstracts it into the feminine virtues of obedience and “sadnesse.”

This assembly of working girls engaged in collective information-gathering and pleasurable social connection details a belonging that is location specific—the girls are framed in a shared doorway—and manifested through the imagined physical co-presence of a laboring community. Co-working was common among village women, as Sherri Olson observes; village women “gathered in their houses, at the market, or in alehouses to chat; they brought their domestic tasks to another person's house so they could talk while working together.”²⁸ These everyday practices transformed ordinary locations into socially meaningful spaces, as labor itself generated durable forms of neighborhood, mutual knowledge, and communal attachment. Challenging histories that have understood medieval women's agency only in regards to their “place,” as that which reestablishes readings of women “within the framework of its circumscription by men,” Olson instead locates women's social power in the production of gendered space itself.²⁹ She argues that “the activity and social relationships of women *qua* women were a significant factor in the on-going divisions in local space that accommodated and directed change, i.e., the 'production of space,' particularly with respect to neighborhood.”³ Emphasizing the “communal and internal forces that may have animated members of that community,” such accounts provide a frame of reference for Griselda’s imagined scene of communal belonging, suggesting that women's domestic and communal labor produced the social infrastructures of local life through the networks of trust, communication, and reciprocal obligation from which political values and social communities of every level in the manorial system emerge.³⁰

²⁸ Sherri Olson, “Women's Place and the Production of Space in the Medieval Village,” 211.

²⁹ Olson, “Women's Place and the Production of Space in the Medieval Village,” 209.

³⁰ Olson, “Women's Place and the Production of Space in the Medieval Village,” 211.

Griselda converts labor into material subsistence for her father while making room for the “leyser” she anticipates with her friends. When the Clerk writes of Griselda’s lifestyle, “She knew wel labour but noon ydel ese” (IV.217), he reveals the conditions under which social life is reproduced while restricting the terms through which readers may value that reproduction. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle describes leisure as that which ought to allow for the development of virtue and both personal and communal well-being and enables civic engagement.³¹ For Boethius in Book III of *Consolatio*, leisure is an extension of labor in that it is productive, reflective, and fulfilling and therefore to be contrasted not with work but with idleness.³² Griselda’s labors and leisure time are bound up in the changeable village environment within which the work of steadfastness and constancy enables women to labor together and to create intervals of collective pleasure. Leisure replenishes trust, circulates information, and makes continuing obligation bearable, and in this way belongs to the production of social life rather than standing outside it.

The Social Production of Virtue

Critical interpretations persist in describing Griselda’s steadfastness as that of a solitary fortress. David Aers develops a common impression of Griselda when he describes her utter isolation—“wherever she is and whatever virtues she practices, she remains markedly detached from any community. She seems as independent and isolated in her home village as in the palace.”³³ Aers’s image of Griselda as an isolated fortress repeats the movement of the Clerk’s narrative to communicate the social value of Griselda’s virtue while obscuring the social and

³¹ Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. Carnes Lord, VII.13–15; see also Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, X.6–8.

³² Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, book III.

³³ David Aers, *Chaucer, Langland and the Creative Imagination*, 160.

political conditions by which these socialized virtues are produced. By treating steadfastness as an individual possession, critical accounts of her isolation overlook the reciprocal practices through which disciplined constancy is cultivated. Taking the lead of *Clerk's Tale* criticism that has recently turned its attention toward the vital social networks of spiritual and secular women's friendship, I follow historians like Marjorie K. McIntosh, whose work on the informal social networks of medieval English peasant women describes the female social economies that were suppressed by men's formal networks of political, social, and economic association.³⁴ These networks generated trust, managed difference, circulated cultural knowledge, established community identity, and enforced social norms, including patriarchal ones. Griselda's constancy takes shape through female networks of exchange in which reliability is essential to social connection and economic survival. Discussing women's informal social credit systems, Margery McIntosh writes, "a different form of social capital was generated by the completely informal and loosely defined networks of friendship, neighborliness, and assistance" that functioned alongside "more organized," male-dominated institutions such as the local courts, fraternities, tithing groups, and guilds. Also termed a "problem-anchored helping network," women's social safety nets of self-help and mutual obligation varied in size and included a diversity of relationships, which were commonly lateral—family or kin, neighbors, co-workers, or friends—as well as relationships with superiors—landlords, employers. Such networks were "especially important to groups that lacked access to institutionalized power," including the laboring poor who were able "to maintain independence and to avoid becoming a burden on others by accumulating enough 'social capital' which could be exchanged for instrumental help or advice,"

³⁴ Marjorie K. McIntosh, *Working Women in English Society, 1300–1620*, chap. 4.

particularly in times emergency or extreme need. Amongst the peasantry, these social networks facilitated the transfer of knowledge, skills, labor, and goods, in small-scale arrangements which were directed toward sustaining livelihoods rather than accumulating capital.³⁵

In this way, female friendships are critical sites of cultural work, care work, and the labor of social reproduction. Medievalists like Carissa Harris have analyzed the convivial social history of medieval wives' meeting habits, while Karma Lochrie and Usha Vishnuvajjala have recently released a collection of essays on women's friendship in medieval literature.³⁶ Finding that there is "no fully elaborated theory of female friendship"—such as there was for men in Aristotle's theory of *philia*, Cicero's *De amicitia*, or Aelred of Rievaulx's *De spirituali amicitia*—and that many medieval representations of female friendship do not fit within established relationship categories, scholars have proposed alternative models of friendship. Specifically, Lochrie has identified several types of friendship which, though absent in classical philosophy and Christian theology, are present in secular medieval texts. Of the *Canterbury Tales*, in particular, she writes, "it emerges in three different forms, all of which exert pressure against the particular constraints in which the women find themselves: identity of feeling, godsibbe femininity, and cross-species empathy." Lochrie's concept of "godsibbe femininity," like Carissa Harris' "felawe masculinity," "offers women an intimate community that seeks its own pleasure, knowledge, and resistance to masculine culture in the company of women." Building upon Lochrie's insight that "female community is often consigned to the margins of society, either the "barbarie nacion" of Syria or pagan Northumbria in the Man of Law's Tale, or

³⁵ Werner Rösener, *Peasants in the Middle Ages*, 1987.

³⁶ Carissa M. Harris, *Obscene Pedagogies*, 26–66; Karma Lochrie, *Between Women: Friendship, Desire, and Marriage in Medieval English Literature*.

in the Wife of Bath's Tale, the forest beyond the Arthurian court," I trace female community within *The Clerk's Tale* to the less fabulous social margins of the working poor. There, female friendship exerts pressure against masculine culture through ordinary practices as women share time, information, observation, and pleasure, generating a collective point of view at a distance from aristocratic culture while also providing the social, cultural, and material basis for the sustainment of a manorial economy.

The peasant class to which Griselda belongs is a community structured by internal hierarchy. Barbara Hanawalt writes, "The peasantry cannot be considered a 'lumpen' class, however, but can be broken into three basic status groups within the class" which are fed by "variations in wealth, the domination of village power, the reliance on fellow villagers, marriage alliances, and a range of behavior that relates directly to the social status of the village family."³⁷ Amongst Griselda's group of friends, there were sure to be differences between "primary peasants" with family-owned land, prospects, and inclusion in local politics, and a "tertiary" peasant with fewer material and social resources like that of Griselda and her father. The two are introduced in terms of their specific location in this stratified system:

Amonges thise povre folk ther dwelte a man,
Which that was holden povrest of hem alle;
But hye God somtyme senden kan
His grace into a litel oxes stalle;
Janicula men of that throop hym calle.
A doghter hadde he, fair ynogh to sighte,

³⁷ Barbara A. Hanawalt, *The Ties That Bound*, 6.

And Grisildis this yonge mayden highte.

(1.208-14)

The daughter of the “povrest [man] of hem alle,” Griselda may arguably be the poorest villager in Saluzzo, with relatively little social capital compared to those with more “village power.” But if this heterogenous group entails differences between its members, it is imagined by Griselda as a homogenous group, reflecting what Vishnuvajjala theorizes as the “shared vulnerability—even in two characters who are not necessarily otherwise equals—and shared knowledge and beliefs can create a subjectivity that is shared but not public” (267). Griselda’s status is what seems to be on Walter’s mind in his warning to the court in the opening of the tale:

But I yow preye, and charge upon youre lyf,
What wyf that I take, ye me assure
To worshiþ hire, whil that hir lyf may dure,
In word and werk, bothe heere and everywheere,
As she an emperoures doghter weere.
"And forthermoore, this shal ye swere: that ye
Agayn my choys shul neither grucche ne stryve."

(1.164-70)

Although the village group participates in the production of class difference, Griselda is the person whom Walter targets and who most suffers its consequences. Vishnuvajjala writes, “characters in late medieval and especially Middle English texts can at times blur into each other in ways that simultaneously protect them and make them more vulnerable,” and that female friendship communities “can shield those inside it from male, colonial, or other external gazes; at the same time, that porousness of the self to one’s friends can also make the people inside the

friendship more susceptible to malignant forces outside it.”³⁸ In “The Franklin’s Tale,” too, the attempts of Dorigen’s close friends to distract her expose her to a dangerous man. “In ceding some of her autonomy, her judgment, and her will to her friends, she is made safer by their presence but more vulnerable by their choices.”³⁹ Within the village, as well as the manor, Griselda must work the hardest to preserve social relations through obscuring her heightened vulnerability and absorbing the uncertainty and violence of her particular precarity.

Griselda's social world of female friendship, then, becomes part of the very structure that makes her available to Walter. From the poem’s start, Griselda's dread of Walter exhibits her vulnerability; as the tale proceeds, vulnerability becomes the basis of her fortitude. According to the Parson, fortitude allows a person to withstand the perils of her “aventure”:

This vertu is so myghty and so vigerous that it dar withstonde
mightily and wisely kepen himself fro perils that been wikked,
and wrastle agayn the assautes of the devel. For it enhaunceth and
enforceth the soule, right as Accidie abateth it and maketh it fieble.
For this fortitudo may endure by long suffraunce the travailles that
been convenable. (10.729-30)

Peasant women were particularly vulnerable to predation by violent men. Before her “aventure” with Walter, Griselda is tested and disciplined in a less romantic laboring environment, where suffering takes the form of poverty’s slow violence and the inequalities of everyday dependence. The marriage transfers a capacity formed under economic hardship into an aristocratic household where it becomes available for spectacular abuse. Virtue in the tale is thus the accumulated

³⁸ Usha Vishnuvajjala, “Subjectivity and Women's Friendship,” 261–65.

³⁹ Vishnuvajjala, “Subjectivity and Women's Friendship,” 267.

product of women's work, although the Clerk presents it as the stable essence of an exemplary woman.

In addition to the extrinsic social pressure produced by Walter's presence and request, we may also consider the pressure exerted by Griselda's friend group. The space in which Griselda joins her fellows is structured by social expectations. McIntosh writes, "a given woman's reputation was determined largely by her female peers, through informal conversations" among women and notes that female social networks required conformity—"closely tied to female networks of social credit was the issue of what it meant to be a good or respectable woman," and "knew the personal histories of all their neighbors and used informal social pressure to ensure conformity to the values that they deemed important."⁴⁰ In a deeply ironic moment that captures the contradictions of her position, Griselda practices, or anticipates practicing, gazing upon the spectacle of the noblewoman right before she herself becomes the spectacle she means to behold. Together, the maidens participate in a form of social evaluation that helps make Walter's proposal intelligible as an opportunity she is expected to accept. The same network that shelters women can therefore establish norms that expose them to danger, demonstrating that social reproduction preserves unequal orders as well as sustaining life within them.

Historians have described a different political economy in peasant women's social credit systems. Not only was this informal credit not transferable to formal social networks, which systematically excluded women and the poor, but in time, female forms of social credit would be attacked by the patriarchal organization of formal social support:

⁴⁰ McIntosh, "The Diversity of Social Capital in English Communities," 470.

Poor-relief officials might regard women who had been valued under the old system for their social engagement with female peers in unfavorable terms. According to the newer values, if women worked harder and saved their resources, rather than sharing them with others, they would not be forced to ask for public assistance. By the early seventeenth century, poor relief for women was restricted largely to respectable elderly widows who had fallen upon hardship through no fault of their own. Poorer women continued to participate in networks of mutual assistance, though no longer with approval from the dominant ideology.⁴¹

These female social support networks provided a different form of support than the social support of men: “Whereas men tended to distance themselves from the poor, leaving money to parish poor-relief officials or other charitable institutions, women’s interactions with the poor often retained a direct, personal quality.”⁴² Women’s social credit remained locally valuable at an economic level as well. Despite the fact that women were the primary producers and sellers of ale and bread, and their exchange of resources and information could have created economic competition (through lowering prices, or increasing volume, or both), their systems of goods production remained localized. In fact, women’s small-scale, neighborhood level forms of social credit suppressed the growth of a market economy, perpetuating a system of localized exchange and labor culture that resembles what labor theorist Isaac Ilych Rubin has described as “socially direct labor.”⁴³ A defining characteristic of socially-direct labor is that because workers have collectivize control over the means of producing and sustaining life-systems, they also exercise

⁴¹ McIntosh, “The Diversity of Social Capital in English Communities,” 474–75.

⁴² McIntosh, “The Diversity of Social Capital in English Communities,” 47.

⁴³ See Rubin, *Essays on Marx’s Theory of Value*, chap. 11, especially 115–23.

control over the social value and cultural meaning of their work. In this way, the social means of Griselda's valuation of her labor is glimpsable in the female community she imagines in the *Clerk's Tale*.

Griselda's oath may be influenced by the forms of cooperative social life she experiences among her female companions—that is, the habits of reciprocity, mutual accommodation, and shared responsibility cultivated within the laboring community of village women. Rather than imagining equality as the erasure of difference, these relationships require continual adjustment to difference through practices of trust, responsiveness, and mutual care. These cooperative habits function quite differently within the manor, where Walter demands not reciprocal participation but unquestioning submission. A defining contradiction of Griselda's story is that she simultaneously avows to be of one mind with Walter while continually insisting upon the social difference that separates them. In cooperating with Walter's demands while refusing to deny the inequalities that structure their relationship, Griselda exhibits a remarkably adaptive form of subjectivity, one formed not through domination but through the everyday negotiations of dependence and reciprocity characteristic of village life. Scholars have traced a bitterness in Griselda's exclamation, "O goode God! How gentil and how kynde / Ye semed by youre speche and youre visage / The day that maked was oure marriage!" (IV.852–54). On first impression, Griselda may have believed that Walter possessed the virtues she already knew from her own world and associated with honorable conduct—kindness, generosity, and cooperative regard for others. Etymologically, *kynde* suggests both kinship and kindness, evoking relationships grounded in mutual obligation rather than domination. Griselda's lament therefore exposes not simply Walter's deception but the collapse of her expectation that aristocratic authority might be governed by the reciprocal virtues she has learned within her own community. Her excessive

vow, then, may be read less as the annihilation of her own will than as an attempt to extend into marriage the risky but ordinary practices of trust, cooperation, and care that organize village social life.

Against the socialized virtues Griselda represents in Chaucer's version of the story, Walter offers a vision of "the fyn, or final effect, of Petrarchan humanism and Petrarchan poetics... to announce and embellish the will of the state as embodied in the person of a single masculine ruler."⁴⁴ When Walter's response to Griselda's difference is to enforce the appearance that they are of one mind, without a process of communicative negotiation or co-operation, he reveals the limitations of a model of equality lacking practices of reciprocation and exchange. Ivy Schweitzer writes, "Politics thus emerges not out of sameness but out of the non-coincidence between self and other that gives rise to a desire for an illusory sameness. In this light, we can understand ideal friendship as a deep-seated fantasy of similitude, even merging, and a desire for a realm free from the commercial relations of exchange."⁴⁵ This is also a masculine and aristocratic fantasy of a relationship that is free from the commercial relations of exchange. Walter's desire for an uncomplaining servant wife seeks to avoid this realm and the issues of need, debt, and contingency conditioning it—even as he enjoys and exploits these very conditions.

Denying the privileged position of the courtly elite, Griselda makes clear that the terms of her marriage to Walter have always been socially determined. She says, "I nevere heeld me lady ne mistresse, / But humble servant to youre worthynesse" (IV.823-34), and expresses surprise "That ye so longe of youre benigntee, / Han holden me in honour and nobleye" (IV.827-28). For

⁴⁴ Wallace, *Chaucerian Polity*, 262.

⁴⁵ Schweitzer, "Making Equals," 346.

years, she patiently denies Walter the fantasy that their marriage has effected any kind of status-transcending transformation, “And she again answered in pacience: My lord, quod she, I woot, and wiste alway, / How that bitwixen youre magnificence / And my poverté no wight kan ne may / Maken comparisoun; it is no nay. / I ne heeld me nevere digne in no manere / To be youre wyf, no, ne youre chamberere” (IV.813-19). This is a historically and materially produced difference, unlike Walter’s “bountee” which “comth al of God” (IV.426) but a difference of class, described as the way in which she is “povreliche yfostred” (IV.213) by the Clerk in a description of the social and material environment in which her virtues are exercised. In this way, Chaucer’s Griselda avows the differences between the type and manner in which women of different classes perform their work. As provocative as Wallace’s image of Griselda as counselor may be, the counsel befitting a noblewoman is a socially specific labor requiring a complex of affects in which poor women are not trained. At the same time, readers are to understand the value and transferability of Griselda’s skills as a domestic servant. Chaucer’s representation of Griselda’s class difference therefore serves his readership by transforming the collective labor of poor women into the individualized virtue of Griselda’s exemplary humility, which the Clerk conflates with the virtues of an exemplary noblewoman. Readers are invited to admire the ethical dispositions that emerge from poverty while overlooking the social relations and forms of labor that produce them, reproducing the very obfuscation upon which aristocratic claims to moral authority depend.

Against Walter’s fantasy of similitude, the tale offers an image of fostering—in Griselda’s fostering, in her fostering of her father, and even in the suggestion, when she joins her friends in the doorway of someone’s dwelling, of being fostered in the homes of others. Such fostering remains within commercial relations of exchange and navigates them through the ever-

contingent practices of reciprocity and mutuality. When the village folk marvel at how well Griselda takes care of her father, they reflect social conditions in which such labor was contingent—according to Peregrine Horden, “there is no ‘golden age’ of household care to be discerned in the European and Mediterranean world in antiquity or the Middle Ages, no period or area in which large supportive families have been efficiently responsible for the overwhelming bulk of welfare provision,” and moreover, that “despite the traditional allocation of domestic care to women,” there is a “growing conviction of some historians, that not even women’s care can be taken for granted.” Walter instructs Griselda to manage his house in much the same way Griselda managed her own, yet he fails to replicate the village virtue economy within the manor. Herself a “povre fostered creature,” Griselda cares for her father in much the same way he cares for her—“in greet reverence and charitee, Hir olde povre fader fostred shee” (IV.221-22). Described as a choice she is encouraged to make because it has been modeled for her and fostered an inclination to imitate her father’s behavior, mutuality and reciprocity define Griselda’s upbringing and inform her decision to foster her father in kind. In the Aristotelian model, habitus develops in two stages—first through habitual exercise and training, and then when a person acts for the sake of virtue itself rather than as a result of social influence. Habitual practice leads, ideally, to volitional exercise.

Imitation of her father’s and community’s example nonetheless leaves room for social difference within the peasant world. As Diana Fuss has remarked in her psychoanalytic reflections on identity, claims to likeness suggest difference—“To be ‘like’ the other is to be different from the other, to be precisely different.” Unlike Walter’s fantasy of compliance, in which co-operation requires the appearance of unanimous agreement, Griselda’s place of fostering is defined by the negotiation and acknowledgment of difference between her and her

aging father. Their difference structures the terms of their domestic arrangement and division of labor, but this arrangement is made possible when it is formulated as reciprocation. Griselda fosters the father who fostered her when she was a child. Likewise, female fellowship is presented as a kind of homecoming to a place that is not your own. When Griselda pictures herself standing in a doorway with her friends, it remains unclear just whose dwelling threshold they gather in. Both scenes of homecoming are disrupted by the imminent threat of violent intrusion from above that the peasant model of mutuality cannot accommodate or work into its model. To be “fostered” means to receive care in a space that is a dwelling other than one’s natal home. The fostering practices of the village poor reflect an awareness and responsiveness to the social upheaval and material precarity to which they were most vulnerable. Unlike the fixed origins of Walter’s *virtu non sanguis*, Griselda’s fostering reveals a process of continual becoming and contingent belonging, in which habit, repetition, and consistency co-exists with social and material difference. Armed with a flexible network of virtues, Griselda learns and quickly adapts to her situation in the manor, but these skills cannot make up for the one-sidedness of a manorial life lacking the particular social arrangements and communal agreements of her village.

In his attempt to prevent it, Petrarch describes the best safeguard against male predation when, in *Familiars* (136), he advises men who are evaluating a prospective wife to find "a noble maiden, devoted to you from an early age and distanced from her people's flatteries and old women's gossipings" (274). In his highly influential monograph *Chaucerian Polity*, David Wallace floats the model of the “cooperative marriage” through his notion that the virtuous wife provides the Chaucerian “solution” to masculine tyranny. An intelligent, advisory spouse, Wallace argues, is "(as exemplified by both Grisilde and Prudence) the best safeguard against

tyrannical masculine tendencies." This logic, however, renders women culpable for their abuse when it makes them capable of changing men's minds. Griselda's isolation is the product of a larger program of intentionally removing young women from their female communities as a form of social control, and it appears in the tale as a process rather than as a given.

The ideological effect of locating feminine virtue in the individual is to isolate the exceptional woman from the working community in which her capacities are fostered. Once detached from that community, constancy can be admired as personal character rather than recognized as the accumulated result of reciprocal work, shared discipline, and collective care. Tracing the importance of the Griselda's virtue of steadfast constancy to the meaning of the tale, Alcuin Blamires captures the conflation of gender, labor, and affect thus:

In isolating the paramount exemplary importance of steadfastness (*firmitas*) in the tale, I think something else that we can resolve is what is meant by a crucial-seeming concluding statement where the Marquis attempts to justify his actions. These actions have been committed, he insists, not out of malice but 'for t'assaye in thee [Griselda] thy wommanheede' (IV. 1075). Womanhood remains unexplained here and seems at first sight peculiar. In conventional Middle English, a test of someone's manhode would signify a test of his 'courage.' There was no broadly agreed complementary significance for wommanheede. However, from a question asked at 698-9, about what more a stern husband could do 'to preeve hir wyfhod and hir stedefastnesse', it seems that in *The Clerk's Tale* Griselda's 'wifehood' and her 'steadfastness' are symbiotic: one might

conjecture that her womanhood and her steadfastness are similarly meant to be symbiotic in this tale.⁴⁶

Medieval marriage displaced women to both undermine and differentiate itself from female sociality and knowledge sharing. In her reading of *The Knight's Tale*, Karma Lochrie argues that the “destruction of female community” is “a pre-requisite of Thesean regnal politics—the conquest of the Amazon “regne of Femenye.” Scholarship has recently demonstrated the tight link between women’s gossip and formation of place-based communities.⁴⁷ Lochrie remarks, “Medieval anxiety about female affiliation can be found in the widespread representations of female gossip – the chattering of the renegade religious recluse, the debased advice of La Vieille, the Old Woman in the Roman de la Rose, or the recalcitrant whispers of women during Mass” (Between Women, 71). In the *Clerk's Tale*, as in the *Knight's Tale*, female community—rather than the isolated intelligent or virtuous woman—holds the greatest potential to oppose masculine violence. Its disappearance enables the Clerk to offer Griselda to an elite lay readership as an object of moral contemplation. Readers may admire and rank her virtues precisely because the laboring relationships that produced them have receded from view to create an artificial vacuum of meaning for an elite readership to fill.

Appropriating Women’s Labor and the Politics of Care Work

Within this larger village economy of obligation, Griselda resides with her father in a home which the Clerk characterizes by the reciprocal labor required of the peasant girl to sustain her impoverished household and her aging father. The people wonder at how well she cares for her father—“The peple cam unto the hous withoute, / And wondred hem in how honest manere /

⁴⁶ Alcuin Blamires, “Exemplifying Feminine Stability,” 167.

⁴⁷ Carissa Harris, “Obscene Pedagogies,” 26–66.

And tentifly she kepte hir fader deere” (IV.330-334)—suggesting that her virtue is as much produced through her attitude to the work as the work itself. Their admiration falls upon the manner and constancy of her care, suggesting that Griselda's celebrated virtues emerge through the activating potential of a disposition that enables the habitual performance of everyday domestic labor. As Hardt and Federici's work would suggest, this labor exceeds discrete household tasks to encompass the continual work of anticipating Janicula's needs and regulating the emotional environment of the household through constant self-management of the mental and physical pain, frustration, adversity, and monotony of the grueling and endless labor of elder-care within the constraints of poverty, including managing scarce resources, and reproducing the conditions of the village at the most basic level. Griselda's attentiveness therefore represents a socially productive capacity rather than an individualized moral disposition. Beyond Janicula's life, her care sustains the household as a viable economic and social unit. Yet the poem does not represent these activities as labor, but instead collapses historically produced forms of domestic competence into innate feminine virtue:

And whan she homward cam, she wolde brynge
Wortes or othere herbes tymes ofte,
The whiche she shredde and seeth for hir lyvyng,
And made hir bed ful hard and nothyng softe;
And ay she kepte hir fadres lyf on-lofte
With everich obeisaunce and diligence
That child may doon to fadres reverence.

(IV.225-31)

The passage records a sequence of ordinary activities—gathering herbs, preparing food, maintaining the household—signaling the value of Griselda’s work to the reader. But the Clerk's practical description of Griselda's labor is subordinated to rhetoric of her exemplary virtue which does not reflect the precarity and contingency of her labors but rather tells a story of the virtues of obedience, diligence, and reverence through which the significance of the work is differently interpreted. The difficulty of this labor disappears, even as readers are asked to register the constant negotiation of scarcity, exhaustion, uncertainty, and bodily need that provide the value of Griselda’s exemplary virtue. The peasant’s virtue demands physical exertion as well as continual self-discipline through the emotional suppression of resentment, the management of frustration, and the willingness to subordinate one's own discomfort—to make one’s bed “ful hard and nothyng softe”—to another's survival. These capacities constitute much of labor’s social productivity as Griselda continually prevents hardship from becoming conflict through her sustained effort to reproduce the household. Her obedient submission to paternal authority is an active practice of preserving the fragile social relations upon which village life depends. The political work of suppressing dissent in the interests of survival and cooperation becomes indistinguishable from the social fiction of voluntary obedience. What appears as reverence is also the difficult labor of sustaining social life under conditions that offer little alternative. By translating these practices into a language of virtue, the Clerk transforms historically necessary forms of self-government into evidence of innate moral excellence, concealing the social and material bases for Griselda’s development. Virtue represents not the work itself, but the character or quality attributed to work and the medium through which its social value is interpreted by others. This transformation from work to virtue has political significance. As Farmer has shown, late medieval discourses of feminine poverty, chastity, and service increasingly made the labor

of poor women available to wealthier households while denying that labor independent economic value.⁴⁸ Andrea Denny-Brown similarly argues that Chaucer writes at a moment when expanding urban households and commercial wealth allowed prosperous wives greater authority over servants, household expenditures, and domestic management. By relocating the value of Griselda's labor from productive work to moral character, the *Clerk's Tale* offers an ideal of feminine household governance grounded not in the managerial authority that the figures of the archwyves represent, or economic discretion but in self-abnegating service. The exemplary wife is thus one who exercises extraordinary capacities for sustaining others while appearing never to exercise power.

The political significance of this transformation becomes clear when placed alongside the changing household economy that Andrea Denny-Brown describes. As urban wealth expanded during the fourteenth century, prosperous households increasingly depended upon servants to perform the forms of domestic labor that had once structured women's own daily experience. Household authority consequently shifted from labor itself toward its supervision, making management, purchasing, and consumption newly important dimensions of feminine identity. Chaucer's Griselda offers a counter-image to this emerging social reality. Rather than presenting household competence as the ability to command labor, the *Clerk's Tale* locates feminine excellence in the complete identification of the self with labor. Griselda governs because she serves, and she possesses authority only insofar as that authority is indistinguishable from obedience. The tale therefore celebrates humility in the service of relocating the value of domestic work from its material productivity to its moral meaning, inviting readers to admire a

⁴⁸ Farmer, *Surviving Poverty in Medieval Paris*, 105–30, esp. 106, 117–30.

form of labor that is so closely and persistently associated with its affect until it appears as natural virtue. The exemplary wife neither directs servants nor manages household wealth but willingly becomes the medium through which another's household is sustained. In this sense, the tale responds to changing social relations by capturing women's expanding domestic authority in a redefinition of the grounds upon which that authority should rest.

The same logic governs the poem's account of Griselda's "sadnesse," which in middle English signifies a rich field of meanings. "Sad" means to be "sated, surfeited; satisfied" as well as "Firmly established, fixed, settled" and "of a person: firm, steadfast; constant; faithful, righteous," "(sth.), affirm, make good."⁴⁹ As Alcuin Blamires observes, Griselda embodies an ethics of sufficiency through a disposition that accepts her impoverished conditions rather than demanding more.⁵⁰ Yet sufficiency is not the absence of desire so much as a particular organization of it. Griselda's contentment is continually produced through labor undertaken within the pressures of material deprivation. Derek Brewer argues that "Chaucer uses sad to express constancy, of which the sharpest and most interesting kind, for him, is constancy of spirit in adversity, a refusal to be broken down by suffering. It is primarily, and paradoxically, an anti-expressive word, or rather, perhaps, an expressive word used to signify the absence of the expression of feeling....The story of Griselda is designed to recommend a heroic Christian stoicism which sacrifices self and personal feelings to steadfast commitment to principle."⁵¹ Griselda's anti-expressiveness is itself a form of expression and feat of internalized effort. The *MED* captures this convergence in its definition of "labour," which includes the emotional and

⁴⁹ *Middle English Dictionary*, s.v. "sad," adj., senses 1(a), 2(a), 2(c).

⁵⁰ Alcuin Blamires, *The Case for Women in Medieval Culture*, "Exemplifying Feminine Stability," 153–171.

⁵¹ Derek Brewer, "Metonymic Relationships," 42.

spiritual valences of hardship, pain, distress, mental anguish, and worry that accompany physical work and worldly occupation for the working and non-working poor. When used to describe Griselda's world and her relationship to her work, her "labour" names both the productive activity and the affective burdens particular to her as an indigent woman. Griselda's "sadnesse" therefore emerges from the repeated discipline of accommodating bodily discomfort, economic insecurity, and social dependence without allowing these conditions to dissolve the household's fragile equilibrium.

Conclusion: From Women's Labor to Lay Authority

Throughout the *Clerk's Tale*, Griselda's labor is persistently translated into an object of moral contemplation. The practices through which she manages scarcity, regulates emotion, preserves the household, negotiates relations of dependency, and sustains collective life appear in order to establish the authenticity and social value of her work only to disappear behind the language of patience, constancy, and obedience. The Clerk repeatedly invites his audience to deliberate over these virtues as though they existed independently of the forms of work that produced them. Walter himself first recognizes Griselda not while she labors but while observing the comportment, or "chiere" through which labor has become legible as character, "Upon hir chiere he wolde hym ofte avyse, / Commendynge in his herte hir wommanhede, / And eek hir vertu" (IV.286–89). His avysement represents the accumulated effects of peasant women's social reproduction for evidence of innate moral excellence. The tale extends this invitation to its readers. Like Walter, they are asked to deliberate, distinguish, and judge—to determine the meaning of Griselda's conduct, to weigh the justice of Walter's actions, and finally to participate in the Clerk's exhortation that "Grisilde is deed, and eek hire pacience" (IV.1177). What appears to be an exercise in ethical interpretation is simultaneously an exercise in political subject

formation. Readers are encouraged to imagine themselves practicing prudent judgment while the historical forms of labor that make such judgment possible have already been rendered invisible.

The history recovered in this chapter therefore concerns not simply Griselda but the conditions under which literary culture produces political authority. The virtues the poem celebrates emerge from the cooperative disciplines of peasant women's work and through the management of households under conditions of scarcity, the regulation of emotion within dependent communities, and the fostering of endurance, prudence, and reciprocal obligation through everyday labor. By detaching these capacities from their material origins, the *Clerk's Tale* converts them into cultural resources available for appropriation by an increasingly lay and literate elite. The pleasure of the "Griselda game," evident both in the tale's invitation to endless moral adjudication and in the history of criticism that repeatedly asks whether Griselda ought to have obeyed or is in some sense responsible for or complicit in her mistreatment, reproduces this displacement. It invites readers to occupy the position of Walter and to recognize and deliberate over virtue rather than to ask how virtue has been historically produced. Reading historically requires more than recovering women's work as a forgotten background to the tale; it also requires recognizing that the poem seeks to transform the social productivity of peasant women's labor into the moral property through which elite readers come to imagine themselves as capable of ethical discernment, political self-government, and, ultimately, the government of others.

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CHAPTER 2: “We the Poorer Born”: Social Status and Women’s Working Relations in

All’s Well That Ends Well

Act three, scene five of *All’s Well That Ends Well* opens upon a scene of neighborwomen gathered at a window and trying to catch sight of a military procession in the streets below. Spectating alongside her mother and their female neighbors, we find Diana, a Florentine maid who helps her widowed mother run a boarding house for girls on pilgrimage to the shrine of Saint Jaques le Grand at Santiago de Compostela in Spain. Within this environment where women’s work is defined by the social services of hospitality, domestic labor, and economic exchange at the neighborhood level, Diana enjoys a degree of autonomy that is not available to most married women, as her mother’s economic independence allows the two to sustain their livelihoods through a local economy of women’s social networks and neighborhood relations. But as the daughter of a poor widow, Diana is particularly vulnerable to the advances of wayward men.⁵² Thus when she expresses admiration for Bertram, a French nobleman in the procession who has been visiting her, their neighbor Mariana is quick to intervene—“Well, Diana, take heed of this French earl. The honor of a maid is her name, and no legacy is so rich as honesty” (3.5.11-13). Mariana’s comment suggests that for women, the importance of sexual reputation applies to all, regardless of rank. Despite her status, Diana’s chastity may afford her the material benefits, or “riches,” of a name that is honorable, if not noble. Tracey Sedinger captures the ambiguous relationship between social reputation and material benefit for girls like Diana, arguing that single working women, “were usually represented as strangely ‘class-less’

⁵² Boarding was not often provided by middling women but largely provided by poor women for whom the slight remuneration and loss of privacy was worthwhile. See McIntosh, Marjorie Keniston. *Working Women in English Society, 1300–1620*. 1. publ., Cambridge University Press, 2005, 61.

(i.e., not represented as exercising privileges or prerogatives), even though their virtue implicitly signified an elevated social status” (3). After the Widow turns to her daughter in explanation, “I have told my neighbor how you have been solicited by a gentleman, his companion” (3.5.14-16), Mariana continues,

Beware of them, Diana. Their promises, enticements, oaths,
tokens, and all these engines of lust are not the things they go
under... I hope I need not to advise you further, but I hope your
own grace will keep you where you are, though there were no
further danger known but the modesty which is so lost.

(3.5.19-29)

The sexual economy circumscribing Diana’s social identity is clear in the women’s language—her virginity is compared to riches in Mariana’s speech, Bertram’s advances as solicitation in the Widow’s, and her modesty measured absolutely, with the potential for permanent loss. This is an economy in which women’s work is sexual in nature, “The irregular treatment of women springs in part from their peculiar social definition: whereas men have assigned functions to perform, women’s duties derive from and relate to their sexuality.”⁵³ Diana’s work as a maid is the management of her sexuality by her “own grace,” her primary means of survival, the sexual restraint and obedience that render moral conduct a constitutive element of women’s labor. So tightly entwined were women’s sexual reputation and employability that any accusation of sexual misconduct threatened not only a girl’s personal honor but her very survival. In this introductory scene to this body of women, Mariana operates within this gossip community of

⁵³ Susan Crane, *Gender and Romance*, 97.

older women that enforces social norms and surveils younger women's behavior in a reputational network of social credit and transaction. While Mariana's admonition appears protective, she reinforces a system in which Diana's social worth and economic viability are reducible to the symbolic value of her maiden virtue, a currency that is central to community relations and social order even as it circulates in obscurity, evaluated by all yet ascribed only to a woman's "own grace." Within the boarding house, Diana enjoys a measure of freedom from the predatory interests of men like Bertram even as her social position is hemmed in by the female networks of women who surveilled each other, operating at a remove from patriarchal oversight but active in reproducing the social and economic vulnerability of single women in service.

The social status of single girls like Diana was considered indeterminate because position was conferred through a husband's status. At the same time, the status of working single women was overdetermined by their inferior rank. Sedinger writes,

Political economy in early modern England naturalized women's marital status, despite differences of degree and hierarchy. This naturalization led to the representation of a homogeneous 'woman,' defined primarily in terms of virtue (or the lack thereof), which forestalled the recognition of social differences between women, including differences of marital and social status. But the homogenization of women was never complete, since status differentiation remained the primary schema for the distribution of social, political, and economic goods. Legal and political discourses continued to register their independent status, largely because, as Sherry Ortner has suggested, in hierarchical societies organized according to status, status ultimately trumps sexual difference.

These conflicting discourses present a "crucial analytical problem" for feminist historians—"though marital and status differences cannot be equated, nevertheless they were frequently

articulated together” (Sedinger, 7). Furthermore, feminist recovery projects may participate in obscuring the status distinctions that structure women’s relationships when they uncritically presume that women identified primarily as women, such that scholars can presume solidarity among women. These critical assumptions are present in important anthologies like *Maids and Mistresses, Cousins and Queens* and *Singlewomen in the European Past*, which can analytically conceal intra-gender distinctions of status and class. In claiming a unified female subject and prioritizing gender over status to restore women’s agency or subjectivity, much feminist recuperative work relies upon what Wendy Brown argues are contemporary notions of a liberal subject whose agency is imagined as pre-existing discourse and thus flattens the effects of representation. In this critical tendency, “power is not seen as producing the subject, but only as privileging or oppressing it” (Brown, 32). Sedinger cautions that such identifications may recreate the very forms of erasure they seek to redress when status hierarchies are overlooked in favor of a gendered collectivity.

Early modern discourses of social subjection conflated differences between women in undifferentiated renderings of womanhood which stand in stark contrast to the well-catalogued and nuanced gradations that applied to men’s working and social status. Instead of reproducing this generalized abstraction of the early modern woman, I take up Wendy Brown’s call for a historiography of contingencies—a mode that foregrounds fractured subject positions and the dissonances between social categories, “a historiography quite different from that expressed by notions of cause and effect, accumulation, origin, or various intersecting lines of development, a historiography that emphasizes instead contingent developments, formations that may be at odds with or convergent with each other, and trajectories of power that vary in weight for different kinds of subjects” (Brown, 32). Sedinger and Brown’s frameworks help us understand the

varying degrees of vulnerability between the women in the play. Status differences in *All's Well*, I will argue, are recreated in a hierarchy of labor amongst women whose relationships to their work and the work of other women reflects and reinforces differences in social status and position. If, as Kathryn Schwarz argues, “Helena represents the logical extreme of a genre and culture which require that women use themselves as tools,” this chapter investigates the ways in which women use *other* women as tools to establish their position within a dominant social order (Schwarz, 207). Reading Helena and Diana’s relationship through the lens of their differing positions reveals a shared investment in the preservation of women’s virtue which ultimately works to efface the significance of women’s status and facilitate the unequal distribution of work and risk that structures Helena’s success, ultimately revealing the ways in which Helena’s ascent to nobility depends upon the social significance of Diana’s maid status.

Thus while much scholarship still tends to characterize Helena’s active will as either a reversal or appropriation of patriarchal authority, others have argued that Helena’s assertive constancy works to reproduce patriarchal structures, exposing their dependency on “women’s will and work” in the process.⁵⁴ In Schwarz’s influential reading of *All’s Well That Ends Well*, “Intentional constancy has the potential to revise or dismantle social organization, to appropriate masculine agency or consolidate feminine homosociality.” Ultimately, however, she finds that the heroine’s feminine constancy “serves the ends of heterosocial desire but deeply complicates the means” (220). Schwarz’s now-classic intervention troubles the critical tendency to presume that a willful woman must be acting in the interests of and on behalf of all women. Describing “the play’s driving force” as “the symbolic relation articulated as Helena’s will to marriage,”

⁵⁴ Kathryn Schwarz, “My Intents are Fix’d” p. 201.

however, Schwarz overlooks the hidden social and economic relation articulated in Helena's will to marriage—Helena's own dependence upon the maidservant Diana's will and work in her efforts to secure her position within the patriarchal order of the court (210). Feminist friendship theory has recently accounted for power imbalances between women—Usha Vishnuvajjala, for example, theorizes female friendship as a “shared vulnerability—even in two characters who are not necessarily otherwise equals—and shared knowledge and beliefs can create a subjectivity that is shared but not public” (267). While Helena and Diana are united by a shared knowledge of their vulnerability as women, their different circumstances are exacerbated, not levelled, by Helena's management, which provides Diana with an avenue to marriage that only works to recenter marital status to women's subject positions and working relationships rather than create shared structures for women's economic, social, and cultural cooperation and interdependence. In a social order which only conferred occupational distinction to men, Diana's work to preserve her maiden virtue and Helena's chastity through the bed-trick conceals women's status differences behind a totalizing category of womanhood even as it exploits and reproduces these status differences in the production of a noblewoman's estate. But while Helena works to effect this patrilineal closure, Diana's developing refusal of marriage and men over the course of the play ultimately keeps her labor relations within a hierarchical community of working women.

Commodifying Maids

Before we meet Diana, then, we encounter the play's main heroine, Helena, having to consider the value of virginity. Parolles, an ill-reputed soldier and close acquaintance with the Countess of Rossillion's son, Bertram, argues that women can put their virginity to use—and better do, before it loses its value:

'Tis a commodity will lose the gloss with lying; the
longer kept, the less worth. Off with 't while 'tis
vendible; answer the time of request. Virginity, like an
old courtier, wears her cap out of fashion, richly suited
but unsuitable, just like the brooch and the toothpick,
which wear not now...

Will you anything with it?

(1.1.158-64, 170)

Helena's reply distinguishes herself, and her virtue, from the multitude of women she imagines
with Bertram,

Not my virginity, yet
There shall your master have a thousand loves,
A mother, and a mistress, and a friend,
A phoenix, captain, and an enemy,
A guide, a goddess, and a sovereign,
A counselor, a traitress, and a dear;
His humble ambition, proud humility;
His jarring concord, and his discord dulcet;
His faith, his sweet disaster; with a world
Of pretty, fond, adoptious christendoms
That blinking Cupid gossips.

(1.1.166-75)

Critics often take Helena's speech as a self-description, but this series of oxymorons is, importantly, about *other* girls.⁵⁵ Helena's very first line anticipates the trio of women who will effect her scheme, "A mother, and a mistress, and a friend." Her virtuosic talents do display the heady composite she describes—"A phoenix, captain, and an enemy, / A guide, a goddess, and a sovereign, / A counselor, a traitress, and a dear" (1.1.174-76), but the speech elaborates the multitude of Bertram's flings with other women in a litany of exaggerated descriptions that occupy the position and ventriloquize the voice of the enamored suitor who exchanges one novelty for another, treating women's virtue as interchangeable.⁵⁶ Making the imagined women into mythical types, Helena imbues them with the kind of value particular to the commodity—value which obscures the labor (including symbolic labor of the kind Helena performs in this speech to reify the cultural value of virginity) that produces it in order to render it exchangeable and which appears to be independent of human forces and construction. Helena will return to this theme later, when the women are well into the scheme of the bed-trick, lumping Diana in with references to women as the playthings of men's lust, which toys with "what it loathes" for its satisfaction (3.4.19-27). In this way, the convention of the maid-mistress swap enacts the commodification of women's sexual virtue and "reveals how the legitimation of a man's social ambition, encoded as the love for a woman of superior social status, apparently requires the delegitimation of a maidservant's social ambition" (Sedinger, 8).

⁵⁵ David Bevington, "All's Well That Plays Well," in *Subjects on the World's Stage: Essays on British Literature of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*, ed. David G. Allen and Robert A. White, Newark: U of Delaware P, 1995, 180.

⁵⁶ In *King John*, virginity is subjected to the forces of commodification in a vision of a world that is dominated by self-serving exchange: "That daily break-vow, he that wins of all, Of kings, of beggars, old men, young men, maids,—Who having no external thing to lose But the word "maid", cheats the poor maid of that—That smooth-faced gentleman, tickling commodity" (2.1.596–601). The word is also used three times in Thomas Heywood's *The Wise-Woman of Hogsdon* in a sustained conceit of the exchangeability of women for sexual use.

Schwarz describes this as a speech that captures the “hybridity” of women, describing Helena’s “contradictory simultaneity” as the miraculously self-contained synthesis of such hybridity. But as knowing woman and would-be wife, Helena understands that men split these dualities between different women to isolate and encourage competition amongst women. To demonstrate mastery and control over this hybrid, Helena must control the othered object of lust, the maid. Janet Adelman tracks this split between the virtuous and unvirtuous woman in the problem plays, noting, “whereas Troilus and then Othello split one woman in two... Bertram and Angelo negotiate their sexual desire between two women, one of whom (Diana/Isabella) is apparently violated and shamed, becoming the repository of sexual soiling, the other of whom (Helena/Mariana) mysteriously remains unsoiled and hence—eventually—available for marriage” (77). While Adelman argues that the performance of sexual contamination is “banished” through “theatrical exorcism,” I argue that this sexual contamination remains structurally and characteristically intrinsic to Shakespeare’s representation of working women’s social status. Sexual culpability lies dormant in single working women, ready to be activated to accommodate the needs of a scheming nobleman or opportunistic gentlewoman.

While Helena’s virtue is transformed from maiden virginity to marital chastity over the course of the play, it is Diana’s virginity that will prove most vendible in the play. Natasha Korda attributes the emergence of the commodity to changes in the nature of the work of middling women like Helena, “The early modern period marked a crucial change in the cultural valuation of housework, a change that is historically linked... to the rise of capitalism and the development of the commodity form” (Korda, 54). Korda uses the theories of Veblen and Baudrillard to argue that “this new form of ‘housework’ is more specifically described as the locus of a ‘symbolic labor,’” defined as the “active manipulation of signs” or status objects. The

value of the housewife's "manipulation" of the "cultural status of the object," according to Baudrillard, emerges not from an "economic calculus," but from a "symbolic and statutory calculus" dictated by "relative social class configurations" (56-57). When Helena stages a bed trick using Diana's virgin virtue to lure Bertram into bed with her, her work resembles the symbolic labor which was being newly defined by its management of status objects. Such status objects included the housewife herself and the fluid servant class that performed a wide range of loosely defined, variable tasks for their social superiors. One such worker in Helena's service, Diana is rarely addressed directly once her mother agrees to her daughter's participation in the bed trick. Helena tells the Widow, "Let her in fine consent / As we'll direct her how 'tis best to bear it" (3.7.23-24). In this way, Helena carefully manages the symbolic value of Diana's maidenhood in the production of her own estate, leveraging their different circumstances and opportunities to differentiate herself from the working woman as an aristocratic subject newly elevated through her marriage to Bertram. Helena's directorial work exerts direct influence, both actual and symbolic, over other women's labor in ways that reveal the extent to which the newly aristocratic woman's virtues rely upon the services of working women for their legitimacy and coherence.

Before she fortuitously appears on Diana's doorstep, Helena laments, "'Tis pity that wishing well had not a body in't" (1.1.179, 181). At the Widow's boarding house, she finds just the body she needs to get her wish. Schwarz argues that in Helena's wish is a "fantasy of materialized desire," (207) one which "anticipates the bed trick that yokes body to wish" and "foreshadows a plot through which Helena's control of her constancy will do the trickiest work of patriarchal ideology, effecting that vital and elusive transition from virginity to married chastity" (219). But whose body is "yoked" to Helena's wish? Helena's intellectual capacity to

perform the social trick of feminine constancy as a bridge from maidenhood to marriage is astounding, but her power to translate Diana's servant status to sexual availability, collapse her person with her function, direct her conduct and manipulate the reputation of her social inferior is crucial to Helena's social mobility. Diana's social significance as a maid, not Helena's individual will, does the trickiest work of patriarchal ideology, since it is the public availability of Diana's maiden virtue for social interpretation which moves sexual value through the circuit of valuation and devaluation that rationalizes hierarchies of labor and status. The symbolic work of conflating working women's sexual and social status with their economic positionality was thus crucial to the production of a status object of manipulable value not only for men, but for advantageous women seeking to navigate a shifting social and economic order.

Making Fair Gifts Fairer

Though better educated and positioned higher in society than Diana, Helena also occupies a liminal position as a woman of middling rank. The daughter of a physician and a gentlewoman by training, Helena's graces have won her the admiration of the court. Yet even after he assents to receiving her medical ministrations, the King's trust is tinged with doubts about the particulars of her upbringing, "More should I question thee, and more I must, / Though more to know could not be more to trust: / From whence thou cam'st, how tended on" (1.1.226–68). Lacking property or title and referring to herself as "poorer born," (1.1.188) Helena is also, like Diana, technically an orphan, a status that increased young women's social and economic vulnerability in this period. As Vivien Brodsky Elliott observes, parental death was an important element in determining young women's migration patterns, "Of female servants travelling to London in the

period from 1597 to 1619, 62 per cent had lost their fathers by the age of 25 years.”⁵⁷ Helena experiments with the possibility of her displacement when she adopts the attitude of a pilgrim, reflecting the uncertainty of her position and the real dispossession to which even wards like Bertram could subject the women in their care. Bequeathed to the Countess of Rossillion’s generous overlooking after her father’s passing, Bertram’s mother explicitly acknowledges Helena as her surrogate daughter, partially elevating her above the other unmarried women of Roussillon and granting her access to aristocratic privilege. Beloved by all at court and achieving “those hopes of her good that her education promises,” Helena performs the humility that approves her merit, and yet she depends not upon birthright but upon these uncertain connections at court.

Though driven to distinguish herself, Helena’s overreach is measured—she assures the King, “exempted be from me the arrogance / To choose from forth the royal blood of France, / My low and humble name to propagate With any branch or image of thy state” (1.1.216-17). Helena’s middling status clings to her, persistently defining her sense of her place in the world. More astonishing than her sense that she must work for her station, however, is the fact that she feels she can,

Our remedies oft in ourselves do lie
Which we ascribe to heaven. The fated sky
Gives us free scope, only doth backward pull

⁵⁷ Elliott, Vivien Brodsky, 'Mobility and Marriage in Pre-Industrial England: A Demographic and Social Structural Analysis of Geographic and Social Mobility and Aspects of Marriage, 1570–1690, with Particular Reference to London and General Reference to Middlesex, Kent, Essex and Hertfordshire', PhD thesis, University of Cambridge, 1978.

Our slow designs when we ourselves are dull. What
power is it which mounts my love so high,
That makes me see, and cannot feed mine eye?
The mightiest space in fortune nature brings
To join like likes and kiss like native things.
Impossible be strange attempts to those
That weigh their pains in sense and do suppose
What hath been cannot be. Who ever strove
To show her merit that did miss her love?
The King's disease—my project may deceive me,
But my intents are fixed and will not leave me.

(1.1.216-29)

Critics have found evidence that Shakespeare, regarding his own efforts to acquire the position of gentleman, defended his own industrious aims to purchase a coat of arms.⁵⁸ But our concern is with those in this passage who fail to better their stations. Helena's speech doubles as a critique of "those that weigh their pains in sense;" those who mistakenly suppose, because dull and backward in their slow designs, that "what hath been cannot be." Those Helena imagines weigh their pains in sense might lack the education and patronage that were crucial to social esteem and survival, yet Helena asks, "Who ever strove to show her merit that did miss her love?" as though striving and effort alone can overcome status. Placing her aspirations in heaven,

⁵⁸ For more on Shakespeare's contentious status and embroilment with Ben Jonson see Maurice Hunt, "Gentleness" and Social Class in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, *Comparative Drama*, Winter 2008, Vol. 42, No. 4 (Winter 2008), 409–432, esp. 413–416.

and the means of their fulfillment within, the up-and-coming noblewoman creates a system of extremes in which degrees in status and the factors limiting social mobility are obscured by the logic of merit.

The Arden Shakespeare glosses lines 225-26 “deem impossible what in fact resolute men have done before.” The ambition to transcend one’s status through striving becomes highly problematic when practiced by women, but Helena’s ingenuity reflects the virtues of the late Queen Elizabeth who, “although she could not completely escape the sexual and gender roles expected of Renaissance women, brilliantly manipulated (and hence problematized) them in order to maintain her power and alleviate the anxieties generated by her anomalous status as a woman rule.”⁵⁹ Women seeking to prove their merit must navigate a social order that was designed to appropriate their efforts and limit women’s social and economic independence by naturalizing sexual difference. The effectiveness and vivacity of Helena’s skillful manipulation of problematic men, as well as the essentially conservative thrust of her program, reflects bourgeois virtues which also hearken back to the titular characters of Shakespeare’s *Merry Wives of Windsor*, those “witty and manipulative married women who control [all] the men” (Neely, 219). Like Helena, these women are esteemed as virtuous, “because all these motifs function to protect the crucial possessions of the middling rank—money, land, and marital chastity ... The overt and threatening sexuality and wit of the women and the misogyny they generate are mitigated by the construction of sexuality as a social and socially useful commodity, and by the women’s self-regulation” (219). Helena joins the bourgeois women who, in Shakespeare’s plays,

⁵⁹ Carol Thomas Neely, "Constructing Female Sexuality in the Renaissance: Stratford, London, Windsor," in *Feminism and Psychoanalysis*, ed. Richard Feldstein and Judith Roof (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 216.

participate in a program of feminine self-regulation which ultimately subordinates the subversive aspects of women's ambition to household control. For such characters, ambition is curtailed by feminine chastity which involves self-management, wider social management of the household, and the regulation of subordinate women's behavior. Helena's ascent depends upon the property relations embedded in estimations of Diana's person, which rearticulate status differences within a gendered hierarchy of labor even as they appear to resolve these under the auspices of homosocial unity and women's social preservation. Helena's precarious gentlewoman status and social mobility are thus framed in relation to the marginal figures of service and dependency to whom she is socially proximate and from whom she distinguishes herself through the merits of her striving, which are legitimize her authority over other women.

When she wins her wager with King, healing the fistula that ails him and earning her choice of husband, Helena's address to her higher-ranking suitors effaces her lower social status through the homogenizing category of womanhood, "I am a simple maid, and therein wealthiest / That I protest I simply am a maid. (2.3.68-69). But Bertram does not buy this evasion of the issue of rank and rejects Helena for her low birth. The King's sovereign authority, however, rests upon his ability to command his subjects and "declare bourgeois exceptions to the laws of aristocratic nature."⁶⁰ The King proclaims, "If she be / All that is virtuous, save what thou dislik'st— / 'A poor physician's daughter'—thou dislik'st / Of virtue for the name" (2.3.132-35). Helena's virtues of "youth, wisdom, beauty, courage" are prioritized over her lack of title. Earlier, the Countess notes this progressive effect of Helena's gentle breeding, "I have those hopes of her good / that her education promises. Her dispositions she / inherits, which makes fair gifts fairer"

⁶⁰ Julia Reinhard Lupton, "All's Well That Ends Well and the Futures of Consent," *Thinking with Shakespeare*, University of Chicago Press, 2011, 117.

(1.3.40-42). But after enumerating her accomplishments, the King reduces Helena's "skill infinite" to her sexual virtue, subjecting the merits of her achievement to the flattening effects of gender,

What should be said?

If thou canst like this creature as a maid,

I can create the rest. Virtue and she

Is her own dower, honor and wealth from me.

(2.3.141-44)

Helena's maiden virtue affirms the King's sovereign prerogative of determining her political position on the basis of her "poor virginity," (1.1.125) exercising absolute authority over Bertram and the aristocracy in the process. Rather than flattening hierarchies, the logic of sovereign exception exploited newly fluid class distinctions by selectively elevating certain subjects in a program of meritocratic preference, momentarily troubling the social order but ultimately reinforcing the absolute rule of the sovereign and stratification among women in the process. Lyndal Roper remarks that, "as the Reformation was domesticated—as it closed convents and encouraged nuns to marry, as it lauded the married state... and as it execrated the prostitute—so it was accomplished through a politics of reinscribing women within the family."⁶¹ Helena's socially recognized virtues reflect her education and training as a gentlewoman—virtues which she exercises as she tests the limits of female virtue by traveling alone, practicing medicine, and

⁶¹ Lyndal Roper, *Holy Household, Women and Morals in Reformation Augsburg*, Oxford: Clarendon Press 1989, 2–3.

choosing her spouse. These merits legitimized the upward mobility and increased political authority of middling over poor and working women.

In the final scene at court, Lafew credits Helena's status to her virtue in praise that naturalizes Helena's authority over her social inferiors by aligning beauty with the right to command service—"He lost a wife, / Whose beauty did astonish the survey / Of richest eyes, whose words all ears took captive, / Whose dear perfection hearts that scorned to serve / Humbly called mistress" (5.3.19-22). In the world of *All's Well*, repeated articulations of Helena's beauty are part of the process of constructing her social value. When Helena approaches the King, he greets her in such a way that courtesy and social acknowledgement are inextricable from a valuation of her appearance, "Now, fair one, does your business follow us?" (1.1.115). That which "makes fair gifts fairer," Helena's inherited disposition is augmented by social estimations of her beauty. When the King encounters Diana in the final scene of the play, he is first given a report by a gentleman who explains, apologetically, that he has entertained a Florentine girl's request for an audience,

Whether I have been to blame or no, I know not.
Here's a petition from a Florentine... I undertook it,
Vanquished thereto by the fair grace and speech
Of the poor suppliant, who, by this, I know
Is here attending. Her business looks in her
With an importing visage, and she told me,
In a sweet verbal brief, it did concern
Your Highness with herself.

(5.3.153-158)

Despite this praise, the King speaks past Diana when she enters, asking the court, “What woman’s that?” (5.3.179). He will not address her directly for another seventy-five lines. In this way, beauty perpetuates a social program of exceptionalism which Sedingler says works to similar effect in *Much Ado*,

In Beatrice’s case, the exceptional woman appears to articulate the possibility of ‘women’s’ resistance to the patrilineal social institutions that have subdued Hero... But as Margaret’s plight demonstrates, the exceptional woman’s effect is limited, given the very real material disparities between Beatrice’s and Margaret’s situations. In other words, Margaret’s efforts to imitate Beatrice (as when she attempts to prove witty in 3.4 or requests a sonnet from Benedick in honor of her beauty in 5.2) are restricted by her very different social situation and prospects.⁶²

Like chastity, beauty offers no real protection to women; rather, it is used to represent status differences in order to differentiate aristocrats from lower ranking women. As Tracey Sedingler observes, the early modern literary motif of the maid masquerading as her mistress exposes the ideological function of beauty, which is “both articulated by and concealed within a masquerade, which registers social differences between women while attempting to adumbrate them via a representation of a pre-political woman (i.e., the exceptional and/or beautiful woman)” (8). Like the commodification of sexual virtue, fairness conceals the human labor and resources needed to cultivate gentility. Both sign and mechanism of Helena’s social becoming, fairness is used to

⁶² “The exceptional woman is, by definition, inimitable; she occupies a position that (by circumstance or prescription) forbids imitation or identification. Moreover, as an ideological construct, the exceptional woman blocks the historical emergence of “women” as a socially recognized and politically salient collective.” Sedingler, Tracey. “Working Girls: Status, Sexual Difference, and Disguise in Ariosto, Spenser, and Shakespeare.” *The Single Woman in Medieval and Early Modern England: Her Life and Representation*, edited by Laurel Amtower and Dorothea Kehler, Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2003, 167–191.

naturalize her elevated social status, sanctioning her ascent while simultaneously masking the social distinctions and labor divisions it depends upon. In this system, estimations of fairness do not function to reward the totality of women's labor involved in the making of a noblewoman in a social program of collective acknowledgement but rather reinscribe women's virtues within taxonomies of status and labor. Helena and Diana thus operate in a system in which, following Sedinger, "the conversion of social antagonism into beauty differences deploys the logic of status hierarchy against any sense of women's community."⁶³

Women's Work

Throughout the play, Diana expresses the same tactful curiosity in Bertram revealed in her first lines. But she is also keenly attuned and responsive to the interests of a female community that forbids this interest. Back at the boarding house with the company of women watching the military procession, Diana responds to Mariana's warning about Bertram by assuring her, "You shall not need to fear me" (3.5.30). The conversation turns to talk of Bertram's wife, and Diana spreads Parolles' defamatory gossip, criticizing Bertram's bride for her lack of refinement, "There is a gentleman that serves the Count / Reports but coarsely of her" (3.5.62-63). Helena, still in disguise, joins this talk to echo Diana's language of class,

O, I believe with him.

In argument of praise, or to the worth

Of the great count himself, she is too mean

To have her name repeated. All her deserving

⁶³ Sedinger, "Working Girls," 7.

Is a reservèd honesty, and that

I have not heard examined.

(3.5.66-71)

As in Mariana's warning to Diana, a woman's honesty stands in for her lack of title. But here, Helena echoes Parolles' scorn and amplifies Diana's prejudice in a judgement of the woman's social inferiority. Too mean to have her name repeated, Bertram's despised wife appears, like Diana, to have nothing more of social or material value than a "reservèd honesty." Registering this misstep, Diana pivots, responding sympathetically to the imagined noblewoman based on their shared vulnerability as women, "Alas, poor lady, / 'Tis a hard bondage to become the wife / Of a detesting lord" (3.5.72-74). Helena's judgement prompts the maid to realign herself with women for whom reputational harm may always carry devastating potential. In the same move that she recognizes the gendered aspect of the imagined woman's plight, Diana restores her class status to that of a lady. Though still impoverished by a lack of patriarchal recognition, the extremity of this "poor lady" is now acknowledged by a sympathetic female community. Feigning ignorance of Bertram's identity, Helena asks, "Which is the Frenchman?" to which Diana responds, "That with the plume. 'Tis a most gallant fellow. I would he loved his wife. If he were honest, He were much goodlier. Is't not a handsome gentleman?" (3.5.93-96). Conventionally, a secret admirer might see a man's wife as her rival. But Diana does not display the kind of social ambition that drives maidservants like Spenser's Dalinda, whose identity, when she is made to masquerade as her mistress, fragments within a "series of unstable and oscillating identifications" to "reveal the pressures of status differentiation on sexual difference" (Sedinger, 3). Going so far as to imagine herself in Helena's place, Diana laments, "'Tis pity he is not honest. Yond's that same knave/ That leads him to these places. Were I his lady,/ I would

poison that vile rascal” (3.5.98-100), in a rhetorical gesture meant not to threaten or displace the imagined noblewoman but to signal Diana’s support for her cause. Karma Lochrie theorizes such solidarity as a shared “identity of feeling” between women in medieval literature. In *The Man of Law’s Tale*, for example, “the “identity of feeling” that unites [these] two women otherwise divided by culture and religion is their experience of male authorities trafficking in them and their beliefs” (*WFML*, 182-83). Redirecting her judgement to express her solidarity with the slandered woman, Diana voices an awareness of women’s vulnerability to defamation that commits her both to the immediate community of women present and a larger, imagined community of women of varying estates bound by a shared position of political subordination. Such a shared identity appears to stabilize Diana’s subjectivity within a paradigm that routes women’s working and social relations with each other through marriage.

When we return to the trio of women gathered at the Widow’s house a few scenes later, Helena has revealed her plan to the Widow and her daughter. In her opening lines, she acknowledges the centrality of the women’s trust in maintaining her social position—“If you misdoubt me that I am not she, / I know not how I shall assure you further / But I shall lose the grounds I work upon” (3.7.1-3). The Widow’s trust builds upon moral valuations of Helena’s wealth and apparent rank as Countess, and this collective investment in rank yields material returns— Helena’s good fortune lends legitimacy to her request of these women and these women’s dutiful service legitimizes her social transformation. The Widow’s willingness to credit Helena’s word, to align with her pursuit of rank, and to authorize the conscription of Diana’s affective labor provide the invisible labor required to cultivate “the grounds” of Helena’s precarious but promising social status. Like merit, then, social virtues may be provisioned by the emotional and material resources of working women even as they categorically conceal the

importance of women's credit networks in the making of the nobility. Helena's ascendance is often analyzed in scholarship as the product of her own efforts, overlooking the social venture capital that is required. Behind Helena's scheme lies the Widow and her daughter's chastity and reputations as collateral, their social acknowledgement and service key to the establishment of Helena as a lady.

Though the plot to use Diana to trick Bertram on his wife's behalf is originally proposed by the Widow, who muses during the women's conversation about Bertram's dispossessed wife,—“This young maid might do her / A shrewd turn if she pleased” (3.5.76-78)—she treads carefully when Helena requests her collaboration in a bed-trick designed to ensnare Bertram, “Though my estate be fall'n, I was well born, / Nothing acquainted with these businesses, / And would not put my reputation now / In any staining act” (3.7.4-7). Wary of “these businesses,” the Widow invokes the multiple registers in which poor and middling women's reputations for honesty and discretion were essential to the trust networks that secured credit, employment, and economic stability for working women. In an economy of service and exchange, Alexandra Shepard writes, women's “virtuous attributes, particularly thrift and honesty, was the oil lubricating relations of trust.”⁶⁴ She explains, “The expanding early modern economy depended almost entirely on credit to function . . . at least ninety percent of transactions were carried out on credit and has highlighted the importance of reputation in facilitating the necessary relations of trust. Credit had ethical foundations and was a form of currency that circulated through the wider public perception of people's virtuous attributes” (15).

⁶⁴ Alexandra Shepard, *Crediting Women*, 15.

Studies of women in hospitality show how this social-economic conversion worked practically. Innkeepers, alewives, and widows keeping lodging used an ever-surveilled public image of respectability to attract boarders and ensure income, themselves surveilling customers through communal norms.⁶⁵ For women in service, mobility and working conditions were embedded within household relations (rather than conferred by the more formal occupational titles conferred to men), so that a widow's permission was what allowed a maidservant to enter into situations that might generate dowry prospects or other routes to upward mobility.⁶⁶ Single women converted hospitality and reputational capital into tangible social outcomes for themselves, their children, and their charges in a system of social credit which relied upon a gendered division of labor and hierarchy of service that Helena will deploy throughout the play.

Helena's language in this scene—"first give me trust ... word to word ... aid that I of you shall borrow" (3.7.9-13)—stresses contracts, words, and sworn counsel in a register of testimony and obligation. She is constructing a legal case for herself—her marriage is valid, therefore her plan is just, therefore the Widow incurs no sin in helping her. But her language deploys the same legal framework which blurs important personal and social distinctions for working women. If the bed trick "Is wicked meaning in a lawful deed,/ And lawful meaning in a lawful act,/ Where both not sin, and yet a sinful fact" (4.7.51-53), then the moral ambiguity of its "wicked meaning" and "sinful fact" are assumed by a woman of uncertain legal status whose task of seducing the Count and presenting the legally illegible riddle of women's will to the court results in the threats of incarceration and death. In *Common Bodies*, Laura Gowing argues that labor and

⁶⁵ Jackson, Matthew. "A Contested Character: The Female Publican in Early Modern England and France." *Brewery History*, vol. 150, 2013, 16–27.

⁶⁶ Mansell, Charmian. *Female Servants in Early Modern England*. 1st ed. Oxford: British Academy, 2024.

sexual availability were intertwined for single working women in ways that reinforced their instrumentality, rendering the working female body a site of contested identity that was exposed to social and institutional intervention, interpretation and instrumentalization. The symbolic power and discursive instability of Diana's legal position is leveraged by Helena when she scripts Diana's role as the compromised maid in her plot. Legal contract and the language of duty naturalize Diana's labor as a resource that can be claimed and repurposed for others' social and material gain. Bertram's would-be invasion and Helena's defense of Diana both participate in recreating and benefitting from the overdetermined significance of Diana's virginity, which reinforces her legal instability.

In Helena's appeal to the Widow, the social value of Helena's social status depends upon the trust of her social inferiors. While trust appears to precede and preclude the requirements of proof, it nonetheless appears contingent upon the social and material supports of status—"First give me trust *the Count he is my husband*, / And what to your sworn counsel I have spoken / Is so from word to word; and then you cannot, / By the good aid that I of you shall borrow, / Err in bestowing it" (3.7.9–13, italics mine). The Widow reinforces this connection between status and trust, trust and material proof by reversing the causal relationship between trust and knowledge, grounding her trust in Helena in the gentlewoman's ability to "show" the proof of her connections—"I should believe you, / For you have showed me that which well approves / You're great in fortune" (3.7.14–16). As Shepard notes, "while it is clear that a reputation for virtuous attributes... was the oil lubricating relations of trust, it is also clear that people in the early modern period were astutely aware of the value of moveable property in each other's possession which served as the cogs of exchange" (15). The Widow describes trust as a relation with material underpinnings, depending as much upon Helena's wealth as on her words, such

that trust between the two women is inseparable from rank and privilege. But while Helena's "fortune"—both her social status and material holdings—precondition her social credibility and the Widow's esteem, the Widow's language of fortune connotes both wealth and chance, suggesting the instability of Helena's social position and the contingency of her improving status.

The keeper of a boarding house for young women, the Widow occupies an important hub in a hospitality economy for vulnerable young women on the road. Revealing an information community and trust network in which young women organize one another, she tells her daughter and her neighbor, "Look, here comes a pilgrim. I know she will lie at my house; thither they send one another" (3.5.32). Because the Widow's meager livelihood depends upon social perception of her ability to protect the virtue of the women in her care, she is particularly vulnerable to the exigencies of social perception. When Helena asks the Widow to use her daughter in a bait and switch with a lusty nobleman, she asks her to risk her social credit and the economic viability of her boarding house. Later instructing Bertram in how to gain entry to her quarters, Diana mentions her mother's complicity in the plot, "When midnight comes, knock at my chamber window / I'll order take my mother shall not hear" (4.1.65-66) in an allusion to the maternal orchestration behind this hidden transaction and seduction, imaginatively transforming the boarding house for girls into a brothel. Thus, Helena does not just engage the working women from a different social vulnerability, she asks them to take different financial risks when she uses gold to persuade them to risk their means of subsistence and their ability to work.

The scene of female collaboration in the boarding house stages an intricate negotiation of status and obligation, as Helena and the Widow bargain over the terms of Diana's participation in the bed trick. The scene opens with Helena reasserting the reliability of her word, to which the Widow replies, "Gentle madam, / You never had a servant to whose trust / Your business was

more welcome” (4.4.15-17). Acknowledging the younger woman’s superior position with the title of “madam,” this Widow of “fallen estate” extends her service to the noblewoman in a gesture that aligns her with a vulnerable servant class. In *Masters and Servants*, Mark Burnett writes, “On occasions, poor or elderly relations worked as waiting-women or ladies’ companions. Women from lower social levels pursuing employment, however, may not have been able to rely upon such exchange networks” (118). Invoking the social scripts of mistress-servant relations, the Widow’s language uses rhetoric found in prescriptive texts such as William Gouge’s *Of Domesticall Duties* to gesture toward an idealized vision of service which instructed masters and mistresses to treat servants with “mildness and counsel” and imagined the household as a “little commonwealth” in which master-servant relations mirrored that of a parent-child dynamic (87). In turn, servants were exhorted to demonstrate “faithful obedience,” “reverence,” and “hearty love,” collapsing the distinction between affection and obligation and recasting work as a moral vocation rather than a contractual exchange. Burnett describes the gendered dimension of this bond, “In accompanying her mistress, the servant is obliged to take an active interest in her affairs, to participate in pursuits from which the husband is conspicuously excluded. Contacts between mistresses and maidservants opened spaces within which familiarities could be exchanged; they also represented a relationship beyond the immediate reach of the master’s authority” (Burnett, 128). By purchasing the Widow and Diana’s “friendly help” with gold, Helena accesses a women’s support network in which “service was always both an economic relationship between masters and subordinates and a complexly personal set of social interactions (Dowd, 21). Separate from yet structured by hierarchy, spaces of intimate female counsel and conspiracy fostered friendly alliances between women which presumed imbalances in power. Contractual service between servants and mistresses entailed a friendly companionship which

presumed a social and economic hierarchy upon which such performances of mutuality and reciprocity rest.

The Widow's language evokes what Laura Kolb describes as the "micro-negotiations over status" which take place through the terms of address (*Intersectionalities*, 167). Referring to herself as Helena's servant, the Widow creates a social identity in conversation and collaboration with Helena, one "where *what a person is called* constitutes an inescapable element of *who she is*. Address shapes identity, and identity—developed dialogically, both in acts of hailing and the reception of those acts—is an ongoing construction" (166). Helena reciprocates the Widow's gesture by establishing the Widow's own position in this scene—"Nor you, mistress, / Ever a friend whose thoughts more truly labor / To recompense your love" (4.4.18-20). Acknowledging the Widow as "mistress," Helena articulates a social hierarchy in which the women's collaboration rests upon their shared authority over other women, affirming the older woman's control over her daughter's body and labor and reproducing a paternalistic logic in which female authority is exercised through the regulation of younger women's.⁶⁷ In this scene, the two women enlist Diana's maiden virtue in accomplishing the social and ideological ends of patrilineal continuity. While the women work together to effect their will over a nobleman in an assertive display of women's cooperation, Helena and the Widow's positions as mistress are defined by their ability to oversee the labor of subordinate women in a system which effectively directs women's working relations away from each other and towards the structures of marriage that center men's oversight over women's work.

⁶⁷ As Laura Gowing observes, the regulation of women's sexuality and reproduction, revolved around distinctions not just of gender, but of life stage and status, "Single women's and servants' place in their community was defined by a lack of autonomy over their own bodies, enforced by women as well as men ... Old age brought a certain corporeal authority, and a simultaneous loss of autonomy ... the ways in which bodily boundaries were defended or invaded defined women's place in the hierarchies of household and community." *Common Bodies*, 80–81.

This alliance between Helena and Diana is structured by hierarchies that routinely compelled women in service to perform tasks reinforcing the authority of both their mistresses and their masters. These tasks were not limited to domestic labor, but as Laura Gowing observes, often extended to the sexual and emotional labor that sustained household hierarchies. Mistresses, no less than masters, regulated female servants' sexual activity, and would not uncommonly punish or dismiss those who reported the master's misconduct. In one particularly striking case, Gowing recounts how both mistress and master pressured their servants into bed with the man, demonstrating that "the physical authority mistresses exercised over servants" was a crucial instrument of household discipline (75). Sexual surveillance, she argues, was "effected by neighbours and family as well as magistrates, and by women as well as men," such that "the body of the single woman (and especially the single woman in service) was barely her own" (73). Burnett notes that early modern culture widely assumed that the female servant could be treated as sexual property, available for use at the discretion of her employers (125). Women's authority over other women's bodies not only maintained moral order but also affirmed the mistress's centrality to the household's economic and social order. Extending Sedinger's insight to the women working in Helena's service, Helena's ascent depends upon Diana's will to participate in the bed trick and the cultural work her maiden status does in ensnaring the Count and providing the delegitimized foil to Helena's social legitimacy, revealing the logic by which the elevation of exceptional women is predicated on the management and instrumentalization of a female underclass.

Offering a dowry to secure Diana and the Widow's cooperation, Helena mirrors the custom by which employers compensated maidservants for their service by helping to fund their marriages: "Wills and correspondence suggest that some maidservants profited from their

experience either by accumulating modest marriage portions or by receiving dowries in their employers' bequests" (Gowing). But Helena's plot places Diana within a system of service in more ways than one. In orchestrating the bed trick, Helena requires Diana to seduce a nobleman and perform her own seduction, a task that exposes her to reputational risk and implicates her in the kind of quasi-sexual transaction the Widow alludes to first in her insistence that she is "Nothing acquainted with these businesses" (3.7.5) and later dismisses: "You never had a servant to whose trust / Your business was more welcome" (4.4.15-17). Janet Adelman explains the conventions of a bed trick which effectively transforms Diana by casting her in the role of the sex worker: "Like Troilus and Othello, Bertram and Angelo are presented as virgins, facing what is in effect their first sexual experience, and that experience again takes the shape of a morning after fantasy, in which a virgin is violated and then abandoned, psychically transformed into a whore" (Adelman, 76). When Helena directs Diana to request Bertram's ring, she blurs the already uncertain line between courtship and commerce. As Gowing points out, early modern courtship often involved exchanges of tokens and gifts, a practice that "might create confusion" since "the distinction between paying for sex and offering marriage might not always be clear" (32). These layered economic and symbolic exchanges leverage the powerful yet unacknowledged social and symbolic power of Diana's virginity, making both her labor and its conflation with her social positionality essential to Helena's designs. As Kathryn Schwarz observes, Helena's "strategies of consolidation employ a disconcerting literalism and impart a troubling visibility," making the silent workings of patriarchal law dependent upon "medicines, money, letters, rings, books, bed tricks, babies" (211). As a maid, the sexual function of Diana's "service" becomes such a prop in her duties to Helena, as she demonstrates in a pun on the multiple meanings of the word— when Bertram swears to Diana, "I love thee / By love's own

sweet constraint, and will for ever / Do thee all rights of service,” Diana responds, “Ay, so you serve us / Till we serve you; but when you have our roses, / You barely leave our thorns to prick ourselves, and mock us with our bareness” (4.2.15-19). In funding and directing this exchange, Helena wields representational power over Diana’s sexuality and social position and puts her body and reputation to work in the production of Helena’s wifely identity. Helena not only blurs the distinctions between herself as instrument and agent but blurs these distinctions for a more vulnerable woman. Helena’s rise is thus not only a triumph of one woman’s willful constancy, or “outrageously intentional, sexual, articulate, and efficient femininity,” but an achievement of social mobility built upon the dual utility of the category of maid as that which presents both agent and instrument, person and function, for aristocratic use.⁶⁸

Once the widow agrees to provide their support, Helena narrates her social ascension as divinely sanctioned:

Doubt not but heaven
Hath brought me up to be your daughter’s dower,
As it hath fated her to be my motive
And helper to a husband...
—You, Diana,
Under my poor instructions yet must suffer
Something in my behalf.

(4.4.20-21)

⁶⁸ Schwarz, 207.

Whereas her earlier lines stress human trust and sworn oaths, here she invokes heaven to place her project in a theological register. The imagery of “dower” is elevated—she is a gift, heaven-sent for the rescue and relief of the two women. Poetic and solemn in tone, Diana is transformed into Helena’s “motive and helper to a husband” in proverbial language that echoes Genesis 2:18, “And the Lord God said, It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him an helpmeet for him.”⁶⁹ Aligning Diana with Eve’s role as the divinely ordained helpmeet, Helena cloaks Diana’s participation in theological inevitability and the maid’s service becomes, in Helena’s framing, providential duty. The helper’s biblical and symbolic power is great, according to the Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament,⁷⁰ ‘ezer’ denotes “help” or “assistance,” ranging from that of a subordinate, to that of a partner or equal, to that of the savior of mankind.⁷¹ The particular kind of help Eve offers is the procreative power to produce life, lineage, and legacy. In “Eve’s Role as a ‘Help’ Revisited,” Donald W. Parry explains, “the...narrative states without ambiguity that Eve was not simply a companion but a giver of life, one who produces offspring. The text, therefore, reveals the manner in which Eve is a help. Just as the animals bring forth after their kind, so would the man and his wife bring forth children. Eve, then, is a help to fulfill the command of Genesis 1:28, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth.’ Adam cannot be fruitful and multiply without Eve” (Parry, 204). As Helena’s “helper to a husband,” Diana might occupy the position of God, whose power ultimately supplies the spouse; or as her stand-in Diana may be a surrogate and sexual partner-in-crime; or she may merely occupy the position of a subordinate. But the many different implications of the “helper” and

⁶⁹ Berry, Lloyd Eason, and William Whittingham. *The Geneva Bible : A Facsimile of the 1560 Edition*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1969.

⁷⁰ Koehler and Baumgartner, HALOT, 1:811–12.

⁷¹ Koehler and Baumgartner, HALOT, 2:812.

their life-giving potential are cut short by Helena's rather less expansive description of Diana's fatedness. While Helena describes her own ascent in the lofty language of blessing, Diana's rather less exciting fate as the helper is couched in language which figures Diana as a useful tool in her grand plans, while Helena's use of possessive pronouns claims Diana as a kind of status object under Helena's management and determining the scope and meaning of the young woman's labor. Claiming representational power over Diana, Helena puts her humanist education to use in the rhetorical and ideological program of making "fair gifts fairer," locating the significance of Diana's labor and service firmly within a web of theological, social, gender, and economic hierarchies.

Describing Diana as her "motive" to a husband is a strange way for Helena to describe Diana's role in her designs. This word creates some confusion for G.K. Hunter, the editor of the third Arden edition, who notes,

Onions glosses, 'mover, prompter, instigator', but Helena prompted Diana, not vice versa. N.S. gives 'something or somebody that causes another thing or person to move', but Diana did not *cause* Helena to move; she *allowed* her to move, nothing more. The context demands a meaning more like 'means, moving part, engine, limb', a sense not recorded outside Shakespeare, but cf. Troil., IV. V. 57 and R 2, I. i. 193.' The more normative sense of 'motive' suggests a confusion or inversion of cause and effect (that may reflect a larger inversion or confusion of the relationship between agency and representation).⁷²

⁷² William Shakespeare, *All's Well That Ends Well*, ed. G. K. Hunter, The Arden Shakespeare, 2nd ser. (London: Methuen, 1959).

What would it mean to invert the causal relationship between Helena's agency and Diana's representation? For her social ambition to be motivated by the figure of the socially fallen woman? If Diana figuratively motivates Helena's aspirations, then these aspirations are not contained by an individual's isolated and future-oriented will but emerge from a larger social history and imaginary involving a variety of women of different circumstances. The Diana-Widow dyad appears both as a kind of past Helena leaves behind and a dreaded future she must avoid. Gowing reminds, "Service was the proper place for single women, and it was expected to end in marriage; to remain too long in service was to risk social suspicion and sexual danger" (39). Offering herself as a vision of Diana's future, Helena works to bring herself and other women into a patriarchally sanctioned hereafter which remains, for women, stuck in a marital teleology reinforcing the binary of marital status that homogenizes women as a class and conceals the ways that degrees in status alienated women's working relations. Because Diana's social inferiority premises Helena's ascent, the problem of women's alienated labor is figured in the solution supposedly offered by the inclusion of the servant woman.

The link between sex and service is present in the Widow's response to Helena's urging. Assenting to Diana's participation, the Widow tells Helena, "I have yielded," in a move that both yields authority to the woman of superior rank and requires a similar compliance from her daughter, conflating the political subordination of the mother with the sexual assent of the daughter (3.7.41). Adelman traces this connection to the maternal fantasy operative in the bed trick, arguing that it produces the uncanny sense that the sexual woman and the mother are the same woman. When the patriarchal demands of rank are routed through and enforced by a feminine homosociality which presumes power imbalances amongst women but reproduces women's categorical subordination, doublings such as the mother/daughter conflation reinforce

the importance of female homosocial bonds in heterosexual formations. This contradiction is revealed to be a structuring feature in the riddle of women's heterosexuality, as in Diana's pronouncement to Bertram at court, "For I by vow am so embodied yours / That she which marries you must marry me, / Either both or none" (5.3.197-98). When women marry men, they marry the many and various other women upon whom the patriarchal figure depends for social power and coherence. The problem of the woman's role in patrilineal reproduction is not only that her authority paradoxically reinscribes the patriarchal order it unsettles, but that this process perpetuates a division of labor amongst women in which sexual service is most imposed upon those most socially and economically vulnerable.

Coming to Court

In the final scene of the play, Diana appears at court to publicly accuse Bertram and present Helena's riddle in preparation for the noblewoman's grand entrance. Presenting herself as "a wretched Florentine" (5.3.180), she articulates a condition that is at once social, spiritual, and affective in a self-description that gathers the moral weight of destitution, the emotional inflection of suffering, and the material constraints that define her social position. Bertram quickly exploits the ethical slippage intrinsic to poverty, claiming that Diana is not merely socially but also morally compromised— "She's impudent, my lord, / And was a common gamester to the camp" (5.3.213). Like wretchedness, commonness links economic and spiritual conditions, and Bertram's charge reveals the sexual vulnerability of poor women that is implicit in the moral valuations attached to women's class status. Gowing reminds us that commonness works in several registers, "the common people—the poor, the servants and labourers of rural and urban society. But 'common' also had particular meanings for women: it meant they were

sexually available.”⁷³ With the lines “He knows I am no maid, and he’ll swear to’t. / I’ll swear I am a maid, and he knows not” (5.3.330–31), Diana articulates a social economy in which the usefulness of women’s virtue relies upon its discursive instability as that which is simultaneously known and unknown, compromised and uncompromised. Thus, in Helena’s riddle Bertram may have sexual knowledge of a maid while her virginity remains a circulating claim. Here the language of commonness produces the social differences between women whose class distinctions may otherwise be threatened by the flattening effects of men’s desire. Such distinctions were crucial for women who hoped to escape misuse at the expense of others, for women’s class distinctions could be easily leveled by their position as women. Gowing captures the social utility of overvaluing women’s sexual virtue in a system of imposed classlessness, “Unchastity made a woman’s body free to one man but the property of none, and left it unguarded. Other women—lawful wives, virtuous single women—are protected and possessed; owned by one man, their bodies are private property. Except that they were not. The female body was a public affair, the target of official regulation, informal surveillance, and regular, intimate touch by women and men. In some way, all female bodies were common, and all of them risked being called ‘common’” (16). In every instance, Helena articulates other women’s commonness to reinforce their vulnerability through the violence of a patriarchal imaginary which conflated the status of commoners with sexual availability and abuse.

The charge of commonness and its centrality not only to Bertram’s claims but to Helena and Diana’s constructions of the maid provides the means by which prostitution is more easily and more readily applied to Diana in particular and working girls in general. Thus, despite the

⁷³ Gowing, *Common Bodies*, 15.

ample evidence proving Diana's claim—the ring, Parolles' testimony, and the Countess' attestation, "This is his wife. That ring's a thousand proofs" (5.3.222-226)—the King translates the ambiguity of Diana's riddle into the specific and damning charge of prostitution, condemning the servant girl without a trace of the curiosity or involvement with which he questions Helena's incredible claims. When Diana refuses to provide a clear answer, he responds, "I think thee now some common customer," returning us to the language of prostitution that haunts the Widow's boarding house. The King judges Diana with the same common sense that he spares Helena when he concedes her impossible claims,

Methinks in thee some blessed spirit doth speak

His powerful sound within an organ weak,

And what impossibility would slay

In common sense, sense saves another way.

(5.3.326–27)

Following Sedinger, the categorical ambiguity of the working single woman necessitates such extreme judgements, since "the 'maid' must be located at the intersection of a series of often conflicting discourses, which render her both unintelligible within and disruptive of hegemonic representations of women" (Sedinger). The King's frustration with Diana's unintelligibility thus reveals the structuring instability of her maid status and the determinative function of her social position in estimations of her character. The logic of the working woman's culpability bears comparison to social evaluations of Shakespeare's other bourgeois wives. Carol Thomas Neely remarks that the merry wives of Windsor, "defend themselves wittily, successfully, and to applause from those who would exploit their sexuality. They are allowed to do so because they are "honest" as well as "merry" (4.2.100) and because this defense of chastity is likewise a

defense of the Windsor middling sort” from the predatory interests of aristocratic vice (219). Like Helena, the merry wives’ proactive offensive operates within a social program that upholds middle-class values through women’s self-regulation. Diana, too, is honest, but her honesty becomes legible only once it is revealed to be working in the interest of preserving her virginity and Helena’s marital status. As the King says, “by thy honest aid / Thou kept’st a wife herself, thyself a maid” (5.3.374-75). Sedinger describes the ideological function of the conflation of women’s marital, moral, and social statuses, “The disguise plot is evidence of the pressure that status differences between women brought to bear on efforts to naturalize sexual difference, as well as efforts to disguise such differences as differences of marital state and morality.” In this way, social and legal estimations of a woman’s honesty are inseparable from her social position.

While the King demands an immediate and coherent account from Diana, Helena’s sudden entrance defers explanation entirely, transforming delay into pleasure. Inviting everyone to the after show, the King’s expansive gesture releases him from his ill mood, “Let us from point to point this story know, / To make the even truth in pleasure flow” (5.3.370–71). The scene shifts affectively from the demand for certainty to the aesthetic enjoyment of narrative, subordinating rational progression to the emotional satisfaction of Helena’s miraculous return. The noblewoman’s feat of social becoming rewards the court’s willingness to believe her miracle as the emotional logic of social transcendence is facilitated by the social lubricants of patience and understanding, these the resources systematically denied Diana in the final scene and the portion promised Helena from the first in the King’s assurance, “rest / Unquestioned welcome and undoubted blessed” (1.1.228-29).

Decoding Diana's Desire

Throughout the play, Diana articulates the seemingly opposed interests of her persistent desire for Bertram and sustained commitment to Helena's cause. Like Helena, Diana's investment in the proper functioning of marriage is "at once possessed of self-control and given to self-indulgence, an artifact of good government and an agent or agent provocateur of misrule" (Schwarz, 209). And like Helena, she subordinates Bertram to the erasure of the ideological, or what Schwarz calls the "power of the social over the individual" embodied in Helena's willful intent.⁷⁴ Explaining the moral justification for their plot, Diana reasons, "Only, in this disguise I think 't no sin / To cozen him that would unjustly win" (3.3.87-88). But while she works to get Helena the marriage she wants, Diana frees herself from such an arrangement, ultimately rejecting this outcome for herself. Well before she goes to court, just after Bertram's final seduction attempt, Diana expressed a new resolve:

My mother told me just how he would woo
As if she sat in 's heart. She says all men
Have the like oaths. He had sworn to marry me
When his wife's dead. Therefore I'll lie with him
When I am buried. Since Frenchmen are so braid,
Marry that will, I live and die a maid.

(4.2.81-86)

Aligning herself with Bertram's dispossessed wife in a gesture of gendered collectivity, Diana's former desire for the Count is finally resolved in her canny response to Bertram's treatment of

⁷⁴ Schwarz, 221.

women. She is altered by her experiences as the play progresses, applying generational wisdom and personal insight to her evolving understanding of men's intentions while maintaining her commitment to Helena's cause. Though the language of class establishes her inferiority in some of her final lines to Bertram—"You that have turned off a first so noble wife / May justly diet me" (5.3.219-20)—what immediately follows is her own personal rejection of Bertram, "I pray you yet—Since you lack virtue, I will lose a husband" (5.3.220-21). And when the King charges her with prostitution, she turns bitterly to Bertram, "By Jove, if ever I knew man, 'twas you" (5.3.327).

When the King attempts to co-opt Diana's loyal service to other women, then, introducing the same problem of women's heterosocial aspirations into the relative quiet and stability of the women's boarding house, Diana has worked her way out of such social and marital aspirations. Her desire manifests the socialization of a community of women invested in maintaining gender and class differences yet removed and enjoying some autonomy from the direct patriarchal control of men. Diana's proximity to women puts her behaviorally at odds with the more distant and unfamiliar demands of men, which women learn to follow best through observation, proximity, and practice. To finally quit Bertram, Diana must travel to court and learn of her position in the context of the aristocratic contempt that greets her there.

Female associations of the kind that Diana expresses are not recognized by the court. While the King centers Diana's chastity around men, she frames her own chastity in relation to other women and what they've taught her, orienting her virtue towards a hierarchical community of women who frame their efforts in opposition to the predatory interests of men. The patrilineal will to marriage which Schwarz finds "manifested in the legacy of Helena's father, in the King's revived potency, in the Countess' patrilineal agenda, and in the conjugal role that Bertram tried

to deny,”⁷⁵ does not merely suppress a pre-existent desire in Diana, but organizes her desire into the socially intelligible and binary categories of chastity and unchastity. The less assimilable aspects of her will—her commitment to other women and its governing role in her desire—are captured by the usefulness of her chastity as social resource to this hierarchical community of women. While Helena’s desire for Bertram is recognized as the legitimate pursuit of a royally sanctioned marriage, Diana’s own desire is irrelevant in the world of *All’s Well* where everyone, especially Diana’s community of women, subordinate hers to Bertram’s desire and the threat of “unlawful” solicitation (3.5.79) to reinscribe her within a property relation in which she is object, her chastity her “family’s jewel” (4.2.55). Diana’s steadfast loyalty to this community and disillusionment with the Count dramatize Brown’s argument that subjects are not prior agents simply denied expression by oppressive social systems, but figures whose identities emerge through the very structures that constitute them.⁷⁶ Though the court interprets her rejection as a display of chastity, Diana’s rejection is contingent upon the circumstances of his proposal, her affiliation with Helena, and her commitment to a larger community of women—commitments which constellate working relations and conduct between women in ways that are undertheorized and underrepresented in early modern drama and literature. Silent at the King’s offer for her own dowry and choice in suitor, Diana joins other of Shakespeare’s women, who respond similarly to the prospect of union (or reunion) with problematic men. Like *Two Gentlemen of Verona*’s Silvia, Isabella in *Measure for Measure*, and Hermione in *The Winter’s Tale*, Diana’s silence

⁷⁵ Schwarz, 210.

⁷⁶ Wendy Brown, “The Impossibility of Women’s Studies.” *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, vol. 9, no. 3, 1997, 79–101.

marks the absence of conventional closure in the play's final scene, disrupting the centrality of marriage to her relationships with other women.

Whereas the great triumph of the play is the victory of Helena's desire, her marriage places the goal of marriage at the center of women's working relations. As Schwarz observes, "Helena's unruly virtue reveals a patriarchal ideology both functional and contingent, its efficacy as practice articulated through women's will and work" (213). Diana's position reverses this relationship between patriarchy and women's work, assuming the centrality of women's will and work and challenging the necessity of routing these through men. Her commitment to women is one which defies the individuating effects of marriage and social distinction. Sedingar writes, "Because status difference is mapped onto marital difference, the maid disappears—an occlusion dramatized by her disguise as her mistress. Consequently, the representation of the maid disrupts a notion of character that emphasizes agency, motivation, and choice." Remaining in her mother's keep, in a company of women, Diana might return to her indistinction and the relative freedoms it affords. This may be a wise choice, according to Sedingar. While scholars have claimed a power in Helena's hyper visible desire, Sedingar warns against the methodological peril of mistaking the working single woman's visibility for agency— "Visibility is always implicated within hegemonic discourses that do not necessarily serve the "interests" of the invisible; the purchase of visibility often required that one surrender desires and goals that cannot be articulated within available forms" (8). Though her ideological commitment to this community produces the contradictions of her investment in a hierarchical system that categorically excludes her, the maid's practical decision to remain in the care of her mother and retain the more direct relationships afforded single working women suggest that Diana's preferred mode of service is that which is mediated through other women, who collectively

provide different social and working conditions than those that are offered to women entering marriage.

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CHAPTER 3: “Bound to Speak”: Women’s Conversational Rhetoric in *Othello*

Since Juliet Dusinberre’s landmark 1975 study of gender in Shakespeare’s plays, Emilia’s speech in Act 4 Scene 3 of *Othello* has attracted sustained critical attention for its commentary on gender relations. In what is commonly referred to as the “willow scene,” Emilia refuses responsibility for men’s behavior—including claims of wives’ responsibility to correct and model appropriate behavior for men found in texts such as William Gouge’s “Of Domesticall Duties”—and instead reverses the logic of patriarchal marital relations to find men responsible both for their actions and for the effects of their behavior upon their wives.⁷⁷ Demonstrating an acute understanding of the scripts that produce the relational dynamic of the shrew-husband dyad, Emilia deconstructs the logic of female culpability to provide a lesson in the discursive construction of the shrew. But while much of the feminist criticism of the 1980s and ‘90s has found Emilia’s speech to be a reactionary defense of retaliatory behavior, scholars like Valerie Wayne have proposed reading Emilia’s speech for an “emergent ideology” located amongst the different strains of misogyny in the play: “while antimatrimonial misogyny is the residual ideology articulated in the play through Iago and, eventually, Othello, and a general advocacy for marriage is projected as dominant through Desdemona, Emilia’s emergent position calls the constitution of woman as other into question” (168). While Wayne stops her analysis of Emilia’s speech there, I place Emilia’s speech within a history of women’s defense narratives which

⁷⁷ References to patriarchal discourse refers to the body of literature analogizing fathers as monarchs and wives as subjects, including works such as Robert Filmer’s *Patriarcha*, published in 1680. Catherine Belsey writes, “Patriarchalism, which elicited some support in the sixteenth century, but gathered strength in the seventeenth, proposed an analogy between the obedience naturally due to fathers of families and submission to the monarch in the interests of the people: ‘As the father over one family, so the king, as father over many families, extends his care to preserve, feed, clothe, instruct and defend the whole commonwealth’ (Filmer, 1949:63).”

provides the rhetorical grounds for the radical model of virtue that the woman explores in conversation with her friend.

While many feminist scholars have been concerned with the ideological content of women's speech and find much of women's defense narratives addressed to men to be constitutively bound up within the patriarchal structures they resist, attention to the situational context and ethical implications of women's defense narratives directed to and for other women provides a broader view of Emilia's "emergent position" between the pro and anti-matrimonial misogynistic discourses in the play. Unlike the scene of female conversation in *Much Ado About Nothing*, where the different moods of the friends unfold as personal tension, the conversational scene of female friendship in *Othello* stages a disagreement between two female friends as an ethical debate that deploys logic and rhetoric deriving from traditions of women's private counsel and women's defense speech. This chapter argues that Emilia's speech is less an endorsement of "retaliation" (Neely, 142), or what Desdemona misinterprets as "pick[ing] bad from bad" (4.3.105), than a revisionary account of women's virtues in a discourse on the ethics of gendered relations.

While many instances of female complaint address women's responses to offending men or to mixed audiences—often seeking recognition from the very order that has wronged the speaker—Emilia's speech addresses other women through the conventions of female retort in a shift in addressee that has consequences for both the rhetorical mode of the speech and the model of feminine virtue it enacts. Before she can bring herself to oppose Iago publicly, Emilia first develops her defense of women in a private moment of counsel among a female audience, where she articulates a political conception of women's social position that prepares her for the public actions of defending Desdemona and disavowing Iago. In the willow scene, this commitment to

Desdemona takes the form of a moral imperative that is worked out through conversation before it becomes ethical action—a dynamic that recalls *All's Well That Ends Well*, where female-directed speech, even when contested and rebutted by female interlocutors, occasions a shift in the character's behavior. The conditions for women's defense in action, that is, emerge through a process of collective ideological formation. Emilia draws on the same conventions as women's defense narratives, but by bringing this rhetoric before a private female audience, the willow scene suggests that before women can defend themselves publicly, they must first practice together within a discourse community, producing the shared language, analysis, and counter-discourse that male audiences and conversants neither tolerate nor provide. As Carole McKewin observes, “the counter-universe of women provides us with an alternative reality, one which finally has a profound impact on the larger world of the play.”⁷⁸ Emilia's conversation with Desdemona prepares both Emilia and her auditors to recognize, judge, and ultimately oppose the forms of masculine violence that structure Othello's world. Yet the play is equally attentive to the fragility of that political education. Although the willow scene demonstrates how women cultivate ethical judgment through practices of private counsel, disagreement, and collective reflection, it also dramatizes the social conditions that prevent such judgment from becoming a durable female politics and enabling community resource. Building on recent scholarship on early modern women's friendships, I argue that Shakespeare relocates the tradition of women's defense narratives from the public act of answering men to the private work of deliberating with women. In doing so, *Othello* imagines female conversation not simply as a vehicle for expressing women's ideas but as the ethical practice through which women collectively produce the habits

⁷⁸ McKewin, “Counsels of Gall and Grace,” p. 129.

of judgment, mutual correction, and political discernment necessary for defense, even as the tragedy reveals how those discourse communities remain vulnerable to the hierarchies of class and patriarchal power that ultimately prevent their solidarity from becoming transformative action.

The Literary Tradition of Women's Self-Defense and Revisionist Strategies

From early character criticism to later new historicist approaches, a persistent strand of scholarship has treated Emilia's shift from wifely compliance to defiant truth-telling in the play as a largely individualized phenomenon. A. C. Bradley characterizes Emilia's final resistance to Iago as a moment as the belated emergence of an innate moral core in which her hidden nature overcomes her prior weakness, rather than a response to the social and marital structures that circumscribe her.⁷⁹ Subsequent critics working in this characterological mode have framed her trajectory as an instance of psychological awakening or tragic recognition, implicitly isolating her behavior from the social and material conditions of early modern marriage and gender relations. Desdemona's speech has received similar treatment. In a conflation of pro- and anti-marital misogynist discourses in the play, Stephen Greenblatt blames Desdemona for Othello's violence, citing the language of her "erotic submission" as the cause of her death: "this frank acceptance of pleasure and submission to her spouse's pleasure is, I would argue, as much as Iago's slander the cause of Desdemona's death, for it awakens the deep current of sexual anxiety in Othello."⁸⁰ In this way, the critical tradition tends to abstract women's speech in *Othello* from the social and historical circumstances of their speech, recasting what might be understood as a

⁷⁹ A. C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy: Lectures on Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, Macbeth*, 2nd ed. (London: Macmillan, 1905), 239–42.

⁸⁰ Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, 250.

socially mediated behavior as the expression of an individual self that transcends social and material conditions. In the process, critically and historically obscured social formations, such as women's conversation and defense narratives, remain illegible even in texts that stage women's ethical development within and around women's discourse communities.

Against this individualizing strain of scholarship, materialist readings like Valerie Wayne's historicize the discourses of gender and marriage in the play. Drawing on pamphlet traditions such as *The Arraignment of Lewd, Idle, Froward, and Unconstant Women* and related misogynist tracts, Wayne locates Iago's misogynistic discourse within a dense network of early modern antifeminist and conduct literature. Medieval traditions cast women as inherently excessive in speech and sexuality, a logic that late medieval culture translated into legal and social practice through the policing of "scolds" and other unruly women.⁸¹ By the early modern period, this discursive inheritance is consolidated into the recognizable social and theatrical types of the shrew as a figure of disorderly speech.⁸² In an address to Emilia, Iago lodges generalized charges against womankind through an indictment of the various and all-pervasive activities of the shrew:

Come on, come on; you are pictures out of doors, bells in your parlours, wild-cats in your kitchens, saints in your injuries, devils being offended, players in your housewifery, and housewives in your beds.

(2.1.121-125)

⁸¹ R. Howard Bloch. *Medieval Misogyny and the Invention of Western Romantic Love*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 1991. Pp. ix, 298; Blamires, A. (1997). *The case for women in medieval culture / Alcuin Blamires*. Clarendon Press.

⁸² Boose, Lynda E. "Scolding Brides and Bridling Scolds: Taming the Woman's Unruly Member." *Shakespeare Quarterly*, vol. 42, no. 2, Summer 1991, 179–213. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2870547>.

Iago here adapts a standard misogynist complaint derived from Theophrastus's *Golden Book on Marriage* and cited in Jerome's *Epistle Against Jovinian*, *The Romance of the Rose* and *The Wife of Bath's Prologue*.⁸³ But instead of placing women in four categories and finding them troublesome in all, as his sources do, Iago describes four kinds of women as all sexually licentious.⁸⁴ Such texts construct femininity through a repertoire of conventional accusations of inconstancy, lust, and duplicity that Iago mobilizes less as an originator of misogyny than as a participant. And alongside this anti-marital misogyny, the increasingly dominant strain of Protestant pro-marital misogyny found in prescriptive literatures like William Gouge's *Of Domesticall Duties*, which codify the subordination of wives and the asymmetrical power Iago exercises over Emilia, reinforce, rather than undermine, the misogyny defining Iago's rhetoric. Because these seemingly opposed discourses perform the same social function, Iago may freely adapt misogynist rhetoric, classifying and ascribing sexual wantonness to women without violating the logic or function of pro-marital discourse. Thus read, Iago's misogynistic behavior is socially produced and culturally normative, sourced from recognizable textual traditions circumscribing women's speech and action.

Emilia's speech in the willow scene emerges as a response to Iago's discourse with its own social and literary referents. When Cassio greets Emilia warmly in Act 2, attributing his "bold show of courtesy" to his "breeding," Iago responds with wordplay that turns Cassio's implied fault onto Emilia, claiming she is a shrew who "oft bestows" her "tongue" on him

⁸³ The section found in Jerome is cited by Miller in *Chaucer: Sources*, 412–13, and the section in *the Romance of the Rose* also in Miller p. 456. In *The Wife of Bath's Prologue* it is 11.248–75 in *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd edn, ed. Larry D. Benson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987).

⁸⁴ It is in response to medieval examples of these proverbial comparisons that the Wife of Bath asks in her *Prologue*, "Been ther none othere maner resemblances, That ye may likne youre parables to, But if a sely wyf be oon of tho?" (368–70).

(2.1.101). Social activities like gossiping were surveilled but largely permitted; however, the accusation that a woman was a scold or a shrew, when declaimed under the right conditions, amounted to legal charges. Emilia says little in response to her husband's slander other than to rebut, when Iago is asked to speak in praise of women, "You shall not write my praise"

(2.1.115). Her remark upon the lack of affirmative discourses about women also resists Iago's authorial power and refuses the legitimacy of pro-marital praise of women, which is equally prone to blame women within the discursive framework of the *querelle des femmes*. Emilia mostly silently bears Iago's commentary in this "public" arena of mixed company—when she issues her response to Iago, she does so to Desdemona in a private apologia for shrewish behavior that challenges the sexual hierarchy:

But I do think it is their husbands' faults
If wives do fall. Say that they slack their duties,
And pour our treasures into foreign laps;
Or else break out in peevish jealousies,
Throwing restraint upon us. Or say they strike us,
Or scant our former having in despite.
Why, we have galls, and though we have some grace,
Yet have we some revenge. Let husbands know
Their wives have sense like them . . .
Then let them use us well. Else let them know,
The ills we do, their ills instruct us so.

(4.3.66-115)

In this passage, Emilia uses logical reasoning to rewrite shrewish behavior as a proportional and rational response to male abuse. This self-defensive language, common to Shakespeare's shrews, emerges from a tradition of women's counter-rhetoric that extends back to medieval legal defense. According to Josephine Donovan, what she calls "women's defense narratives" emerged from the form of the legal dispute of the late medieval period and persisted well into the early modern era in the forms of female-authored framed novellas, pamphlets, legal transcripts, and other forms of women's "autobiographical "life-writing" such as "personal texts written in the first person, such as diaries, letters, 'receipt' books, mother's legacies, as well as more straightforward autobiographical histories of a life."⁸⁵ Like Donovan, Subhashish Guha has traced how the women writers of the defense-narrative tradition, from Christine de Pisan through Margaret Cavendish, repeatedly deployed case-based reasoning to redefine the terms of guilt and innocence when publicly defamed.⁸⁶ In the *novelles* of seventeenth century women, in legal transcripts both real and fictionalized, in pamphlets and vindications, the accused woman, more than simply denying wrongdoing, argues that the moral framework within which she is condemned contains fundamental internal contradictions. The wife in Marguerite de Navarre's fifteenth novella makes this move when she confronts her philandering husband: "'Now, Monsieur, do you intend ... to take revenge on me for the very kind of thing you yourself have been guilty for years ... ?'" ["Et vous, monsieur...voudriez-vous prendre vengeance d'unoeuvre, don't si, long temps a, vous m'avez donné exemple...?"]⁸⁷

⁸⁵ Donovan, Josephine. *Women and the Rise of the Novel, 1405–1726*. Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 1999, 141. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-67512-8_10

⁸⁶ Guha, Subhashish. "Women's 'Defence-Narrative' and its Role in the Formation of the Novel." *Sanglap: Journal of Literary and Cultural Inquiry* 6:2, 2020. For a detailed reading of the Wife of Bath as a casuistic rhetor, see George Starr, *Defoe and Casuistry*.

⁸⁷ Marguerite de Navarre, *The Heptameron*, ed. and trans. P. A. Chilton (London: Penguin, 1984), 196; *L'Heptameron*, ed. M. Francois (Paris: Gamier, 1991), 123.

This genre came to develop recognizable conventions, including the revisionist strategies of proportional counter-claim, case-based reasoning, embedded rewriting of the opponent's logic, and the reversal of gendered commonplaces.⁸⁸ In Jane Anger's *Protection for Women*, Anger changes "she" to "he," and "woman" to "man," to "try the fit of male rules to their makers," just as Emilia does syntactically when she imports the female subject into the frame established to rationalize men's "peevisish jealousies" (4.3.100). Anger's chief resource was to move "the Surfeiter his pen with my hande," to use the oppressor's own discursive materials against him, not by denying the charges but by completing the causal chain they leave unfinished.⁸⁹ This line of reasoning persisted in women's defense narratives through to the end of the century, with Margaret Frith, the inspiration behind Daniel Defoe's *Moll Flanders*, deploying the logical axiom "that it was no deceit, to deceive the Deceivers," in her 1662 *Defence and Apology*.⁹⁰ Emilia's conversation with Desdemona, initiated at Desdemona's desperate request and attempt to understand her circumstances, draws upon the counter-discursive formation of women's defense narratives, rearticulating women's speech and sexuality as sites of ethical reasoning rather than signs of disorder.

Desdemona opens the dialogue in the willow scene by appealing to Emilia's moral judgment: "Dost thou in conscience think—tell me, Emilia—" (4.3.68-69). Here, the invocation

⁸⁸ Magnusson identifies these strategies in what she calls the "revisionary rhetoric" of Jane Anger's pamphlet *Protection for Women*, while Donovan discusses these same strategies within the framework of casuistical methods of case-based reasoning and appeals to conscience in women's defense narratives. See Magnusson, A. Lynne. "'His Pen with My Hande': Jane Anger's Revisionary Rhetoric." *ESC: English Studies in Canada*, vol. 17 no. 3, 1991, 269–281. *Project MUSE*, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/esc.1991.0011> and Donovan, Josephine. "That All the World May Know": Women's "Defense-Narratives" and the Early Novel, *Genre and Women's Life Writing in Early Modern England*, 2007.

⁸⁹ Magnusson, A. Lynne. "'His Pen with My Hande': Jane Anger's Revisionary Rhetoric." *ESC: English Studies in Canada*, vol. 17 no. 3, 1991, 269–281. *Project MUSE*, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/esc.1991.0011>

⁹⁰ Frith, Mary. *The Life and Death of Mrs. Mary Frith, Commonly Called Mal Cutpurse, Counterfeit Ladies*, Todd and Spearing. 1662.

of conscience introduces the language and terms of the situationally specific, case-based reasoning of legal disputes, since the conscience, in English common law, was the guiding principle for the application of the law. Othello frames Desdemona's murder in explicitly juridical terms when he says “it is the cause, it is the cause”—meaning the case against her—that compels him (5.2.1). While conscience was the faculty meant to ensure just judgment within the juridical system, Othello appropriates this legal form while evacuating its deliberative content—announcing a verdict rather than weighing evidence—in a manner consistent with a legal apparatus that offered women accused of sexual transgression little meaningful recourse. Desdemona's appeal to Emilia's conscience in the willow scene evades this system by restoring the deliberative function that Othello's rhetorical stance has foreclosed, relocating moral reasoning from the public forum—where women could neither testify effectively on their own behalf nor expect the law to work in their favor—into a private, dialogic space of female friendship. In this conversational space, guilt and innocence are not presupposed but questioned and collaboratively reasoned through with conscience working as a capacity for moral evaluation and judgment that Desdemona instinctively entrusts to another woman. When, in *The Comedy of Errors*, Adriana remarks upon the behavior of Antipholus of Ephesus, asking, “Why should their liberty than ours be more?” (2.1.10), Shakespeare has her angrily take issue with the inequality of the sexes to “use the assumptions implicit in her character not as aesthetic presuppositions but as suppositions, ideas to be played with rather than assumed.”⁹¹ Wayne has traced dramatic adaptations of the shrew in the plays of Shakespeare and *The Wakefield Master*, arguing that the playwrights were “altering literary and cultural conventions when they used her angry speech to

⁹¹ Wayne, “Refashioning the Shrew,” 167.

object to genuine wrongs in the imaginative worlds they created; but they did so because they aimed at something larger in their plays than a mere affirmation of those worlds.”⁹² Emilia’s speech partakes in a tradition of women’s questioning, dialogue, and debate; speaking on behalf of other women as a moral thought experiment between women that allows for the free play of ideas and the kind of moral deliberation necessary for ethical action that was otherwise censored by controlling husbands. When she proclaims, “And if wives fall, I do think it is husbands faults,” Emilia echoes the logic of the shrew so memorably voiced by Chaucer’s Wife of Bath, “In feith, he shal nat kepe me but me lest;/ Yet koude I make his berd, so moot I thee!”⁹³ Whereas Iago’s rhetoric is a derivative assertion of presuppositions, Emilia’s speech applies the conventions of women’s defense to the more collaborative ethical situation of women’s collective moral reasoning and deliberation.

Women’s Retort as Legal Defense in Church Courts and Neighborhood Networks

Over the course of the play, Othello’s accusation of adultery against Desdemona escalates from lewd innuendo to “technical defamation,” and even, according to Lisa Jardine, “invites direct comparison with the cases in the Durham records” (29). Jardine is concerned with differentiating between male-authored textual and discursive construction of women’s culpability and what she calls the “event” or “actual” occurrence of women’s social participation, where women’s historical agency or subjectivity may be glimpsable within male-authored fictions. Through comparisons with legal records and historical accounts of women’s self-defense in the Ecclesiastical Courts, “the shape of the tale becomes structurally significant, as it

⁹² Valerie Wayne, “Refashioning the Shrew,” *Shakespeare Studies*, vol. 17, 1985, 161.

⁹³ Geoffrey Chaucer, “The Wife of Bath’s Prologue,” *The Canterbury Tales*, edited by Larry D. Benson, Houghton Mifflin, 1987, lines 360–61.

matches the shapes of other tales, told in the early modern community to other, more occasional, judgmental ends. We do not thereby access ‘truth’ or ‘reality,’ but we do begin to recognize the shared cultural conventions where ‘lived experience’ was given expression and acknowledgement” (33). Part of the shape of the tale is the ways in which each of the three women accused of sexual misdemeanor in the play—Bianca, Emilia, and Desdemona—respond to these charges quite differently according to their differing social status, and with different consequences. Unlike the more genteel Desdemona, Bianca and Emilia recognize the social and legal necessity in publicly challenging their slanderers—“the very forms of Emilia’s repetition of this ‘slander’ (4.2.135) indicate first, the seriousness of the accusation, and second, the necessity for formally rebutting it” (29). While Jardine does not develop a reading of Emilia’s defense, I read the maidservant’s response to her lady’s defamation as an instance of cross-class solidarity and an example of the affordances of collaboration amongst women of different estates. Emilia recognizes similarities and differences in the noblewoman’s vulnerability to the consequences of misogynistic discourse and works to engender women’s ethical collaboration through conversation and social analysis.

Emilia's speech draws on the same conventional resources as women's verbal self-defense in the church courts because both arise from the same sociopolitical situation. Early modern women wrote fictional and auto-fictional *novelles* and pamphlet defense-narratives in part because they had no guaranteed access to courts. If women did gain access to courts, they brought with them the reasoning that women circulated through gossip networks, pamphlet literature, and *novelles*. The defense-narrative is both a literary genre and an important site of discursive formation where early modern women worked out, across fiction, autobiography, petition, and legal testimony, arguments for the legitimacy of women’s speech and knowledge

and for the examination of sexual hierarchies. Church court records from London between 1560–1640 reveal that three quarters of all defamation cases were brought by women, and nearly half were both fought and defended by women, demonstrating that women's retort to sexual slander was circulated in social and legal practice as well as literature.¹⁰ The rhetorical strategies documented in church court testimony mirror the strategies of Emilia in conversation with Desdemona and in the final scene of the play. Women in defamation cases routinely deployed the embedded counterclaim, used the reversal of accusatory logic, and called community witnesses and other women who shared knowledge of the situation to testify to common grounds that the formal record could not accommodate.⁹⁴ Feminist scholarship demonstrates that these were the conventional and available social moves for women in the specific rhetorical situation of being publicly slandered without civic recourse.

The social dimension of women's retort outside of the courts is documented in accounts of female gossip networks in which the informal communities of neighborhood women who shared information, coordinated responses to threats, and supported each other in disputes, constituted the social infrastructure within which women's retort operated.¹¹ Pamela Allen Brown argues that theatrical audiences would have recognized dramatizations of these practices as representative of established social formations. Plays drew on and circulated the cultural scripts of women's collective verbal defense in ways that their audiences could readily identify—"Jests gave non-elite women dramatic cues and scripts, a range of positions from which to speak and act."¹² This social context suggests that the rhetorical strategies deployed in the willow scene were culturally available and socially legible to Shakespeare and his audiences. When

⁹⁴ Capp, Bernard. *When Gossips Meet: Women, Family, and Neighbourhood in Early Modern England*. Oxford UP, 2003.

Emilia insists, “Why, we have galls,” (4.3.103), a London theatrical audience may have recognized the statement not only as a variant of the literary convention but as an expression common to neighborhood disputes and church court testimony.¹⁶ This double legibility as literary convention and as social practice suggests a dialectic between intracommunally circulated female discourse and the more public forms of that discourse that would emerge and circulate in legal and literary contexts.

Between Friends: Sermo Rhetoric and Female Discourse Communities

Unlike the civic-facing complaint traditions of legal testimony or the *querelle des femmes* pamphlets, or the socially embedded context of women’s village and urban gossip networks, the willow scene occurs between two women who find themselves far from home in a military camp in Cyprus. The language, logic, and performance of Emilia’s speech are informed by the contexts of broader, public-facing discourse and female social networks, but the rhetoric of the willow scene is also shaped by a sense of privacy between an aristocratic woman and her maid and the women’s geographic isolation. Lynette Hunter’s work on conversational rhetoric illuminates this intimate scene of female friendship of women of differing status. Hunter traces the development of *sermo* rhetoric, derived from Erasmus’s *De Conscribendis epistolis* and the Ciceronian tradition of friendship, to trace conversational rhetoric through the English tradition, showing how the democratic potential of familiar rhetoric is progressively curtailed as it is restricted to civic elites and eventually relocated to women and the domestic sphere. *Sermo* rhetoric derives from Cicero’s *De Amicitia* and *De Officiis*, where the term names a mode of speech suited to friendship, one that requires a radical mutuality in which each interlocutor opens their inner world to the other. Erasmus inherits this tradition and transforms it in response to the specific problems of print circulation in which the audience is absent and diverse. Hunter writes,

While all rhetoric is based on doubtful premises, there are different ways of engaging with those premises. Plausible rhetorical strategy depends on a coherently defined audience that accepts the common grounds used by the rhetor. A rhetor using probable rhetoric engages the audience in the formation of common grounds, and this may be behind its specific appeal to the diversifying audiences of humanist Europe which would not have had identical assumptive logics.⁹⁵

When writer and reader cannot assume shared backgrounds or assumptive logics, the rhetoric of *sermo* generates, rather than assumes, the common grounds needed for persuasion. This distinction between generating common grounds and assuming them is the difference between probable and plausible rhetoric suggested in Erasmus' development of *sermo* rhetoric. While plausible rhetoric depends on self-evident grounds, assuming a familiar audience that accepts the rhetor's premises without negotiation, probable rhetoric engages the audience in forming the grounds for persuasion to co-generate, rather than assume, the conditions for communication. Due to changes in the social and economic structure of English society, conversational rhetoric is increasingly associated, by the early seventeenth century, with women and with spiritual life as the rhetoric of those who have no access to the civic discourse's certain grounds and must therefore generate grounds of their own.⁹⁶

Read in these terms, Iago's rhetoric provides the antithesis of the willow scene's probable *sermo*. Where Emilia generates grounds through the conversational, the interrogative, and the co-generative, Iago assumes grounds. His repeated small observations to Othello—"Ha, I like not

⁹⁵ See Lynette Hunter, *Humanism, Capitalism, and Rhetoric in Early Modern England*, 91.

⁹⁶ Hunter, "Friendship, Temperance and the Probable"; and Hunter, *Humanism, Capitalism, and Rhetoric in Early Modern England*.

that”; “Look to your wife”; “I know not what he did there, but to be hanged if he had been there before her”—are the devices of plausible rhetoric presenting itself as the expression of a trustworthy friend while functioning as the imposition of certainty. Othello accepts these assumed grounds not because he has co-generated them but because Iago's plausibility has made them appear self-evident. In this way, the play stages, as its central dramatic mechanism, the systematic destruction of the conditions for trusting communication afforded in probable discourse.

Against the rhetoric of certainty and established authority that typifies the plausible, the probable is the rhetoric of friendship and the familiar, the mode appropriate to situations in which grounds cannot be assumed because the speakers come from different or unacknowledged positions.¹³ Emilia and Desdemona's exchange in the willow scene is suited to *sermo* rhetoric; the women's friendship must accommodate status differences and requires a discursive mode that allows them to negotiate these differences.⁹⁷ Desdemona's status as a Venetian noblewoman and Emilia's role as her maidservant place the women in unequal positions that inform the conversational intimacy between the two women, as Emilia uses conversational rhetoric to reach an audience she knows may be unreceptive to her message, and therefore in need of persuasion. Read through the Erasmian model of familiar rhetoric, the willow scene appears as a site where common ground cannot be presumed but must be actively produced across difference. Emilia's speech, in this sense, does not simply express an independent ethical position but works to generate the very conditions under which such a position can be shared and recognized by

⁹⁷ This dynamic marks an original addition of Shakespeare's and a departure from *Gli Hecatommithi*, in which the unnamed wife and spouse of the ensign is herself a noblewoman. Perhaps Shakespeare heightens this social asymmetry to dramatize its negotiation.

Desdemona. Though Emilia's witty retorts to Desdemona's sincere questioning may appear flippant, her explication of gendered violence works to associate her mistresses' experience with Othello with the experiences of a larger female body, translating her experiential knowledge shaped by social subordination into a logic that her mistress might herself adopt. Read through the world-building potential in *sermo*'s probable rhetoric, Emilia attempts to persuade Desdemona through the collaborative construction of meaning rather than the invocation of established authority—an authority unavailable to Emilia—even as the gap in status between the two women interferes with the social and rhetorical conditions necessary for the co-generation of novel or emergent frameworks and shared understanding, rendering their collaboration contested and incomplete.

The Willow Scene and the Ethics of Address

The willow scene is the only extended scene in *Othello* from which all male characters are entirely absent, and the privacy of the scene is not incidental to its rhetoric but constitutive of it. Within this space, Shakespeare creates the material conditions for the female-directed address to which the pamphlet tradition gestures and the social practice of women's gossip networks perform. Like Jane Anger's final call to women—"let us secretlye our selves with our selves, consider"—in her *Protection for Women*, Shakespeare stages Emilia and Desdemona in a theatrical enactment of private conversation between women. Opening the *sermo* exchange, Desdemona earnestly asks her friend, "Dost thou in conscience think—tell me, Emilia—/ That there be women do abuse their husbands / In such gross kind?" (4.3.67-69). This familiar questioning about marital relations is a specific form of address that prudently solicits the particular, sociosituated judgment of someone whose experience makes her the appropriate interlocutor. Responding to Desdemona's bid for understanding, Emilia's speech is an attempt to

build a shared understanding between the women through exchange. However, she sidesteps the logic of Desdemona's loaded, misogynistic premise—"There be some such, no question" (4.3.70)—accepting that women's infidelity exists before proceeding to generate the grounds for understanding it differently. Emilia's proposition, "But I do think it is their husbands' faults / If wives do fall" (4.3.96-97), challenges Desdemona's assumptions and proposes an alternative logic for consideration between the two women. In the complaint tradition, the logic of female culpability is embedded within the rhetorical situation of a reproach directed at the absent lover and displayed before a male public to assess the grievance. In taking up her friend's grievance, Emilia changes both speaker and audience, placing the wronged women in the position of the deliberating audience. By re-orienting the rhetorical situation of the complaint, Emilia transforms its operation and articulates a desire to generate, between the two women, the common ground of an understanding of their shared situation. Unlike other rhetorical modes, the function of *sermo* "is to engage with the other person or thing in a manner that enables a two-way communication in which each makes possible conditions in which the other may change its own self." In this way, "the stance of *sermo* [also] establishes communicative forms for particular kinds of probable counsel that underlie the understanding of civil behaviour in the sixteenth century."⁹⁸ Appealing to Emilia's conscience in posing this question to her companion, Desdemona's address initiates ethical debate within the conversational, co-generative mode that discursively produces what Hunter calls the "co-extensive sense of selfhood" of probable rhetoric.⁹⁹ But as Emilia's conviction and the common sense of women's counter-discourse begin to assume a more presuppositional mode in this passage, the call to "let husbands know" moves beyond the

⁹⁸ Hunter, "Friendship, Temperance and the Probable," 193.

⁹⁹ Hunter, "Friendship, Temperance and the Probable," 189.

private conversation and redirects women's anger toward a male audience, perhaps escalating too quickly beyond the realm of conversational rhetoric and accounting for Emilia's failure to persuade Desdemona.

The classical tradition consistently frames virtue not as an individual achievement but as a social and relational one, formed and sustained through community. *Sermo* rhetoric, oriented toward conversation rather than declamation, provides the conditions for true ethical development precisely because its means and ends are both irreducibly social. Unlike oratory, which positions the speaker as an authority delivering judgment to a passive audience, *sermo* proceeds through exchange, qualification, and mutual recognition, enacting the collectivity it seeks to produce. Ethical formation, on this model, is not the private cultivation of virtue but a collaborative achievement that can only emerge from—and remain answerable to—a community of interlocutors. In the *Politics*, Aristotle argues that “man is by nature a political animal” and that anyone who lives outside the *polis* “is either a beast or a god”—that is, either subhuman or superhuman, but in either case outside the conditions that make virtue possible (1253a2-4). Virtue, on this account, requires the *polis* not merely as a backdrop but as its constitutive medium: the community provides the habituation, the models, and the mutual recognition through which character is formed. This social dimension of virtue extends into Aristotle's account of friendship in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, where he argues that the highest form of friendship—between people of equal virtue—is itself morally constitutive rather than merely pleasant. “Such friends,” he writes, “are useful to each other in respect of the good” (1157b1), and elsewhere that “the excellent person is related to his friend in the same way as he is related to himself, since a friend is another self” (1170b6-7). The friend functions as a kind of moral mirror, providing the honest judgment and virtuous example through which the self continues to

develop. Crucially, Aristotle also insists that prudence—the virtue that coordinates all the others—cannot be possessed by the young precisely because it requires experience of the particular situations in which virtue must be exercised (1142a12-16). Virtue is thus not a static possession but an ongoing practice that depends on sustained engagement with others who can model, correct, and recognize it.

Christine de Pizan adapts this classical framework in *Book of the City of Ladies* to address the social formation of virtue in female community specifically. Where Aristotle's *polis* was in practice a community of male citizens from which women were excluded, Christine constructs an alternative community—the city of ladies—in which women's virtue is formed, protected, and mutually recognized. Lady Reason tells Christine that the city must be built “with the help of our three selves”—Reason, Rectitude, and Justice (I.8.1). Christine's project throughout is to demonstrate that women possess the same capacity for virtue as men, and that what has prevented the recognition of this capacity is not its absence but the absence of the social conditions—education, community, mutual recognition—that make virtue possible. In *The Treasure of the City of Ladies*, she extends this argument practically, describing how women must cultivate virtue through their relationships with each other, modeling prudence and temperance for one another in the absence of the public institutions available to men. “A wise princess,” she writes, “will want her ladies and maidens to be good” not merely for the sake of decorum but because the cultivation of virtue is necessarily collective—each woman's moral formation depends on and contributes to that of the others (I.13). A century later, Jane Anger makes a version of the same demand with considerably more urgency. In *Protection for Women*, Anger addresses herself explicitly to women as a collective, “to all women in general,” framing her pamphlet not as an appeal to male authority for redress but as a call for women to reason

together about their own condition. Her central complaint is not merely that men slander women but that slander works by preventing women from speaking to and with each other: male defamation isolates women from one another, disrupting the community of discourse that would allow them to reason collectively toward self-knowledge and ethical action. When Anger writes that women must "understand" the "villainy" done to them rather than simply suffer it, she echoes the Aristotelian insistence that virtue requires perception of one's situation—a perception that, for women, can only be cultivated collectively, in the company of other women who can confirm, correct, and extend one another's moral reasoning and behavior. The willow scene stages this dynamic process in Desdemona's appeal to Emilia's conscience and Emilia's answering defense of women. Both speakers assemble a specifically female audience for moral reasoning in which the social conditions for virtuous action—mutual recognition, courageous honesty, collective reasoning toward justice—are reconstructed.

Emilia's speech rhetorically performs the conventions of a revisionary tradition that, across two centuries of women's writing, had been systematically redefining the discursive terms through which feminine virtue was constructed. What emerges from this historical convergence of literary and legal procedure was a new conception of virtue that was neither passive chastity nor silent endurance but what Betty Travitsky, surveying the tradition from Isabella Whitney through Mary Tattlewell, argues is more reasoned defense than generalized, hyperbolic attack.¹⁰⁰ Female polemicists of the early modern period refused the abstract, universalizing gestures of misogynist rhetoric, confining their claims to known cases and insisting on the specificity of the double standard's injustice. Emilia's questioning—" And have not we affections, /

¹⁰⁰ Travitsky, Betty. *The Paradise of Women : Writings by Englishwomen of the Renaissance Compiled and Edited by Betty Travitsky*, 1981.

Desires for sport, and frailty, as men have?" (4.3.112-13)—belongs to this tradition of epistemically modest but morally precise argumentation. Like many women's defense narratives which joined case-based reasoning and considerations of conscience with hermeneutical counter-discourses that argued the case for women's equality, Emilia asserts a likeness between the sexes:

And have not we affections,
Desires for sport, and frailty, as men have?
Then let them use us well: else let them know,
The ills we do, their ills instruct us so.

(4.3.108–115)

Rather than claiming that women are superior, Emilia claims they are equivalent in an echo of the logic of early modern women's scriptural defenses and polemical tradition in which biblical texts were re-read to contest theological misogyny. Central among these re-readings was the Genesis creation narrative where the derivation of woman from Adam's rib becomes the site of sustained reinterpretation. Writers repeatedly challenge the claim that Eve's priority in the Fall establishes female moral inferiority by emphasizing either Adam's greater culpability as the one who knowingly transgresses or the shared nature of sin. Esther Sowernam makes the same move in *Ester hath hang'd Haman* when she observes that if woman received her crookedness from Adam's rib, "how doth man excell in crookednesse, who hath more of those crooked ribs?"—a critique of the patriarchal origin story that turns it against itself by the same logical operation Emilia applies to the weaknesses of affection and frailty.¹⁰¹

¹⁰¹ Sowernam, *Ester hath hang'd Haman*, 55.

But the addressee in women's conversational rhetoric introduces the resistance of misogynistic reasoning from within. Desdemona does not receive Emilia's generated grounds as a co-participant in the *sermo*; rather, Desdemona opposes the traditional virtues of patience, chastity, wifely submission against the maidservant's attempt to rewrite feminine virtue from within women's shared experience. Her refusal—"I do not think there is any such woman" (4.3.94)—and her insistence on her fidelity and Othello's honor reveal the persistence, in her, of the virtue framework that Emilia attempts to rewrite. The reflexive internalization of the shrew in Desdemona's speech—"Beshrew me if I would do such a wrong / For the whole world" (4.3.88)—reveals the paradox of feminine chastity she extolls and her inability to reason outside of the binary terms of the dominant virtue framework. Yet Desdemona is discerning throughout the play, when, for example, she contradicts Iago's misogynistic rhetoric and flouts humanist wisdom in her remark to Emilia, "Do not learn of him, Emilia, though he be thy husband" (2.1.159-60).¹⁰² Ruth Vanita has insisted on the reductiveness of ascribing Desdemona's behavior to simple masochism, remarking that despite some scholars' "elucidation of Desdemona's extreme situation, cut off from father and countrymen, a compulsion which renders her powerless, the myth of her passivity dies hard."¹⁰³ Nevertheless, Desdemona's pro-marital misogyny, though it in no way justifies her murder, functions in the play to reveal the ethical and discursive limitations of traditional feminine virtues. Her responses to Emilia demonstrate the ways in which the causal logic of women's virtue leads her to accept culpability for Othello's behavior, her attempts at active repair with Othello mistaking women's resourcefulness as a

¹⁰² Neely, "Women and Men in Othello," 142-48; see also Wayne, "Refashioning the Shrew," 165.

¹⁰³ Ruth Vanita, "'Proper' Men and 'Fallen' Women: The Unprotectedness of Wives in *Othello*," 344.

substitute for reciprocity in relationships.¹⁰⁴ While some feminist scholarship characterizes Desdemona as responsive and prudent, and Emilia as reactive and retaliatory, such a reading assumes a traditional moral framework to be primary, and the women's speech as a secondary response to it. If the moral framework Emilia proposes is centered, however, Desdemona's final response—"God me such usage send, / Not to pick bad from bad, but by bad mend!" (4.3.116-17)—appears as the uncomprehending and reactionary response to Emilia's alternative virtue—one which accepts the misogynistic tradition of women's patient endurance rather than learning from the maidservant's prudent resistance. The change of addressee from the civic-facing mode to the female-directed mode does not, then, automatically produce an alternative community, but rather reveals the degree to which potential community members have or have not been able to disengage from the civic order's terms. The willow scene is not the triumph of women's community but its embattled attempt—a scene in which Shakespeare represents women's defense speech, staged for a private female audience, while also showing the dis-integration and divisions of that community from within through the persistence of strains of misogyny that make such community both necessary and difficult to sustain.

Thus, a straightforward notion of shared female community is difficult to locate in the scene's class dynamics. The movement of the song from Barbary to Desdemona and then into dialogue with Emilia traces a cross-class circulation that both enables and strains communicative intimacy. Barbary's position as a servant, like and unlike Emilia's, underscores that the knowledge encoded in the song emerges from conditions of subordination. Desdemona's uptake of the song does not fully dissolve the hierarchical gap between her and her maidservant, nor

¹⁰⁴ Neely, "Women and Men in Othello," 142, 147–48.

does it provide tangible protection to the vulnerable noblewoman. The scene cannot rely entirely on presumed common ground but must instead generate it through the exchange, performance, and partial translation afforded by the mode of conversational rhetoric. Desdemona's singing gestures toward such shared ground, but it also exposes its limits, as the affective framework of the song's insistence on individual endurance remains tethered to a discourse that stabilizes, rather than challenges, the structures producing women's suffering, as the narrator claims individual responsibility for a man's conduct to insulate him from broader social accountability. It is at this point that Emilia's rhetoric diverges from the inherited discourse represented in Barbary's song. Both recipient of Desdemona's performance and heir to Barbary's position, Emilia is uniquely capable of recognizing the constraints of the script being reiterated. While she participates in the conversational intimacy of the scene, her responses work to reframe its terms, shifting from repetition toward critique by articulating a model of reciprocity that holds men accountable for women's actions. In response to Desdemona's opening question, which presumes the misogynist construct of the shrew, Emilia personalizes the problem by associating herself with the woman Desdemona is describing. She then invites Desdemona to imagine herself as such a woman—"Why, the wrong is but a wrong i' th' world; / and, having the world for your labor, 'tis a wrong in / your own world, and you might quickly make it / right" (4.3.90-92)—before affirming the existence of many such women—"Yes, a dozen; and as many to th' vantage as / would store the world they played for" (4.3.95-96). Bringing these together, she introduces the shared "us" of her central argument: "say they strike us, / Or scant our former having in despite. / Why, we have galls, and though we have some grace, / Yet have we some revenge" (4.3.101-04). If Barbary's song encodes a cultural logic of resignation and Desdemona inhabits that logic to the point of identification, Emilia ultimately breaks from it by introducing new

possibilities for association and identification which themselves allow for new possibilities of behavior and thought. Hunter writes, “It is the idea of a melded selfhood that is the foundation for friendship and infuses the rhetoric of the probable,” this being “an early modern concept of melded selfhood, gesturing to a concept of identity that is not singular but continually in a material process of remaking itself in the familiar and nurturing context of friendship.”¹⁰⁵ Having engaged with an inherited form of female lament, Emilia transforms its premises, converting a discourse of individual endurance into one of accusation and collective ethical judgment. In this trajectory, Barbary’s song provides the discursive ground upon which Emilia’s dissent works, marking her as the figure who interrupts the cycle of repetition by reconfiguring the terms of association and ethical participation available to the women.

Virtue, Passion, and Practical Judgment

A notable feature of Renaissance ethics is the interactivity of body and soul. Renaissance psychology was grounded in Aristotle's *De Anima*, which defines the soul as the animating principle of the body—that which differentiates living from non-living things and moves the body through the forces of sensation, emotion, and cognition. Of the soul's three powers—vegetative, sensitive, and intellective—the highest encompasses not only the organic faculties but the rational powers of intellect, conceptual memory, and will, whose operations depended fundamentally on sense perception. In the tradition of Aristotelian psychology and Galenic physiology, Renaissance writers sought to account for the function of sense perception and its connection to cognition and action, grounding moral capacity in the soul's capacity to perceive, process, and respond to the world. This linkage between moral philosophy and psychology

¹⁰⁵ Hunter, “Friendship, temperance, and the probable,” 197.

meant that ethical judgment was not purely abstract, but a faculty continuous with the embodied sensations of sensory experience. Emilia invokes this tradition when she insists that wives share with husbands the full range of perceptive and moral faculties: "Let husbands know / Their wives have sense like them. They see, and smell, / And have their palates both for sweet and sour, / As husbands have" (4.3.104-08). Emilia's appeal to "sense" is an appeal to the rational use of sensory knowledge as the basis of moral perception and judgment. Before she arrives at this claim of equivalence, she grounds her argument in the sensual and sensory language of betrayal: "Say that they slack their duties, / And pour our treasures into foreign laps; / Or else break out in peevish jealousies, / Throwing restraint upon us" (4.3.98-101). The image of treasures poured into foreign laps registers infidelity as both economic dispossession and bodily violation, creating an impression of the experience of the domestic environment through its impact on the woman's soul. Importantly, Emilia's racializing depiction of the "other" women that are targeted by these predatory men mistakes the direction of this transfer of wealth, imagining that the resources husbands take from their wives are given to their "foreign" mistresses, rather than apprehending the system of double-exploitation that benefits men at every woman's expense, especially foreign women's. Emilia reasons from the bodily experience of what women perceive and endure, treating sensory and affective experience as the legitimate ground of ethical analysis. Her speech enacts what Aristotelian psychology implies but its civic application denied—that women, as beings with sense, are also beings with judgment. The interrogative mode that follows—"Is it sport? I think it is. And doth affection breed it? / I think it doth. Is't frailty that thus errs? / It is so too. And have not we affections, / Desires for sport, and frailty, as men have?" (4.3.108-112)—builds on this foundation, drawing Desdemona into a shared, cumulative analysis of men's behavior that moves from perception to comprehension to moral equivalence. When

Emilia reasons, "Say that they slack their duties . . . Or say they strike us . . . Why . . . let husbands know / Their wives have sense like them" (4.3.98-105), she revises the virtue of prudence by invoking women's obligation to a moral conduct differently construed. Emilia makes sense of experience by perceiving it as inherently social and shared, transforming the private knowledge of women's domestic lives into a collective and reasoned account of injustice in a rebuttal that belongs to traditions of women's defense speech and early modern virtue ethics. In Emilia's speech the rational soul perceives, compares, and concludes, and it is this faculty, which is fully operative in women but systematically denied civic expression, that Emilia's speech claims and demonstrates at once.

Considering Emilia's carefully chosen audience and ethical purpose in advising her friend, her impassioned defense of wives appears more prudent than most critics are willing to admit:

Or say they strike us,

Or scant our former having in despite.

Why, we have galls, and though we have some grace,

Yet we have some revenge.

(4.3.97-103)

Emilia's rhetoric challenges a tradition that defined women's temperance as the absence of gall—as patience, self-regulation, the decorous absorption of injury before a civic gaze that rewarded well-performed suffering. In her work on virtue in Shakespeare, Unhae Park Langis demonstrates that, although the early moderns inherited the reason-dominant ethics of Stoic philosophy, this influence was tempered by an early modern interest in the passions. For Aristotle, virtue is not the suppression of passion but its integration with reason in a union, not separation, of the moral

and the rational. But as a situational ethic, virtuous moderation can only be limned “in outline and not precisely” (Scodel 3), and the question of how to apply this principle to everyday life was, in the early modern period, deeply contested. “Against the Stoic model subjecting emotion to rational rule, humanist and Reformation traditions within the contexts of both religious and secular life offered powerful validation of passion in its own right” (6). Virtue as a means of self-government and self-knowledge, and Augustinian humanism advanced a model of the will that is guided by the passions rather than reason, “which are in turn not merely the disorderly impulses of the treacherous body but expressions of the energy and quality of the heart, that mysterious organ which is the center of the personality, the source of its unity and ultimate worth” (7). Langis argues that this measured approach to moderating the passions viewed virtuous comportment “more as a prudent deployment of emotion and action than a rational suppression of the passions” (3). And, “Although he defines moderation as a disposition to choose the just mean between excess and deficiency, the golden mean is not simply a midpoint between a particular vice and virtue but rather, given a person's abilities, the right response in a situation as to 'the end, the manner, and the time'" (p.14). Prudence enacts justice by action taken "at the right times, with reference to the right objects, towards the right people, with right motive, and in the right way" (Aristotle, NE, II.6.1106a28, 36; VI.9.1142b27).

Emilia's remark, "We have galls," is not a confession qualified by the assertion that such gall is justified by provocation, but the establishment of equivalence between women's and men's affective and moral capacity—the prudence from which the argument's proportions are calibrated. Her insistence that women "see, and smell, / And have their palates both for sweet and sour" (4.3.105-06) asserts not simply equivalence of capacity but equivalence of perception, aligning women with a mode of knowledge situated in embodied experience. This counter-

discourse redefines temperance as the appropriate anger of a woman who has assessed the situation correctly and responds with the critique it warrants. Emilia's pairing of "some grace" with "some gall" reconfigures virtue as a mean that is neither passive endurance nor unregulated excess, but a proportionate responsiveness to injury. To possess "grace" without "gall" would be to accept abuse imprudently, to mistake submission for virtue, and to possess "gall" without "grace" would be intemperate. The speech does not argue for prudence, courage, and justice from outside those values; it enacts them in a form that the complaint tradition does not accommodate. McKewin draws the connection between this conversational speech between friends and Emilia's public speech at the play's end—"Her controlled vehemence in the speech at the end of her conversation with Desdemona—"Why we have some galls; and though we have some grace, / Yet have we some revenge" (4.3.91-92)—is the preparation and warning for her cleansing fury in the final act." What Emilia models, particularly in the context of instructing a younger, vulnerable, newly married woman, is a form of judgment that calibrates response to circumstance, granting her a scope of articulation that she does not permit herself in the presence of her husband. Read alongside Aristotle's account of *phronesis* in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Emilia's emphasis on perception resonates with practical wisdom as a faculty grounded in habituated perception and the ability to discern particulars rather than apply universal rules. Given Desdemona's impending strangulation and the frequency with which women were murdered and assaulted, Emilia's call for "some revenge" opposes the static virtue of feminine meekness with a more sensible assessment of the right response to the women's extreme situation. Emilia's impassioned argument is virtuous, in the Aristotelian sense, in its precision of deployment—the rightness of its audience, its moment, and its moral aim. In this intimate exchange, ethical reasoning becomes situational and relational, grounded in the assessment of

harm rather than adherence to the norms of gendered conduct. The willow scene provides an instance of what Langis calls Shakespeare's "nuanced and complex dramatization of the Aristotelian concept of virtuous action" by recasting feminine virtue not as the dignified endurance of wrong but as its active, reasoned contestation.¹⁰⁶ Emilia's speech thus claims for women the very conditions of ethical judgment that Aristotelian virtue presupposes, even as it undermines their categorical exclusion from its formal recognition.

At the same time, Emilia's argument presses against the limits of Aristotelian ethics by reframing the doctrine of the mean and the problem of *akrasia*. When Emilia suggests that women's infidelity may follow from men's prior betrayals—"The ills we do, their ills instruct us so" (4.3.115)—she does not simply excuse wrongdoing but recasts it as a form of proportional, if ethically fraught, reciprocity. This formulation unsettles the Aristotelian distinction between virtuous moderation and incontinence by suggesting that what appears as excess may in fact register a misrecognized response to injustice. In this sense, Emilia's reasoning exposes the gendered asymmetry embedded in ethical frameworks that presume a neutral subject while differentially regulating male and female conduct. This challenge becomes more explicit when set against the account in the *Politics*, where women's virtues are defined as categorically distinct—organized around subordination rather than deliberative authority.¹⁰⁷ The speech reconstitutes what virtue requires from a woman in the specific situation of being denied civic standing while being held fully accountable to the civic order's norms. The virtues appropriate to the situation—assessed from within the experience of those who inhabit it, not imposed from outside by those who benefit from it—are proportional anger rather than patient endurance, the

¹⁰⁶ Unhae Park Langis, *Passion, Prudence, and Virtue in Shakespearean Drama*, 16.

¹⁰⁷ Aristotle, *Politics* I.13, 1260a12–24.

communal obligation to speak rather than the civic duty to be silent, and the prudence to address those who can receive the grounds rather than perform for those who will dismiss them. Emilia's speech directly contests the gendered division of Aristotelian virtue ethics, presenting women as equally capable of moral perception, judgment, and response. Like those working before her in the tradition of women's counter-discourse, Emilia emerges as a kind of counter-witness to the Aristotelian tradition, appropriating its language and logic of virtue while exposing the constitutive exclusions on which it depends.

The Limits of Collective Recognition

Valerie Wayne has argued that “Othello’s discord is caused not by a shrew but by a husband who charges his wife with being a shrew, yet Emilia does take on the role that her husband so ironically prescribes for her” (177). This conclusion, however, overlooks the context in which Emilia's resistance emerges, since her speech is neither directed at nor designed to torment Iago in any immediate or direct sense. Rather, Emilia's defense of shrewish behavior functions less as direct retaliation toward Iago or the pursuit of personal retribution than as a pedagogical thought experiment conducted with another woman for the purposes of addressing her friend’s immediate needs and modeling the collective defense of women. Unlike Shakespeare's earlier representations of the shrew, such as Adriana in *The Comedy of Errors* or *The Taming of the Shrew*’s Kate, whose resistance are primarily framed as personal grievance, Emilia develops a categorical defense of women as a group with which she identifies. She emphasizes men's hypocrisy in blaming women for male behavior regardless of women's conduct, thereby exposing the wholesale inadequacy of the shrew label and suggesting that women's behavior falls outside of these misogynist categories altogether. Women are shrews not because they act like shrews, but because they are women, a tautology that releases women from

the category when the discursive fiction is attributed to its rightful author. When Wayne places Emilia's speech in the context of shrewish behavior, she illuminates the stakes of this redefinition of virtue. Wayne argues that Emilia's behavior, though it does rise to the level of what she deems shrewish behavior, is ultimately revealed to be "justified and necessary because marital obedience is no longer an appropriate response for a wife."¹⁰⁸ This argument, read alongside the social fiction of the shrew and the context of Emilia's conventionally shrewish rhetoric, articulates the element of justice, appropriateness, and necessity central to Emilia's rhetorical performance. Emilia's argument recodes her imminent disobedience not as irrational excess but as a "practicer of arts," a woman who uses language with purposive skill to produce a concordant response amongst women.¹⁰⁹ The speech that has been coded as disorder when primarily responsive to an unsympathetic male audience becomes an ordering principle in the move to organize women. The virtue that emerges from the defense-narrative tradition is accordingly active, rhetorical, and morally self-authorizing—it does not appeal to feminine modesty or divine sanction for its legitimacy, but to the internal logic of the accusation itself, which, followed logically, shifts the focus onto the accuser.

Tragedy and the Female Subject

The tragedy of *Othello* has been attributed to the breakdown of marriage as both an ethical and rhetorical institution—"As befits the major preoccupations of the play, the breakdown of the heroics of marriage is constituted in Desdemona's career as the breakdown of language. The untenable position that she occupies in the action can best be described by noting

¹⁰⁸ Wayne, "Refashioning the Shrew," 165–67, esp. 167.

¹⁰⁹ Wayne, "Refashioning the Shrew," 169. Wayne repurposes Brabantio's accusation that Othello is, "a practiser of arts inhibited and out of warrant" (1.2.78).

that she makes three remarkable attempts to save her marriage in the play, and that each attempt is a lie. In examining her three lies, we can see that each issue from the paradoxical, contradictory materials that compose the idealization of marriage.”¹¹⁰ The incomplete and contested community formation of the willow scene may also be read as the failure of shared language amongst women that creates the conditions for tragedy in *Othello*. McKewin asks in her meditation on female conversation in Shakespeare, “What is the connection between women’s conversations and characterization, between women’s talk and genre? And what do these conferences tell us about women’s responsibility in the tragic world?”¹¹¹ These questions are addressed in the play as both the possibility and the failure of generating a shared ethics is staged in the women’s conversation.

Catherine Belsey describes the subject of liberal humanism in terms of the epistemic quality of the women’s failure to create a shared understanding in the willow scene. For Belsey, the “impression of interiority” of the tragic subject is produced “above all by means of the formal development of the soliloquy” (42). The soliloquy stages a speaker who is fragmented into the different voices of what Belsey terms the uttering subject and the subject of utterance, but “since the subject of the enunciation always exceeds the subject of the utterance, the ‘I’ cannot be fully present in what it says of itself” (49). The subject of utterance, defined as the outward projection of the “other,” and the uttering subject who recognizes the inadequacy of this externalized self, are conceived as incompatible “I’s” that fail to meet. Between these voices—the self that speaks and the self that is spoken about—is a gap that liberal humanism rushes to fill in with the

¹¹⁰ Mary Beth Rose. “The Heroics of Marriage in *Othello* and *The Duchess Of Malfi*.” *Shakespearean Tragedy and Gender*, edited by Madelon Sprengnether and Shirley Nelson Garner, Indiana University Press, 1996, 222.

¹¹¹ McKewin, 189.

imagined interiority of the singular speaker. The result of the fragmented “I” is that the ethical relationship between cause and effect, or action and awareness, loses its social orientation as it is located within this mysterious interior. Outstripping action, the individual’s self-awareness occurs in isolation, away from any others affected or the social accountability that restores meaning to an individual’s behavior.

Crucially, this subject is asymmetrically gendered—while male subjects in Renaissance drama are fragmented between competing selves, their incoherence is staged within discourse, generating the soliloquy, debate, and philosophical meditation that paradoxically confirms their depth as subjects. Women, by contrast, are split at the threshold of speech as they are called into subjecthood by the drama but denied the legibility that subjecthood is supposed to carry. The contradictions that define early modern femininity, between chastity and desire, obedience and self-expression, subject and object, cannot be resolved within language because they concern, and foreclose, the prior question of whether a woman’s speech constitutes meaningful discourse—“A discursive instability in the texts about women has the effect of withholding from women readers any single position which they can identify as theirs. And at the same time a corresponding instability is evident in the utterances attributed to women: they speak with equal conviction from incompatible subject-positions, displaying a discontinuity of being, an ‘inconstancy’ which is seen as characteristically feminine” (149). Women’s fragmentation therefore does not produce interiority in the way men’s does, it produces an absence—a gap between being called into speech and being granted the comprehending listener that speech is supposed to summon.

The tragedy of *Othello*, then, is not just that Emilia speaks too late to save Desdemona, but that the very conditions which install Emilia as a speaking subject simultaneously produce

the absence of the audience that would make her speech collectively actionable. In contrast to the “I” of the soliloquy, Emilia’s conversational rhetoric and the collective “we” of her speech bring the subject of reflection and the reflecting subject together through both an imagined and actual plurality of women. Emilia addresses Desdemona as though she were the socializing audience whose recognition would transform a private defense into a shared political analysis—the “you women” of the pamphlet tradition or collective identity that Guha identifies as the crucial outcome of the counter-tradition of women's defense-narratives.¹¹² But while the ethical impotence of the dis-integrated self unfolds against the backdrop of already authoritative speech for men, for women, such misrecognition is the precondition of their social position.

Desdemona’s defense—“I never gave him cause,” “I am honest,” “My love doth so approve him”—splits her speech between a self-aware “I” and the female subject of her speech which is always already condemned. Desdemona’s rhetoric locates both her virtue and its judgement within herself, possessively framing these as inherent and proprietary. When Othello accuses her, Desdemona’s ethics do not incorporate circumstance, social context, or other women as witnesses of her character, but appeal to her own interior truth framed as self-sufficient authority. Thus, “the position allotted to women, the position of the subject in liberal humanism, is one in which unity, autonomy, and choice are always imaginary.”¹¹³ Desdemona’s understanding of women as a group develops first through the individualized interiority of the liberal subject before it is displaced onto the social group of women in a way that produces social judgement without dialogue, a shared understanding dependent on the contingencies of experience, or shared language produced from such exchange. Declining to associate herself with the women of

¹¹² Guha, 8.

¹¹³ Belsey, *The Subject of Tragedy*, 221.

Emilia's willow scene speech, she replies that she would not do such a deed "for the whole world," ending the exchange without offering the recognition that would have made Emilia's equivalence—"have not we affections, / Desires for sport, and frailty, as men have?"—socially operative (4.3.115-16). Desdemona is present in the scene, but she cannot place herself within the collective to which Emilia addresses her speech because the position available to Desdemona is one defined entirely by an idealized wifely interiority—the imaginary unity and autonomy Belsey describes, and that Emilia's speech is designed to deconstruct.

Emilia's rhetorical repositioning is inseparable from her ethical development—her growing capacity to see herself as part of a collective, rather than an isolated subject, grants her access to the means of social thought and ethical action. Initially, Emilia displays the hallmarks of traditional feminine obedience, observing Iago's misogynistic charges against her in silence and meeting his demands. But unlike Iago's ideal woman who "thinks, and ne'er disclose her mind" (2.1.156-57), Emilia's awareness and challenge to the sexual hierarchy develops in conversation with another woman to the point that her power of speech has been transformed by the play's end: "So come my soul to bliss, as I speak true. / So speaking as I think, alas, I die" (5.2.300-01). Belsey has argued that "to be a subject is to be able to claim rights, to protest, and to be capable, therefore, of devising a mode of resistance more sharply focused than prophesying, witchcraft or murder," and that women "as subjects find a position in the discourses about them and addressed to them, and are consequently able to speak."¹¹⁴ Emilia's speech-act on Desdemona's behalf brings her into what Hannah Arendt characterizes as the public sphere of ethical action. This initiative has the quality of the virtuous moderation that is not a static

¹¹⁴ Belsey, 224.

disposition but a dynamic and responsive one —"the deliberately active life that constitutes virtue abhors complacency and requires constant modulation toward perfection" (17). Emilia's conduct in the final act performs such a modulation through a radical recalibration of affect and action in response to the failure of the speaking conditions that had previously constrained her. Following Aristotle as Langis does, moderation does not mean the suppression of passion but its disciplined deployment, and crucially, "the virtuous mean comprehends rather than eschews the sometimes extreme measures required of prudence; affectively, moderation might entail the release, suppression, or sublimation of passion as the situation demands" (17). Emilia's outburst in 5.2 occasions such a release—not as intemperate excess but the morally appropriate response to an extreme situation, the unleashing of passion that the moment demands and that her prior restraint held in reserve—"Villainy, villainy, villainy! / I think upon 't, I think! I smell 't! O villainy! / I thought so then. I'll kill myself for grief! / O villainy! Villainy!" (5.2.270–73). What may appear as unrestrained is in fact the convergence of sensation, cognition, and moral judgment that forms the psychosomatic basis of virtuous action—the moment one in which sense perception, processed through the common sense and assessed against principles of good and evil, issues in an overwhelming recognition of wrong. Like Macduff, who "feel[s] it as a man" before turning grief into righteous action against his family's murderer, Emilia does not bypass grief but passes through it, and it is the affective transit from sorrow to moral clarity to speech that constitutes her virtue. The moderation she exhibits is not the steely self-governance of the Stoic ideal but what Langis, invoking the Augustinian tradition, identifies as the alternative model—virtue as activity within a moral community, oriented not toward personal peace but toward justice. Against Iago's repeated imperatives—"Charm your tongue," "Get you home," "Be wise, and get you home," "Zounds, hold your peace!"—Emilia asserts the right and necessity of

speech—"Twill out, 'twill out. I peace? No, I will speak as liberal as the north. / Let heaven and men and devils, let them all, / All, all, cry shame against me, yet I'll speak" (5.2.259–263). The triple invocation of "all" signals her moral comprehensiveness through a deliberate enumeration and refusal of every possible authority that might silence her. Emilia's decision to speak is Aristotelian moderation—not the suppression of passion but its perfective orientation toward a just end.

Justice is both the most comprehensive and the most socially oriented of the cardinal virtues—it “maintaineth common utility, giveth the rule, the order, the measure and manner of all things both public and private, the band of human conversation and friendship.”¹¹⁵ Yet the question this raises for Emilia, as for all women in the world of the play, is how justice can be claimed or enacted by those whom the legal and civic order has systematically excluded. For women, social norms were enforced collectively and extra-legally—through neighborhood courts of reputation, pamphlet exchanges, church court testimony—precisely because the official instruments of justice were not available to them. Emilia's final actions in the play operate and exceed this extra-legal register. Rather than targeting men through strategic address, she redirects her attention to women entirely. Her refusal to return home—"I will not"—expresses a profound withdrawal from the male-governed domestic sphere and reorientation toward women as the proper community of her moral allegiance. This refusal is the product of the deepest form of virtue—the integration of passion, reason, and will into unified moral action. Emilia's search for justice on Desdemona's behalf brings her, by a logic that is both ethical and deeply personal, to treat herself with the same dignity she enacts in honor of her friend. In Langis's terms, this is

¹¹⁵ Lodowick Bryskett, *A Discourse of Civill Life*, quoted in Unhae Park Langis, *Passion, Prudence, and Virtue in Shakespearean Drama*, 19.

virtue as the complete life—not a single act but an orientation of the whole self toward just ends. Emilia dies not in the home to which Iago commanded her to return, but in the act of enacting justice for another woman, her testimony and her death together constituting the most comprehensive performance of the cardinal virtues in the play.

The same failure to generate common grounds that occurs between Emilia and Desdemona recurs, differently inflected, in Emilia's interactions with Bianca. Emilia's defense of Desdemona, while forceful, remains entangled in the very discourses it seeks to resist—it relies on the misogynist virtues of "innocence" and "chastity," thus reintroducing the binary logic she challenges in the willow scene. Her public mistreatment of Bianca—whom she physically assaults and calls a "strumpet"—reveals the persistence of exclusions which strategically conflate gender and class, underscoring that aristocratic femininity is a category produced through the exclusion of lower-class women and others who cannot be assimilated into its terms. In this sense, the category of "woman" itself is unstable and unevenly distributed amongst the women of the play. Emilia's incredulity at Iago's deceit mirrors Desdemona's earlier refusal to fully apprehend misogyny in the willow scene, suggesting that the failure to generate shared grounds is not only interpersonal but social. When Iago turns the charge of "villainous whore" upon Emilia, weaponizing this same honor system she attempts to use in defense of Desdemona, she rejects this honor system in a refusal to be silent—"I will speak as liberal as the north" (5.2.219). In this moment, she abandons the protections of honor and, paradoxically, aligns herself socially with figures like Bianca even as her language continues to rely on the same purity/corruption binary she resists. Her final speech thus both challenges and reproduces the discourse it seeks to dismantle, marking the limits of ethical transformation within the tragic form of virtue that is individually achieved. If conversational rhetoric seeks to

co-generate understanding, shared analysis, and language for collective action, Emilia and Desdemona's conversation marks the tragic inability to generate common ground across class lines—a form of erasure in *Othello* that suggests the close relationships between conversational rhetoric, collective decision-making, and ethical possibility.

Women's resistance in Shakespeare's plays may be measured by their reach beyond pro and anti-matrimonial misogyny to concrete alternatives for women outside of the framework of the patriarchal household. In her final speech, Emilia's still active struggle to defy her husband is followed by a determined and radical step beyond the limitations of the home: "'Tis proper I obey him; but not now. / Perchance, Iago, I will ne'er go home" (5.2.196-97). Like Diana in *All's Well that Ends Well*, Emilia's emergent feminism is differentiated from other women's pro-matrimonial stances through a proactive reach toward the alternative of actual, rather than imagined, women's community. Emilia's rewriting of feminine virtue is, however, partial in exactly the way the scene's incomplete community formation is partial—because the terms of probable rhetoric neither guarantee, nor coerce, nor assume recognition, they must assume the risks of social misrecognition and vulnerability to the violence of men.

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AFTERWORD

In the preceding chapters, I have argued that capacities conventionally represented as feminine virtues—patience, fidelity, and prudence as well as the skills of attentiveness, accommodation, and care that make these virtues possible—become differently legible when they are understood as practices cultivated through the work of sustaining relationships under conditions of inequality. Reading these social capacities as work has also required attending to the circumstances in which they are exercised and considering who requires them from women, whose interests they serve, what forms of dependence they reproduce or alter, and what resources and relationships make their exercise possible. The women considered throughout this study do not possess virtue as an abstract aspect of their character. They develop forms of judgment through the practical work of deciding whom to trust, whom to care for, when to accommodate another person, when accommodation becomes dangerous, and where forms of mutual dependence might instead sustain a woman's capacity to act. These questions remain central as I turn from women in service to women with greater access to property, education, and social authority. The change in social position allows me to ask what becomes of the ethical practices developed in the preceding chapters when women possess greater resources with which to act upon what they recognize as inequality and injustice.

The readings that follow extend the account of women's labor, ethical judgment, and collective life developed across this dissertation. In the *Clerk's Tale*, the qualities that make Griselda useful to others are detached from the material and relational conditions through which they are produced and elevated into exemplary virtues available for elite appropriation. Her patience, care, constancy, and capacity for accommodation become evidence of an ethical character whose value can be interpreted and circulated by men while the labor and social

relations that sustain those capacities recede from view. The problem is therefore not only that women's work goes unrecognized as work, but also that the ethical value assigned to women's conduct can obscure the question of whether a particular exercise of patience, fidelity, vulnerability, or accommodation is fitting to the relations in which it occurs. Walter can demand Griselda's continued openness to his authority precisely because the Clerk makes the virtues developed through her relations of care available for extraction from those relations. Chapters two and three have consequently asked what happens when women themselves participate in judging the proper objects and circumstances of their own capacities and consequently withhold trust from men who would exploit it, recognize forms of dependence that dominant social arrangements obscure, and redirect care, knowledge, fidelity, and vulnerability toward relationships capable of sustaining communities rather than exploiting them.

The following readings of *Pericles* and *As You Like It* develop this question under altered material conditions. Marina and Celia possess forms of privilege unavailable to many of the women considered in the preceding chapters, but their greater resources do not remove them from the dissertation's central problem of dependence. Instead, their privilege makes visible another consequence of recognizing dependence—the obligation to decide what to do with resources once one understands that capacities for flourishing are unevenly distributed. Pericles' daughter, Marina, will question how education, money, rhetorical skill, and social status might be used to enlarge another person's capacity for judgment rather than establish her superiority over them. In *As You Like It*, Celia's friendship with her dispossessed cousin makes the question more explicitly material by asking what affection requires when one woman's security is implicated in the social order that has deprived another of property and position. In both plays, practical wisdom therefore entails more than recognizing the ethical capacities of another person.

It involves deliberation about the material and relational conditions under which those capacities can be exercised.

These readings also complicate the forms of female collectivity traced in the earlier chapters. This dissertation has considered how women produce capacities for survival and judgment through relations that dominant literary and political languages frequently describe as service, femininity, obedience, or personal affection. *Pericles* and *As You Like It* explore what happens when characters who possess unusual access to resources can make those resources answerable to the forms of dependence they recognize. Marina directs money, trust, and knowledge toward people whose social positions have made ethical agency difficult to exercise and difficult for others to perceive. Celia attempts to make affection answer materially to Rosalind's dispossession by placing property, mobility, and personal risk within the obligations of friendship. Their actions do not overcome the class structures that make such acts of redistribution necessary, and their privileged capacity to give remains a determining contradiction. Yet this contradiction permits us to pursue a question implicit in the *Clerk's Tale*—what would it mean for those who benefit from unequal arrangements of dependence to recognize the labor and capacities upon which their own lives depend and to allow that recognition to govern the distribution of resources, risk, and authority? While Griselda's labor sustains forms of wealth, household order, and political authority whose distribution she cannot control, Marina and Celia, by contrast, possesses resources and must decide whether possession entails an obligation to redistribute them. Moving from *Pericles* to *As You Like It* allows us to explore both the prudent distribution of trust and the distribution of the material resources that make particular forms of relation possible. Where Marina must determine how to address people situated differently within a coercive economy, Celia must confront an inequality produced

within the intimate relationship itself. *As You Like It* therefore returns our concern with women's friendship to the problem of property. What forms of reciprocity become possible when affection makes one woman recognize that her security exists alongside, and may be structurally connected to, another woman's dispossession?

Recognizing the labor that produces women's capacities for care, prudence, reciprocity, and collective survival, then, how might we understand those same capacities when they appear among women with considerably greater access to property and power, and when those women can use their resources to alter the conditions under which others exercise them? In Shakespeare and Wilkins' *Pericles*, the princess Marina redistributes resources to the brothel-keepers attempting to traffic her in the form of the social capital which laboring men are systematically denied. Resourcing their ethical capacity through a demonstration of trust, faith, and patient understanding, she encourages them to value their ethical capacity and contributions not to moralistically blame them when they fail, but in a situation-specific recognition and address to the men's precarity that creates the conditions for interpersonal trust and social transformation. This response to sexual aggression is important to the ethical distinction traced throughout this study, because Marina does not extend vulnerability indiscriminately to the men who claim access to her body. She refuses that claim while choosing forms of trust that are fitted to the possibilities she discovers in particular relationships. Her practical wisdom lies partly in distinguishing vulnerability from submission and in determining when an act of trust might alter the terms upon which another person encounters her. In this way, practical wisdom in *Pericles* begins in the recognition of class difference rather than its erasure. Such a recognition across class does not require pretending that people share identical conditions, but requires

understanding the different relations people occupy within a common structure and considering the capacities they possess for altering it.

Practical Wisdom and the Redistribution of Resources

Marina enters Mytilene as someone whose education, rhetorical skill, musical accomplishment, chastity, and philosophical fluency signal her status as well as her personal character. The play exalts her exceptional capacities in the language and conventions of the nobility, even as it places her among more vulnerable people whose capacities are obscured by their entanglement in the forms of social violence particular to the poor. Yet Marina's practice of wisdom models the means by which ethical capacity can become a shared resource rather than an excuse for exclusion. When she appeals to Bolt, the brothel-keeper who is plotting her rape and ruin, for help, Marina reveals the degradation of the whore house, illuminates the better nature of this man, and urges him to take other occupations. She beseeches him, "Empty / old receptacles, or common shores, or filth, / serve by indenture to the common hangman: / Any of these ways are yet better than this" (1.23.151). When Marina appeals to Bolt's capacity for change, she successfully realigns their positions so that they are no longer adversaries, evoking what Arendt describes as the revelatory quality of speech and action that becomes apparent when people are "*with* others and neither for nor against them—that is, in sheer human togetherness" (180). Marina's arguments are fitted to the particular circumstances and needs of the man before her, and while in the brothel she repeatedly turns away from the abstraction of virtue toward a situation-based approach, reasoning from the material constraints of the people she encounters and asking what forms of action remain available to them. Practical wisdom, in this sense, begins in the recognition of difference rather than its erasure. Class solidarity does not require Marina to pretend that she and Bolt occupy the same social position, rather it requires her to recognize the

economic vulnerability structuring his choices while refusing the conclusion that poverty has extinguished his capacity for ethical action.

Yet the coercive system of prostitution, driven as it is by social inequality and violence, afflicts Bolt. Bolt makes that inequality explicit when he asks what alternative Marina imagines for him: “What would you have me do? Go to the wars, would you, where a man may serve seven years for the loss of a leg, and have not money enough in the end to buy him a wooden one?” (1.19.218-21). His reply places the brothel economy within a larger structure of constrained labor rather than reducing his conduct to individual depravity. Bolt’s pressing question reveals surprising vulnerability and honesty, and in this way resembles both the risky self-disclosure of Arendtian action and a patient revealing the source of his affliction. Just as Nussbaum says the philosophical “medical model is committed to trust the patient at some level” (26), Marina takes Bolt into her confidence and entrusts both her plans and her gold to him in a gesture of faith that requires Bolt’s participation in a greater and more virtuous purpose. Here she redistributes material resources together with the social capital of trust in the presumption that Bolt can keep faith, exercise judgment, and become an agent in a common project. Because degraded social positions are often reproduced precisely through the denial of such presumptions, this reparative gesture undoes the meritocratic logic underlying much early modern virtue discourse. Bolt is addressed not simply as an instrument of the brothel, nor as a morally defective poor man who deserves rebuke, but as someone whose judgment can matter to the organization of another form of life. In this act of cooperation Marina invests her social bond with Bolt with faith and inter-dependence as well as gold.

It is for this reason that Marina’s treatment of the brothel workers is more politically suggestive than a moralistic story of the virtuous gentlewoman reforming her inferiors. Her

rhetoric repeatedly works by restoring to others a capacity that the social order has ceased to acknowledge in them. When she reasons with Bolt about possible forms of work, she insists that virtuous action does not require a special education or philosophical training, but may begin in the ordinary exercise of judgment available to any person considering the choices permitted by difficult circumstances. This situation-based approach emulates the therapeutic model of Hellenistic philosophy that Nussbaum says subverts Platonic and Christian concepts of external, inhuman ethical truth to look inward for an ethical truth that is “in and of our human lives . . . something *to* and *for* human lives” (Nussbaum 22). The same principle governs the effects of her speech upon the men who leave the brothel announcing that they will “do anything now that is virtuous” (1.23.8). The comedy of these men’s instantaneous reform might prevent us from taking this as a plausible program of social transformation, but the scene nevertheless imagines wisdom as social and contagious rather than proprietary. “Real wisdom,” according to Pierre Hadot, “does not merely cause us to know: it makes us ‘be’ in a different way” (265). Marina’s knowledge acquires value by becoming another person’s capacity for action. And while her arts are initially signs that distinguish her from the women and men around her, their purpose changes through conversations where understanding becomes available for recognition and transmission. What is redistributed is not just information but the social conditions for another person’s development in the capacity to judge, speak, interpret circumstance, earn a livelihood, and participate in forms of association beyond coercive dependence. What begins as the privilege of royalty thus opens onto more difficult political considerations about what it would mean to organize collective life so that the resources necessary for judgment, care, friendship, meaningful work, and practical wisdom were not privileges bestowed from above but conditions held in common.

The contrast with Lysimachus sharpens the class politics of this redistribution because he lacks none of the resources denied to Bolt. Lysimachus is governor of Mytilene, yet Marina refuses the assumption that his office produces honor. When the Bawd appeals to his status—“he’s the governor of this country”—Marina separates title from ethical capacity: “how honourable he is in that, I know not” (1.23.43-44). Her skeptical questioning exposes the ideological convenience by which political authority is made to stand in for virtue. Later, when Lysimachus admits that her speech could have “altered” a corrupted mind, the scene forces political authority to submit to a standard of judgment located outside office. Arendt says that in ancient Greece, “Of all the activities necessary and present in human communities, only two were deemed to be political and to constitute what Aristotle called the *bios politikos*, namely action (*praxis*) and speech (*lexis*)” (25). Marina uses speech to achieve the freedom that Hannah Arendt traces to the unexpected originality of beginning that generates free action. Embodying the notion of *isēgoria*, Marina enters the brothel lamenting her fate and the degradation of those around her. Joe Sachs explains that *isēgoria* means “‘freedom of speech’ and as a consequence political equality in its totality” and that it “makes clear the link between the use of discourse and political institutions” (7). Marina’s speech is politically and institutionally subversive when she inserts herself into the world in a surprising moment of staunch self-assertion. Julia Lupton identifies the fusion of personal freedom, political agency, and inter-relational action that Marina accomplishes when she says, “Marina’s speech, qualifying as action in the Arendtian sense, has rendered the *oikos* into a provisional polis insofar as their exchange prompts each actor to risk self-disclosure” (136). The politically transformative capacity of Marina’s speech is elucidated by Victoria Silver’s description of the institutional power of words in a key early modern political text when she says, “*Leviathan* expounds the radical notion that political systems, not to

mention human knowledge and institutions, are merely rhetoric realized and endorsed by communities” (356). When Marina speaks in direct opposition to those who have taken an institutional claim to her body, including the governor of Mytilene, she destabilizes the existing power structure and begins a process of institutional reform with the material result that money that entered the brothel in anticipation of purchasing a woman’s body is redirected into a form of exchange that makes her independence possible. This marks an inversion of the brothel’s economy where gold begins to circulate outside of the system of commodified flesh. Recognition here alters not just how people understand themselves but how resources are socially distributed.

Yet Shakespeare can imagine this astonishing redistribution because Marina is an extraordinarily educated and well-resourced member of the royalty. Capacities that would be coded as mere service, attentiveness, accommodation, or survival when practiced by poorer women acquire the elevated names of rhetoric, philosophy, wisdom, and civic action when Marina performs them. The women working within the brothel possess knowledge of bodies, markets, danger, persuasion, and household survival, but their practical intelligence is subordinated to the degraded economic role through which the play makes them recognizable. Marina’s exceptional status therefore exposes the problem of how capacities produced through the work of sustaining relationships become culturally valuable only when detached from ordinary labor and concentrated in exemplary figures. Her philosophical generosity does not undo that hierarchy, but it does expose its contingency by repeatedly treating ethical judgment as something other people can exercise rather than as that which remains within the exclusive domain of the nobility.

This possibility does not resolve the contradictions of *Pericles*. The play ultimately returns Marina to dynastic recognition, and even Pericles’s forward-looking declaration that “our

son and daughter shall in Tyrus reign” (1.27.85) retains the traces of an incestuous familial and hierarchical logic from which Marina has repeatedly had to escape. But the social relations Marina creates in Mytilene have already imagined another form of social reproduction. Her work fosters other people’s capacities rather than merely reproducing lineage. If the reproductive labor examined in this dissertation is so often devalued because it sustains lives without granting those who perform it authority over the worlds they sustain, Marina’s pedagogy offers a partial counterimage in the care that becomes politically consequential when sustaining another person also means enlarging that person’s capacity to act. Marina’s redistribution is not primarily a redistribution of wealth but of the social capital of trust, recognition, knowledge, and faith in capacities that social inequality has made difficult for Bolt and the other working-class men to exercise or have recognized by others.

Recognition, Reciprocity, and Redistribution

As You Like It approaches this question of obligation through the redistribution of financial and material resources between two gentlewomen. Like Marina, Celia occupies a privileged social position that gives her resources with which to act upon the inequality she recognizes. Unlike Marina, Celia redistributes the material advantages of aristocratic birth itself. When her friend and cousin Rosalind is dispossessed and banished by Celia’s father, Rosalind’s loss implicates Celia directly because the same aristocratic order that dispossesses one woman secures the position of the other. Their friendship therefore makes inequality intimate, confronting Celia with the question of what she should do with resources she possesses within a system that has targeted someone she loves. While the women’s intimacy is made possible in part by precisely the resources from which other women are excluded, Shakespeare makes those resources an object of ethical decision. In this way, Rosalind and Celia’s friendship flourishes in

response to loss and calamity as their intimacy becomes the means for exercising loyalty, faithfulness, wisdom, prudence, generosity, and reciprocity as foundational tenets of friendship and romance alike.

When Rosalind and Celia arrive in Arden, they bring their gold and social privilege with them. The forest does not simply constitute an alternative space outside the economy they have left behind. Corin must sell his time; Silvius possesses resources but is too distracted by love to make use of them; and the young women possess money. Even within this supposedly leveling pastoral space, differences of status, property, prestige, and power persist. The forest is marked by money, wage labor, and dispossession, conditions that resonate with the enclosure and land reforms transforming rural England in Shakespeare's time.¹¹⁶ Hospitality itself therefore raises an economic problem, since one must possess something in order to be hospitable or charitable. Yet something in the exchanges among Rosalind and Celia is not exhausted by this economic inequality. The practices and affects associated with hospitality—welcoming, sharing, problem-solving, and speaking across difference—remain in reserve, available for reuse under changing economic conditions. What potential might these communal values retain for transforming social relationships that are being newly alienated by a transitioning economy?

Celia's response to her friend's banishment is to imagine her resources relationally rather than possessively. When she promises Rosalind that "what he hath taken away from thy father perforce, I will render thee again in affection," (1.2.14–15) affection names more than consolation. If affection were Celia's only offering, it might merely smooth over the violent exercise of power over Rosalind's estate. But Celia's affection entails a financial component and

¹¹⁶ Richard Wilson and Randall Martin

in this way acquires a material dimension as friendship entails deciding what to do with wealth, hospitality, mobility, and inherited privilege. The equality imagined between friends does not abolish the inequality surrounding them nor does the inequality between them does \ thwart strategies for exchange. Instead, recognition produces an obligation concerning what she will do with the advantages that inequality has given her. Though this may easily be a demonstration of aristocratic class solidarity, the practices and principles of holding things in “common” holds the egalitarian potential evoked by the forest of Arden.

The play itself is composed as a series of conversations, and conversations between these friends repeatedly stage Celia’s emotional labor. Celia knows how to console. She notices her friend’s affective condition, reframes Rosalind’s situation, offers material support, and adjusts her behavior to changed circumstances. She earnestly takes up these tasks as she gently chides her friend in a pedagogical demonstration of skillful situation-framing, “I could have taught my love to take thy father for mine. So wouldst thou, if the truth of thy love to me were so righteously tempered as mine is to thee” (1.2.8–10). Mingling teaching with the moral duties of affection, truth, love, and righteousness, Celia paints a portrait of friendship like that described by Cicero in *De amicitia*, as “something like a school for virtue, in which other noble virtues are learned” (46). In chiastic lines that display mirroring with difference, Celia issues her love for Rosalind as an instructive example to model and educate Rosalind in resilience, in fostering and being fostered, in restoring one’s fortune by sharing the fortunes of friends, and in finding a rehabilitative community in the face of disaster and isolation. She argues, “Herein I see thou lov’st me not with the full weight that I love thee. If my uncle, thy banished father, had banished thy uncle, the Duke my father, so thou hadst been still with me, I could have taught my love to take thy father for mine. So wouldst thou, if the truth of thy love to me were so righteously

tempered as mine is to thee.” (1.2.6-10) Rosalind is enfolded within this restored community that is more than contingent since it is based in kinship and kind-ness, while the uneven structure of the lines account for the inequity in circumstance that has come between them. Celia’s close comparison displays “an assumption crucial to classical humanistic pedagogy—that internalizing exemplars (moral prototypes) through acculturation (paideia) empowers rather than blocks individual deliberation and agency” (Wehrs 4). In a brief space, Celia argues for the socially egalitarian and restorative possibilities of friendship even as she acknowledges and accounts for the state of worldly being as one in which mutuality floats on a bedrock of inequities.

As Celia exercises hospitality, beneficence, and friendship, she mingles these with the terms of courtly fidelity so that love and devotion for one’s ruler takes an erotic charge. Critics have noted that long before the love games of the forest commence, Celia is Rosalind’s love-fool. In Shakespeare’s source text *Rosalynd*, “Lodge describes Alinda (Celia) as loving Rosalynd ‘more than herself’ ” and protesting to her usurping father that, because they “have two bodies and one soul,” she must be “co-partner” of Rosalynd’s “hard fortunes” and so “participate in exile” (Tartamella 294). Emotional labor becomes both a means and an end of vulnerability, collaboration, and commonality. When Shakespeare alters the source text by frustrating Celia’s attempts to join Rosalind in exile, he creates the opportunity for Celia’s repeated, deepening vows of fidelity and friendship to Rosalind. Celia’s vulnerability becomes the site of virtuous love in action that is strengthened and enriched when faced with adversity.

Celia’s unprompted oaths are the opposite of a love test, they are rather a pure demonstration of fidelity that places female love and faithfulness over paternal and patriarchal duty. Couching the Erasmian romance of intellectual friendship in courtly terms, Shakespeare’s couple use the language of marriage and sexuality to reveal the romantic affordances of

friendship as it unfolds in loving relationships founded in reciprocity. In the *Adages*, Erasmus unites the terms of friendship with hospitality and supplication,

This is my guest, so you will offend against the law of hospitality;
he is my suppliant and thereby he is also yours, so you will offend
against the law of supplication; finally I am a friend supplicating
for a friend, so you will offend against the law of friendship. [39]

Exercising the wisdom of a true friend, Celia's magnanimity is a portrait of intellectual friendship as the wise governance of relationships and the attendance to needs that are understood as particular to mutable, ever-shifting social states. The form of Celia's practice is suited to extend across paradigms both lived and ideal and across registers romantic, platonic, personal, and political as they arise in new and various forms to constitute new forms of loving.

Yet the exchange also reveals the difficulty of translating generosity into recognition. With some irritation, Rosalind says that unless Celia can "teach [her] to forget a banished father," she must not "learn [her]" how to remember any pleasure (1.2.3–5). When Rosalind responds to Celia's urging, "Well, I will forget the condition of my estate, to rejoice in yours" (1.2.14–15), she does not say she will forget her estate altogether, but forget its *condition* in order to connect with her friend. But the phrasing has plenty of room for ambiguity, darkly suggesting a kind of willed amnesia and subtly reiterating the differences between the two women. Over the course of the play, Rosalind will chafe under her friend's charity and increasingly distinguish herself from Celia as she turns toward heterosexual romance, disavowing the world of women through the misogynistic rhetoric of her love-lessons with Orlando and her eventual abandonment of Celia.

Celia's courageous yet risky self-disclosure therefore does not necessarily produce the recognition she seeks. As in the conversation between Desdemona and Emilia in *Othello*, Celia may overcorrect here. She may be too eager to solve her friend's problems, failing first to listen to and reflect the reality of Rosalind's loss back to her before asking Rosalind to "forget the condition of [her] estate." Though skilled in the arts of love and friendship, Celia may have more to learn, and the inequality inherent to charity, generosity, and hospitality suggests fundamental obstacles to human association posed by a social order designed around differences in estate. Celia's material reparations do not offer a shortcut to intimacy; more emotional labor—sitting with and making space for Rosalind's suffering—may be needed before trust and vulnerability can regrow under these changed conditions. In this way, Shakespeare suggests that both forms of repair are needed: the care work of friendship and the willingness to act and make material amends.

Or, despite Celia's generosity and imagination, Rosalind may not share this radical vision of reciprocity centered on female relationships; she may first need to work out her attachments to heterosexual romance. In her love-talks with Orlando, Rosalind voices a persistent anxiety about possession: "Now tell me how long you would have her after you have possessed her?" (4.1.110) She seems both aware of her lack of control and to use the discussion to voice anxieties about her own love madness when she says, "The wiser, the waywarder." Echoing the rhetoric of Emilia and other Shakespearean women, she then expresses the conflict inherent in marriage and the futility of attempts to domesticate women: "Make the doors upon a woman's wit, and it will out at the casement. Shut that, and 'twill out at the keyhole. Stop that, 'twill fly with the smoke out at the chimney" (4.1.125–27). Yet this familiar trap offers a particular form of ever-thwarted resistance that may appear preferable to Rosalind precisely because the male foe is conventional,

easily outwitted, and someone with whom she can avoid recognition. Such anxieties and fears of recognition might help explain Rosalind's betrayal first of Celia, who sees her best, and then her obfuscation and disparagement of womankind. Like Desdemona, Rosalind may be avoiding the recognition entailed by the love of women and the love of oneself as a woman—a comic version of the tragedy of avoidance and misrecognition staged in *Othello*.

This problem returns us to the question of how women can find recognition within literary traditions that systematically misrecognize the profound philosophical, practical, and political-economic questions women engage through conversation with one another. Rosalind delivers an epilogue that playfully disavows both women's speech and her own ability to deliver final words, carrying the double edge of folly's capacity to discover new truths as well as to avoid vulnerability and make light of tragedy. She declaims:

It is not the fashion to see the lady the
epilogue, but it is no more unhandsome than to
see the lord the prologue. If it be true that good
wine needs no bush, 'tis true that a good play needs
no epilogue. . . What a case am I in then, that
am neither a good epilogue, nor cannot insinuate
with you in the behalf of a good play! I am not
furnished like a beggar, therefore to beg will not
become me. My way is to conjure you, and I'll
Begin with the women. I charge you, O women,
for the love you bear to men, to like as much of
this play as please you. And I charge you, O men,

for the love you bear to women—as I perceive
by your simpering, none of you hates them—that
between you and the women, the play may
please. If I were a woman I would kiss as many of you as
had beards that pleased me, complexions that lik'd
me, and breaths that I defied not. And I am
sure, as many as have good beards, or good faces, or
sweet breaths, will for my kind offer, when I make
curtsy, bid me farewell.

(V.iv.1-23)

Rosalind ends by identifying her audience as prospective lovers whose ranks she both leaves and imaginatively joins. In the epilogue, Shakespeare's Rosalind unbinds textual meaning and ascribes the value of the play to the audience, and like Folly she invokes not their strict memory of the play, but their "liking" of it to draw upon the same generative and world-building capacity of emotional renewal to which Folly ascribes her universal power in the opening of the *Moriae Encomium*. Yet the invitation is also shot through with open questions about the possibilities of relation between men and women. Gender inequality is avowed and addressed through women's freer choice to read for what they like. Anthony Grafton finds that in Erasmus' *Encomium* the author is, "revealing, not stating, that poetry may be read and enjoyed without being treated either as an insidious intoxicant or as the vehicle of sacrosanct wisdom, and that the better a person knows poetry the more fun he can have with it." Rosalind is the mouthpiece for this very same hermeneutic of wisdom in the epilogue of the play as she engages the wit and acquired wisdom of her audience to co-create forms of reading that resemble love, forms of knowing that

resemble self-recognition, and forms of play that resemble wisdom. Yet, like the relations the play has staged between women, this invitation remains troublingly unresolved.

In *As You Like It*, Celia models what happens when women who possess property, mobility, education, or proximity to power recognize dependence rather than disavow it. This distinction suggests one direction in which the history of women's friendships might lead. Recognition is not yet reciprocity, and reciprocity is not yet justice. Both Chaucer and Shakespeare repeatedly imagine women perceiving dependencies that the prevailing social order requires them to misrecognize. That households depend upon servants, husbands upon wives, noblewomen upon working women, and formal political authority upon the working relationships of women that they decline to value. The friendship of two gentlewomen raises the question following recognition, prompting us to ask what obligations arise from knowing oneself to be sustained by unequal relations. Celia can convert recognition into hospitality, shared risk, and the redistribution of resources because she possesses resources to give; the working women examined in this dissertation more often produce those resources without controlling their distribution. Reading in this way prevents women's community from becoming an abstract sisterhood detached from class and material conditions while allowing us to ask whether relations cultivated among women—attention to dependence, reciprocal care, shared knowledge, accommodation to changing need—might furnish practices through which unequal social relations can be perceived and even acted upon.

What, then, does recognition obligate readers to do once we have learned to recognize women's work where we have been taught to separate virtue, femininity, love, patience, friendship, service apart from the rigor, discipline, tedium, and toil of repeated and challenging

work of sustaining relationships? Beyond whether women recognize one another, can recognition lead to reconsiderations of who bears labor, who controls resources, who assumes risk, whose knowledge governs collective decisions, and who receives the benefits produced by women's work? Such questions bring us to the problem of the distance between recognizing dependence and reorganizing the conditions of dependence. In *All's Well That Ends Well* and *Othello*, women who seek to create safety for themselves and other women of differing ranks experiment with ideas about how to withhold access to their sexual and emotional labor from men in order to reorganize the conditions of social and economic dependence. Such attempts in literature raise the question of how to transform the recognition of our dependence upon others into social arrangements in which the labor of sustaining collective life entails a corresponding claim upon its resources, authority, and possibilities for flourishing.

Returning to Crocker's account of vulnerability as a legitimate expression of medieval women's virtue helps clarify what these literary histories of women's relationships might offer to such a project. If vulnerability can constitute a capacity rather than merely a condition imposed upon women, its virtue nevertheless depends upon the practical judgment through which women determine where and with whom the risks of openness may appropriately be taken. The women examined here repeatedly distinguish between forms of vulnerability demanded by unequal relations and forms deliberately undertaken within relationships that offer some possibility of recognition, reciprocity, and collective flourishing. Their refusals, evasions, and strategic withholdings therefore belong to the same field of ethical judgment as their practices of trust, disclosure, care, and fidelity. Aristotelian virtue ethics helps make this distinction legible because virtue inheres in conduct fitted to particular circumstances rather than in the maximization of any single disposition. Read in this way, women's ethical agency lies partly in

their capacity to judge the relations in which vulnerability might become a virtue and to participate in creating the social conditions that make such vulnerability prudent. If Celia's arrangement with Rosalind does not, ultimately, confront the reality of the gentlewomen's dependence upon the subjugation of poor women, it nevertheless introduces an explicitly economic dimension to the question of what must those with greater access to resources and authority do once class inequality becomes recognizable to them. The situational character of virtue thus returns us finally to the material conditions that make particular forms of ethical relation prudent, possible, and sustainable. Can the work of sustaining others become not the hidden infrastructure of unequal societies but the basis for reorganizing what society holds in common? What Chaucer and Shakespeare's female characters finally make visible, then, is that women's virtue lies not in an inexhaustible capacity to endure, serve, or remain open to others, but in the historically situated work of judging which relations deserve those capacities—and in recognizing, with other women, when their withdrawal is itself a form of ethical and political life. Across these texts, women's virtue emerges as the practical and collective capacity to distinguish between relations that sustain life and those that consume it, making refusal and collective deliberation themselves part of the long history of women's ethical and political judgment.

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