Issues of Evil
ISSN 2283-8759
pp. 231-252 (2025)

"This it is when men are ruled by women". The Evil of Queenship in Shakespeare

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In fairy tales the wicked stepmother ultimately finds a terrible death to punish her for her evil deeds. The Queen in Shakespeare's late romance *Cymbeline* fits the bill. But something similar happens to Tamara in *Titus Andronicus*, who takes revenge on her martyred son. Indeed, queens in these plays are targeted as monstrous whenever they insist on following their political ambitions. In the history plays Queen Margaret is slandered by the Yorkists, because she will not cede to them the throne that she believes is rightfully her son's. Lady Macbeth, in turn, is called a "fiend-like queen" by Duncan's son Malcolm, after he has reclaimed the throne. In all cases – as my article will demonstrate – the notion of evil is used as a weapon to harness, manage and contain feminine power.

Keywords: Shakespeare's plays as series, evil queens, patriarchy, misogyny, Elizabeth I

I

The fate that befalls queens in Shakespeare's plays is just as sad as the stories that Richard II, faced with his own dethronement, recalls of his predecessors. Some are humiliated or deposed and banished, some are haunted by the ghosts of those they have harmed. Others are murdered, commit suicide or can only resort to cursing their adversaries. Still others, in turn, successfully stand up to tyrannical husbands or stubborn fathers and get their will, albeit not always for long. Viewed as a series, they form a dazzling spectrum of queenship. Because in the patriarchal world Shakespeare's plays reflect and reflect on, sovereignty is conceived in terms of masculine power: when women sit on the throne, they cause a disturbance in the political system. Regardless of whether they trigger violence or seek to settle disputes, they function as symptoms of the prejudices and fantasies

that are negotiated in relation to them. They aren't necessarily evil, but in one form or another, they are regarded as such, owing to their strident will to rule. At the same time, read against the grain, Shakespeare's plays demonstrate that, by seeking to assert themselves on a patriarchal political stage, his queens represent a counter-power that can be read as a critique of the very cultural codes that exclude them.

For this reason, a fundamental contradiction comes into focus when we consider these *dramatis personae* as a series: Shakespeare's queens support the political system, regardless of whether they oppose a ruler, appropriate his power for their own ends or unambiguously conform to his rule. Some are rebellious in their ambition, others seek to curb the arbitrary assertion of power of the king. Still others insist on the law of justice and mercy against his blind stubbornness, his dangerous pride or his tyrannical jealousy. In the dramas in which female rulers are punished for their transgression and sacrificed for their resistance, their political legitimacy proves to be unstable. In other plays, however, they appear as figures of political persistence, whose demands bring about a correction of the king's rule. They ensure the continued existence of the royal system, if not their particular lineage, by expressing their will through political cleverness, sharp wit or a pithy silence. At the same time, precisely because they never fully belong to the political system, they can be seen as serving an ambivalent, even contradictory reflection on sovereignty[1].

II

The typology this essay seeks to develop, takes as its point of departure the queen as a figure of resistance. At the very beginning of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Hippolyta appears as a defeated Amazon queen. She watches silently as Theseus, the Duke of Athens, her future husband, sides with his courtier Egeus, who wants to force his daughter, Hermia, into marrying Demetrius, a man she does not love. She decides to disobey her father and flees with Lysander into

1 For a discussion of Shakespeare's queens as a series and in relation to the depiction of female politician in TV drama, see the revised edition of Bronfen 2025. See also Wald 2020, as well as the collection of scholarly essays edited by Bronfen and Wald (2025). For a discussion of how the queens in these plays assert themselves again masculine power, see Packer 2016.

a forest close to the court and, because the fairies who reside there, intervene in the events that take place there that night, Hermia will get her will. The next morning, Theseus and his bride Hippolyta find two couples, sleeping at the edge of the forest, with the young man Hermia rejected now re-united with his former lover, Helena. While, to Theseus, what the young people have to report seems unbelievable, Hippolyta is the one to take the lovers' account seriously: "all the story of the night told over, and all their minds transfigured so together, more witnesseth than fancy's images and grows to something of great constancy" (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, V.i.23-26)[2].

In this nocturnal story, she, furthermore, has a double in the fairy queen Titania, even though the Athenian lovers never mention her. Only we are privy to what befell her the previous night. Although Titania had stubbornly resisted the rule of the jealously fairy king, Oberon, she too must ultimately submit to his will. He had cunningly sprinkled her eyes with the drops of a love potion so that, upon awakening, she had come to dote on one of the Athenian artisans, rehearsing a play nearby. To enhance her humiliation, Oberon's puck had transformed Bottom's head into that of an ass. Although Titania spends the night with him in her grove, when she wakes up the next morning, her eyes have been cleansed of her romantic folly. She is compelled to ask Oberon for help in explaining how it came to be that she was found lying next to this disgusting mortal. While, for her, the fairy king has the interpretive authority over the events that happened that night, it is open to us to remember the erotic ecstasy she experienced with Bottom. The seminal point for the discussion that follows is the double vision of queens we get in both Hippolyta and Titania. In both cases they are humiliated and must accept marriage with a ruler who has come to contain their independent power. Yet from the perspective of these heroes, this is a form of punishment for wickedness ascribed to these strong-willed heroines, be it in regard to the military prowess of a warrior queen, be it in regard to the fairy queen's insistence on not giving in to all the demands made by the Fairy King.

A line of connection can be drawn between this romantic comedy and the early revenge tragedy, *Titus Andronicus*, because, like the Amazon Queen, Tamora is also brought to Rome as a prisoner after

2 All citations are taken from Shakespeare 2017a.

having been vanquished on the battlefield. There, the queen of the Goths falls to her knees before the Roman general, who has defeated her after a 10-year war campaign, and tearfully begs for mercy for her first-born son. Why, she asks him, should her son be martyred in the marketplace for the brave deeds he has done for his country? Despite her motherly pleas, Titus refuses to show mercy and has her son burned at the stake and it is this hard-heartedness, which will be avenged. After the heir to the throne, Saturninus, is appointed emperor, he chooses Tamora as his bride. Unlike Hippolyta, this warrior queen does not fall silent. Instead, explaining the ruse behind her marriage, she claims to be "a handmaid to his desire, a loving nurse, a mother to his youth" (*Titus Andronicus*, I.i.336-37)[3]. At the same time, she uses the confidence her husband places in her to turn him against his loyal general. Indeed, Tamora becomes the shadow ruler of Rome.

Her weapon is no longer the sword but rather the double-tongued speech with which she publicly advocates a reconciliation with Titus, while admitting her real intention to her husband only in secret: "I'll find a day to massacre them all, and raze their faction and their family, the cruel father and his traitorous sons to whom I sued for my dear son's life, and make them know what 'tis to let a queen kneel in the streets and beg for grace in vain" (I.i.454-60). By showing no compassion in her maneuvers against her designated enemy, and, instead, acting in utter cruelty, she brings into focus what it means to be thus humiliated. Titus and his allies, however, declare her to be an arch-villainess precisely because she, as a woman, claims the lust for vengeance that is considered the prerogative of Roman men. It is worth noting that, unlike Hippolyta, she does not fight alone. Her clandestine lover, Aaron, who was brought to Rome with her as a prisoner of war, is her staunch ally. He, too, lustfully instigates mischief without showing remorse, even while calling her a siren and praising her for her "sacred wit to villany and vengeance" (I.i.620-21).

With his help, Tamora is not only able to betray the emperor, but also to carry out her bloody campaign of revenge with utter determination. She incites her sons to ravish Lavinia, the daughter of Titus, and to kill her husband, the emperor's brother. Tamora then pretends

3 All citations are taken from Shakespeare 2009.

that the general's two sons are responsible for the murder and thus ensures their execution. She uses her evil eloquence as a weapon one last time to convince Titus to invite the emperor and his youngest son Lucius, who has been banished by him, to a banquet. Although she hopes to complete her retribution in one fell swoop, the banquet turns into a massacre. Lucius is the only one to survive because he arrives too late. To satisfy the wrath of the man, whom Tamora has failed to vanquish along with his family, it is not enough for her to die in the bloodbath she has herself unleashed. An empress, who, to her enemy, embodies the epitome of female evil, must be completely extinguished, stripped of all her honors. In the monologue with which the play ends, Lucius, who is appointed the new emperor, gives orders that pertain to how the corpses are to be disposed of. The murdered Saturninus is to be buried in his ancestral tomb, while his murderer, Titus, and his daughter are to be buried in the tomb of their ancestors. Tamora, however, is forbidden a burial. No one is allowed to mourn the former empress, and, instead, she is thrown over the city wall and exposed to animals and birds of prey: "her life was beastly and devoid of pity, and being dead, let birds on her take pity" (V.iii.198-99).

From the perspective of the newly crowned emperor, this may be a justifiable form of punishment. However, the radical rigor with which Tamora's humanity is denied can also be read as a dramaturgical consequence of the fact that throughout the play she, as ruler, reflected the male barbarism lying just beneath the surface of the Roman code of honor. Titus had not only shown no mercy to her son, but also killed his own son at the very beginning of the play because the latter had dared to disobey the general's orders. Titus also stabbed his own daughter Lavinia in cold blood at the banquet because, according to his idea of honor, her violated body had no right to survive. Tamora, who has appropriated and perpetuated this ruthlessness, must be dehumanized so that the double standards, on which the continued existence of the Roman polis is based, can be veiled by virtue of her sacrifice.

The nameless queen in *Cymbeline* offers us a further variation of female perfidy. At the beginning of the play, she assures Innogen, "be assured you shall not find me, daughter, after the slander of most stepmothers, evil-eyed unto you" (I.i.71-73), and yet, precisely as in fairy tales, the second wife of the King of England will ruth-

lessly betray the princess (Shakespeare 2017b)[4]. Innogen had secretly married the courtier Posthumus, although her father wanted her to marry her stepmother's son, Clothen. After the banishment of her husband to Rome, she becomes a prisoner in her father's castle. Soon after this, she is designated as the first victim of the experiments with poisonous drugs which the queen has been conducting for some time. The queen assures her physician Cornelius, whom she asks for a medicine that will cause a protracted death, "unless thou think'st me devilish, is't not meet that I did amplify my judgement in other conclusions?" (I.v.16-18). It is precisely this denial which makes him realize that she is not only interested in expanding her knowledge. He sees through her evil intentions and gives her a potion that will induce only a fake death.

Innogen, however, thwarts the queen's murder plan by fleeing from her home, hoping to reunite with her husband, who has secretly returned to England. The queen, in turn, unable to poison her disobedient daughter-in-law, is forced to embark on a new ruse to insure that her son be crowned king. While Titania resists Oberon as long as their marital dispute continues, and while Tamora leaves the Roman emperor partially in the dark regarding her revenge plot, the evil queen in *Cymbeline* turns her claim to power directly against her own husband. The absence of her daughter-in-law appears to her as a happy coincidence: "gone she is to death or to dishonor, and my end can make good use of either. She being down, I have the placing of the British crown" (III.v.62-65). The news that the king has burst into a fit of rage over his daughter's escape makes her happy, because as long as he remains in this state, no one dares to go near him. The last words she speaks in the play proclaim the hope that his rage will have fatal consequences for him: "may this night forestall him of the coming day" (III.5.68-69). If he does not survive the night, she, herself, will be allowed to determine the royal succession.

This regime change, however, does not come to fruition. Instead, after the murder of the queen's son finally thwarts her invidious plans, she is compelled to turn her death wish on herself. In the midst of the general reconciliation in the last act, her physician delivers the message regarding her demise, assuring those who have

4 All citations are taken from this edition.

assembled around Cymbeline, "with horror, madly dying, like her life, which, being cruel to the world, concluded most cruel to her self" (V.v.31-34). On the surface, the confession she made before her suicide testifies to her heartless malice. Cornelius continues by assuring the king, "she confessed she never loved you, only affected greatness got by you, not you; married your royalty, was wife to your place, abhorred your person" (V.v.337-40). Thus, to the end, he portrays her as a figure of malignant resistance. He finishes his testimony by noting that she only regretted that the evil she had set in motion could not be carried out. As with any femme fatale, the queen's false flattery and murderous calculation can be read against the grain. Reduced to the role of proxy, one might surmise, she could only participate as a political player by acting through the king. This, however, also means that she never desired the king's natural body, but his second, symbolic one[5]. This shadow rule would have continued, had her son assumed the crown after Cymbeline's death. This raises the point that if, as a woman, she can only satisfy her political ambition at her husband's side, she can only fully realize it over his dead body. The king may reproach himself for having allowed himself to be blinded by her beauty and flattery. This, too, can also be read against the grain. One might claim that within the patriarchal codes of Cymbeline's court, the queen was compelled to play the submissive wife, because she could assert her own desires only with the help of the feminine weapon of deceptive beauty that was available to her.

If we look at these three queens as a series, we can read the portrait Shakespeare offers of the queen in this late tragedy as a counterpart to that of the Amazon queen Hippolyta. For her, marriage to Theseus is tantamount to a renunciation of her sword. The only way she can assert her will as his wife is through her rhetorical mastery. In *Cymbeline*, in turn, it is only after the queen's marriage to the English king that she is able to ignite her fighting spirit. For her use of treachery, she, like Tamora, is vilified by her fellow men after her death. She is declared to be the epitome of feminine evil. While the warrior queen in *Titus Andronicus* is much more obvious in her acts of retalia-

5 I take the distinction between the natural and the symbolic body of the kind from Ernst H. Kantorowicz and his reading of *Richard II* in Kantorowicz 1957.

tion, the clandestine wicked plotting, which the queen in *Cymbeline* is accused of, is also a reflection of the political stage on which she has tried to assert her claim to power. She feigns the enchanting, loving, caring wife while exercising her power insidiously from behind the scene, because she is denied a direct path to the royal rule.

III

Another queen in Shakespeare's oeuvre is worth adding to this series, not because she is wicked, but because it is her obedience and goodness that makes her a figure of female resistance. In the late play *Henry VIII*, Katherine of Aragon is caught in the crossfire of a dispute between Cardinal Wolsey and the common people. In order to eliminate the queen, who threatens to jeopardize his political plans, the Cardinal persuades his sovereign that his marriage to her is not legitimate. Because King Henry has fallen in love with Anne Bollen, he is prepared to annul the marriage. Some of the lords see through the Cardinal's intrigue and call the Queen's fall "a loss of her that like a jewel has hung twenty years about his neck yet never lost her lustre; of her that loves him with that excellence that angels love good men" (*Henry VIII*, II.ii.29-33)[6]. Wolsey, however, initiates a lawsuit against Katherine, which will allow Henry to divorce her.

The court becomes a battlefield on which Katherine uses her rhetorical skills as a weapon to defend herself against the false accusations brought against her. In self-defense, she reminds the king that she has been a faithful and humble wife for twenty years, has always obeyed his will and has never contradicted his wishes. She not only accuses her adversary Wolsey of hiding arrogance beneath his gentle, humble appearance. She also demands the right to decide for herself who may judge the legitimacy of her queenship. To show her opposition to a trial that she feels is unjust, she leaves the hall abruptly, but is called back by the king. He proceeds by praising her meekness, obedience and piety in front of the lords and calls her unique, "the queen of earthy queens" (II.iv.133-38). Nevertheless, King Henry demands proof from the clergyman, who has been sent from Rome to take part in this trial, that his marriage is lawful. For the king, it is not

6 All citations are taken from Shakespeare 2000.

the question of his wife's innocence that is at stake, but the loophole in the law that would justify granting the longed-for divorce.

Even after the interrogation, Katherine defies her adversary and utters an auspicious curse: "take heed, lest at once the burden of my sorrows fall upon ye […] you turn me into nothing. Woe upon ye" (III.i.110-11; 114). She stubbornly refuses to accept the accusations against her, yet she has no choice but to relinquish her status as queen and resign herself to the demeaning title of "Princess Dowager". The divorce declaring her marriage null and void, is tantamount to a symbolic death, which she carries out at her own body at Kimbolton Castle, far away from court. Stripped of all her earthly honors, she turns her gaze to the world beyond. In a nocturnal vision, she sees a multitude of dancing ghostly figures awaiting her in heaven. Enraptured, she awakens and describes to the Roman clergyman, who pays her a final visit, how these angelic figures invited her to a banquet and promised her eternal peace. As a final expression of her resistance, Katherine dictates her obituary from her deathbed. Therein she states that she should not only be buried in accordance with her royal status, but also in accordance with the virtues, which the law in King Henry's court was not prepared to recognize: "Strew me over with maiden flowers, that all the world may know I was a chaste wife to my grave. Embalm me, then lay me forth. Although unqueened, yet like a queen and daughter to a king inter me. I can no more" (IV.ii.167-72). In this choreography of her death as a sublime self-sacrifice, she stages the obedience demanded of her as queen in excess – exposing that the evil Wolsey attributed to her was a mirror of his own machinations. If, in court, she was unable to assert her position, she can determine on her deathbed how she will go down in the annals of cultural memory. She insists that she was a flawless queen and wife, and in so doing insists on her own legitimacy, while exposing the illegitimacy of those who accused her of something else. The actual villain in the piece, who will subsequently loose his power at court, is the cardinal who spearheaded her vilification.

The last scene in the play, in turn, brings the queen into play, who serves as a point of reference for all the female sovereigns in Shakespeare's oeuvre. The Archbishop of Canterbury announces that the newborn Elizabeth will surpass all princely honors and be gloriously admired by her subjects. Elizabeth I had long been known to her sub-

jects as an "Amazon Queen". On August 9, 1588, before the invasion of the Spanish Armada at Tilbury, she gave a speech in which she announced to her troops that she was determined to fight to the death with them and to give both her honor and her blood on the battlefield for her God, her kingdom and her people. She justifies her ability to do so with the famous sentence: "I know I have the body but of a weak and feeble woman, but I have the heart and stomach of a king and of a king of England too" (Felch and Stump 2009, 392)[7].

Shakespeare's history play, which was written after the death of Elizabeth I, presupposes knowledge, on the part of the audience, of how perfectly she had come to control the machinations at her court. She was known for playing favorites off against each other, using spies to monitor her opponents and having rebels and political rivals executed. At the same time, her sexually ambivalent symbolic body gave rise to a cult around the veneration of her queenship. She resolutely staged herself as the "Virgin Queen", unwilling to be married to any earthly man because she could only be married to England. Crucial to the way in which Shakespeare's portrait of Elizabeth I offers a comment on the other portraits of queens we find in his plays, is that, in this late history play, the announcement of her glorious reign is voiced as an obituary. At the end of his speech, the Archbishop states: "She shall be to the happiness of England an aged princess. Many days shall see her, and yet no day without a deed to crown it […] But she must die: She must, the saints must have her. Yet a virgin, a most unspotted lily, shall she pass to th' ground, and all the world shall mourn her" (V.iv.56-62). Though meant as an homage, the reference to the fact that the saints in the afterlife rightly demand her death, renders Elizabeth I as a reflection on the queen, whose death in this history play correlates with her birth. The heavenly scene described in the obituary not only recalls the ecstatic vision that Katherine has on her deathbed. It also continues this scene by casting Elizabeth I as the crowning glory of the successful earthly reign that was denied to her father's first wife.

Looking at the portraits of queens that Shakespeare offers in these plays, what is drawn into focus is the ubiquitous cultural presence of

7 For the ambivalent representation of Elizabeth I, see Berry 1989, as well as Levin 1994.

Elizabeth I as imaginative potential. The dazzling palette ranges from reverence and veneration to defamation and rejection. In *Richard III*, the eponymous hero sums up the unease associated with female rule in a conversation with his brother. Although he wants to blame Edward IV's wife Elizabeth for the fact that Clarence has fallen out of favor with him, he also addresses the pejorative attitude towards the female ruler in general: "thus it is when men are ruled by women" (I.i.62). What Shakespeare's dramas show in ever new variations is how the cultural fears and fantasies that Elizabeth I invoked came to be transferred to dramatic female rulers. If Amazon queens can be conquered on stage and independently minded queens be dethroned, this serves, on the one hand, as a dramatic discharge of the anxiety that the real power of Elizabeth I was able to trigger. On the other hand, from today's perspective, the fate that befalls the queens in these plays also reveals a fundamental compensation for the feeling of vulnerability that male subjects had come to experience in the face of her resolute queenship[8].

Viewed as a series, a complex aesthetic formalization emerges. Female domination is not only presented as a terrifying image, an embodiment of evil, but the fears attached to it are also exposed as strategies of defamation. If the plays serve as a means of coming to terms with these unsettling political ideas, they also lend themselves to a perspective that sheds new light on the way such cultural unease was processed. Indeed, they can all be read as double visions. On the one hand, they serve as portraits of sometimes dutiful, sometimes self-determined women seeking to assert themselves in the public arena, and, on the other, as reflections of both reverential and demonizing fantasies that stubbornly cling to the notion of female rulership.

IV

In addition to these figures of resistance, we find, in Shakespeare's oeuvre, queens who obediently support the wishes of their sovereign. As such, they embody not a counterweight, but rather an extension of the crown. The most prominent of them, Lady Macbeth,

8 I take this discussion of the cultural unease that accompanied the rule of Elizabeth I from Montrose 2006.

offers a particularly disturbing spin on the portrait of a dutiful wife. She stands faithfully by her husband in all his dark machinations, and, in so doing, hopes to realize her own political ambitions. She not only emphatically supports his plan to murder King Duncan, but is also prepared to accept the terrible consequences of this act. After she receives the letter in which Macbeth tells her that three weird sisters have prophesied that he will become king, she proves to be a true "partner of greatness" (*Macbeth*, I.v.11). She asks the dark spirits of the nocturnal deity Hecate, "unsex me here, and fill me from the crown to the toe, top-full of direst cruelty. Make thick my blood, stop up th'access and passage to remorse, that no compunctious visitings of nature shake my fell purpose, nor keep peace between th'effect and it" (I.v.41-47).

Like the queen in *Cymbeline*, she is a femme fatale with two faces. After Duncan arrives at her castle, she presents herself to him as a humble, submissive subject and entertains him festively, while at the same time preparing everything for the regicide that must take place that night. She is fearless and bold from the outset, mocking her husband, who suddenly has doubts about their murder plans. If it is she who does not allow for the possibility that they might fail, it is also she who, after her husband steps out of the death chamber with the bloody daggers, returns there so that the blame falls on the guards. Unlike Macbeth, the sight of the dead instills neither fear nor guilt in her. Rather, she explains to her husband: "my hands are of your color, but I shame to wear a heart so white" (II.ii.65-66). Where Macbeth struggles with his conscience, she is resolute, using her femininity as a weapon to disguise her imperturbability. After Macduff finds the murdered king in his bedchamber the next morning and wakes everyone in the castle, she plays the shaken wife to perfection.

The double face of the femme fatale is crucial to the portrait of this politically ambitious queen. Precisely because she complements Macbeth's ambition with her own, she gives a touch of evil to the idea of the faithful wife who is prepared to submit completely to the king's wishes. At the same time, she stands by her actions because she realizes that she cannot undo them, and this, too, makes her a figure of evil in the political realm. She has no mercy. Instead, her mantra is, "Things without all remedy should be without regard: what's done, is done" (III.ii.12-13). Yet the play does not divide the

dangerous ambition evenly among these partners in greatness. Lady Macbeth has no need for further remorse after the murder of Duncan, because Macbeth does not let her in on Banquo's murder. For this reason, she also does not see the ghost with whom Macbeth speaks during the banquet. Instead, oblivious to his hallucinations, she has to send the guests away because Macbeth keeps telling her in his terrifying speech that he sees blood everywhere. She subsequently tells her husband that he should be ashamed of himself for allowing himself to be so taken in by a false creation of his mind. She recognizes a deceptive reflection of his fear in these hallucinations and reproaches him, "O, these flaws and starts, imposters to true fear, would well become a woman's story at a winter's fire" (III.iv.63).

By comparing the images of horror that Macbeth sees in his mind's eye with a scene in which women tell each other ghost stories by a winter fire, she establishes a link to Queen Isabella in *Richard II*. As this queen takes leave forever from her husband, the deposed king begs her, when she will have returned to France, to relieve her grief regarding his tragic fate with similar tales: "In winter's tedious nights sit by the fire with good old folks, and let them tell thee tales of woeful ages long ago betied" (V.i.40-42). Although Lady Macbeth, unlike her, neither laments nor foresees disaster, she too is not without remorse. However, her anxious gaze is not directed towards an as yet undetermined future. Instead, her unconscious eye is turned towards the past events that occupy her dreams because her conscious mind does not allow her to admit her guilt. In the last scene in which she appears on stage sleepwalking, she tries to wipe the blood from her hands. They bear imaginary traces of all the deaths she is responsible for, even if she did not participate in all of them directly. At the same time, she again seeks to contain the agonizing knowledge that she can only reveal while sleepwalking by replaying not only the murder, but also her forbiddance of remorse. After recalling the names of the victims of her husband and his henchmen, she assures herself once again that "what's done, cannot be undone" (V.i.67-68).

This pathos gesture is poignant in its ambivalence. In a state of somnambulism, Lady Macbeth confesses her crimes and at the same time accepts them. It is a different kind of ethical despair than the lust for destruction in which Macbeth has become entangled. Although she continues to complement her husband in his murderous tyran-

ny, a change has occurred regarding the dynamics of the royal couple. They seem to have swapped roles regarding their conscience. Lady Macbeth is now the one who is haunted by ghostly visions, as Macbeth had been in the previous acts. It is as if she had relieved her husband of the regrets, about whose debilitating effects she had warned. While the king, seized by a mad furor, goes into his last battle without any feeling of remorse, in her somnambulism Lady Macbeth expresses her grief over the destruction of the world that her shared political ambition has caused. In contrast to the queen in *Cymbeline*, she does not commit suicide because she has come to realize that her evil project has failed, but because she has acknowledged her guilt regarding the death of those who have fallen victim to her ambition.

Macbeth hears the screams of the women who find her corpse but is no longer moved by the horror. He has become what she wanted him to be. His compassion has dried up completely. He remarks laconically, "she should have died hereafter" (V.v.17). His point is that she should not have died yet given that there is no time to bury her properly before the battle that is about to begin. Yet what he also articulates is that her suicide – like her appeal to the dark spirits of the nocturnal goddess Hecate – is an act committed outside of ordinary time. The fatal consequences of a wife's fidelity belong to a different temporality than that of the everyday.

V

By turning to *King Lear*, we can shift our gaze from rebellious or obedient wives to ambitious daughters, who are also deemed evil owing to their resolute political self-assertion. In the opening scene, Lear wants to divide his country into three kingdoms. The daughter who proves to him with her words that she loves him the most is to receive the largest part. He thus blurs the line between a private declaration of love and a public oath of allegiance. Goneril and Regan, the two older daughters, may appear hypocritical because they are prepared to flatter their father unconditionally. However, their clichéd answers also meet the requirements of a court ceremony, during which the abdication has already been decided. In contrast, Cordelia's disobedience is shown by her refusal to enter into this empty ritual. Her intimate feelings as a daughter are more important than the words that may be

spoken on such a public occasion. The answer she gives – "Nothing, my lord" (*King Lear* I.i.87) – is her way of remaining silent about what she does not want to say in this particular time and place. She turns Lear's demand for undivided love into a statement about what he should expect from her not as a daughter but as a future queen: "I love your majesty according to my bond, no more nor less" (I.i.93).

Like her sisters, she also speaks in the language of public appearance, but instead of flattering her father, she focuses her attention on another symbolic obligation; namely the love, care and duty that she will owe to her future husband. She sees this as a loyal and virtuous way of telling the truth. The king, however, says, "better thou hadst not been born than not to have pleased me better" (I.i.235-36). He is not concerned with his daughters' true feelings, but with assuring them that he will retain paternal power despite abdicating his throne. In anger, he withdraws his love from Cordelia, whom he initially took to be his supreme joy, now calls her his "sometime daughter" (I.i.120), and gives her to the King of France as his wife without a dowry.

While speaking to their father, the two older sisters agree to Cordelia's banishment. Behind his back, however, they conspire against him because they see a threat to their own future reign reflected in the younger sister's courageous response. They have long since realized that their father's rash actions are evidence of poor judgement and choleric behaviour. They rightly fear that he will continue to exercise his authority after his abdication. Lear may no longer want to rule over his kingdom, but, by demanding to retain his entire entourage while staying first with the one daughter and then with the other, he continues to seek to rule over them as their father. He wants to force them to fulfill their daughterly obligation to him as well as to succeed him in ruling his realm. They, however, want to be queens alone, and no longer dutiful daughters. While Goneril had uttered the platitudes the king wanted to hear in public, in private she calls her father an "idle old man, that still would manage those authorities that he hath given away" (I.iii.17-19).

Again, we are confronted with a double portrait. Either we see Goneril as a headstrong daughter who wants to unnecessarily restrict her old father's power, and, in this, could be called evil. Or we see her as a queen who is justified in being concerned about the rioting of her father's entourage because she has to ensure order and

the observance of rules in her kingdom. Lear's rowdy knights and squires not only disturb the general peace. They also create chaotic conditions in Goneril's castle, undermining her rule because they are only prepared to accept her father's orders. She cannot accept the leniency her husband Albany pleads for. To prove her power as queen, she finds herself compelled to order Lear to reduce his followers befitting his new status.

Furious, Lear goes to the castle of his second daughter with his boisterous entourage and, here too, he insists on his paternal supremacy. However, warned by Goneril, Regan also does not give in to his demands. Instead, she replays the opening scene in a new key. Rather than fulfilling Lear's wishes unconditionally, Regan shows the former king what it means to hand over the symbolic body to his daughter. Now it is time to comply fully with her will. She decides that he doesn't need a retinue at all and resolutely explains to him, "how in one house should many people, under two commands, hold amity? 'Tis hard, almost impossible" (II.ii.429-30). Goneril, who has joined her sister, emphatically agrees. Because neither of them wants to share their rule with their old father, they forbid him to bring a single knight with him if he wants to sojourn in their castles. Because Lear stubbornly insists on his paternal rights, Regan sends him out into the night storm and has the gates locked behind him and his men. She no longer treats him like a king, but like an intransigent father. While to some, this act is a sign of utmost cruelty, Regan sees her action as a lesson she must teach: "to wilful men the injuries that they themselves procure must be their schoolmasters" (492-94).

As with the other queens who use violence to defend their position of power, a double portrait emerges of the two sisters. The fact that they send their old father into a storm makes them appear vicious, heartless and without mercy. They can be seen as villains because they insist on their authority instead of submitting to the father who handed his power over to them. Yet as female sovereigns, they are justified in fully accepting the symbolic role bestowed upon them instead of tolerating a shadow king at their side. The violence with which they take action against the courtiers who continue to stand by Lear may seem terrible, but it can also be seen as a justifiable reaction to the fact that their father's men are not willing to recognize their po-

sition as the new rulers. What would be considered just punishment for treason in the hands of a king becomes inappropriate cruelty in the hands of these two queens.

After Cordelia returns from France with her army and, in the role of a righteous warrior, fights for her father, the defamation of her sisters takes another turn. The force with which the two fight back can be read as a warning against sovereigns who do not possess the feminine virtue of leniency expected of them. Goneril's husband, who changes sides, gives voice to this misogyny. Because she is ruthless in the realization of her goals, he calls Goneril a she-devil and proclaims, "proper deformity shows not in the fiend so horrid as in woman" (IV.ii.61). She is perceived by him as demonically wicked because her feminine appearance, with which she was able to skillfully present the obedience demanded of her in the opening scene, no longer conceals her true political ambition. Because Albany cannot reconcile these two sides, he dehumanizes his wife and proclaims, "thou are a fiend, a woman's shape doth shield thee" (IV.ii.67-68).

The double portrait that Shakespeare offers of Goneril draws attention to a further conundrum. The violence she unleashes must be seen in the context of a war, in which she has to defend her kingdom against an invading army, even if her military actions seem excessive and heartless. Cordelia, after all, intervenes in the family dispute as a warrior queen in her own right. Tragic irony, furthermore, relates the battle that leads to the destruction of this royal family's dynasty back to the beginning of the play. Once again, the youngest sister brings to light why Lear's demand for unrestricted love pits the queen against the daughter. Cordelia has not come to reclaim land, but to help a mentally disturbed father in his distress. The tears she weeps over his neglected state show him the love that she did not want to put into words in the opening scene. On the battlefield, however, her tears do not give voice to a blind obedience to a stubborn king, but rather suggest concern for the well-being of her mentally disturbed father. Whereas, in the first scene of the play, she remained upright while her two sisters accompanied their hollow speech with a genuflection, it is now she who kneels before him and asks for his blessing.

The reconciliation that takes place after the two have been captured also recreates the opening scene. Lear abdicates again. He does not want to continue fighting. Cordelia thinks they should talk to Go-

neril and Regan, but he resolutely rejects this option[9]. Instead, he withdraws completely into the fantasy that he could spend time in prison, intimately conjoined with his favorite daughter far away from the court and mock the political machinations of his other two daughters. His wish is as self-centered as it is poignant. It makes clear once again that for Lear, renouncing the crown goes hand in hand with complete domination of his daughter. Again, Cordelia is at a loss for words. She leaves the stage in silence. Soon afterwards, she is murdered by one of her sister's henchmen, then Goneril kills herself after having poisoned Regan. The corpses of the three warrior queens bear witness to what was foreshadowed in the first act. Lear ensures that none of his daughters will succeed him. However, the three corpses also bear witness to the cultural threat posed by the idea of a queen who sits on the throne not as an obedient wife but as a self-determined daughter.

VI

One last queen is worth adding to the series of portraits discussed so far, because only her husband, blinded by his jealousy, declares her to be evil, while everyone else at court recognizes this act of defamation as a reflection of the obscene kernel at the heart of his sovereignty. In *The Winter's Tale*, the double vision we get of Hermione shows evil to be unequivocally in the eye of the beholder. In that she combines obedience with self-confidence, she anticipates Katherine of Aragon in *Henry VIII*, the history play Shakespeare will compose one year later. That fact that she, however, survives her ordeal brings up a seminal question: What does it take for a queen to be rehabilitated from false accusations of wickedness? After Leontes has accused his wife of adultery, she also insists on pointing out that she never did anything but perform her duty to him and thus renders visible the king's fickleness. At his behest, she had persuaded Polixenes to postpone his departure. However, the eloquence with which she has succeeded in doing so inflames her husband's jealousy. Leontes starts to

9 In his essay "Avoidance of Love. A reading of *King Lear*", in *Disowning Knowledge in Seven Plays of Shakespeare*, Stanley Cavell draws attention to the repetition compulsion at work in this tragedy, given that in this parting scene King Lear once more abdicates, as he did in the first act, while Cordelia once more has nothing to say to his demand (Cavell 2003).

imagine that the child she is pregnant with was not conceived by him but by his childhood friend. Her maternity has, however, become the target of his suspicion in another sense as well. The intimate alliance that Hermione maintains with her son Mamillius also triggers his blind jealousy. Although she notices that Leontes reacts with anger at the news that Polixenes is prepared to stay longer, she does not confront her husband. Instead, she retreats to a private chamber with her son, where not the king's authority but her motherly devotion rules. There she asks Mamillius to tell her a story and he offers her a sad one: "a sad tale's best for winter. I have one of sprites and goblins" (*The Winter's Tale* II.i.25-26)[10]. He only wants to tell her the gothic tale about a man who lives next to a cemetery in confidence, so she asks him "come on then, and give't me in mine ear" (II.i.32).

The winter's tale is a secret, which only the two of them share. Leontes, who appears unexpectedly in his wife's chamber, not only disturbs this intimacy. He also has this scene in view at the very moment that a lord tells him about Polixenes' flight from the court. The fact that he cannot hear what Mamillius is whispering in his mother's ear serves to drive Leontes's jealousy to extremes. Completely convinced that his suspicions about Hermione are justified, he demands the boy from her: "Give me the boy. I am glad you did not nurse him. Though he does bear some signs of me, yet you have too much blood in him" (II.i.56-59). Words and blood take on a similar meaning. Leontes fears that Hermione's influence is more powerful than his; just as the intimate scene of storytelling has excluded him. He tells his lords that the queen must be separated from his son because she has betrayed him with Polixenes.

Like Katherine in *Henry VIII*, Hermione also has to stand a public trial. However, for Leontes, at stake isn't the legitimacy of the marriage, which would justify a divorce. Rather, he declares the adultery of which he accuses her to be an act of treason and demands the death penalty, even though his entire court assures him that his queen is unequivocally without blemish. Hermione, like Katherine, resists the accusation of disloyalty and insists, "my past life hath been as continent, as chaste, as true as I am now unhappy" (III.ii.32-34). Her reproach exhibits a similar rhetorical skill. If she had not shown Polixenes the affection Leontes demanded of her, this would have signified ungrate-

10 All citations are taken from Shakespeare 2010.

fulness to their guest and disobedience to her husband. She tries in vain to make him realize that she has become the screen of his deluded fantasy, which has nothing to do with her as a woman of flesh and blood: "my life stands in the level of your dreams" (III.ii.79). In so doing, Hermione courageously dismantles his royal authority. She explains to him that a judgment based on suspicion and jealousy is not justice, but rather an expression of tyranny. With her plea, she defends the law, on which the court in Sicily is based, against the king's arbitrary judgement. Evil is entirely on his side of the legal debate.

Hermione ultimately falls silent, not, however, because Leontes insists on doubting the oracle, even though it has taken her side by calling her chaste. Rather, she faints the moment she receives the news that her son, Mamillius, has died out of grief. If it was her rhetorical eloquence that aroused Leontes' jealousy, she is now completely at a loss for words and is declared dead by her loyal lady-in-waiting Paulina: "this news is mortal to the queen. Look down and see what death is doing' (III.ii.145-46). Hermione's silence can, thus, be seen to echo Cordelia's silence in the face of her father's blinded request that he be locked up alone with her in prison so that they can share "old tales" with each other. Lear's delusion can also be read as a mirror inversion of the scene in which Mamillius whispers a gothic story into his mother's ear. In the late romance, however, the wintry ghost story turns out to be prophetic. As if Mamillius had unwittingly foreseen both his own fate and that of his father, he becomes the character who is buried in the cemetery. Leontes, in turn, is given the role of the mourner who lingers nearby. Suddenly awakened from his delusion, he ruefully visits the gravesite of his wife and son on a daily basis.

Unlike the other queens, Hermione, however, is neither deposed nor banished. Nor does she die after securing her obituary. The symbolic death she undergoes can be reversed because she has a loyal companion who takes on an active role in how she is to be remembered. The decisive variation that Shakespeare introduces into the series of female sovereigns with this portrait concerns the period of latency that Hermione spends away from the court, as though in hibernation. In Paulina's house Hermione waits patiently for the return of her daughter, who was repudiated by Leontes immediately after her birth. He had claimed, "This brat is none of mine. It is the issue of Polixenes" (II.iii.91-92) and wanted her to be left to die in the fields beyond the court.

It is noteworthy that Hermione returns from the realm of death as the mother of the future queen of Sicily, whom her father had initially repudiated. The first words she speaks after Paulina has brought her statue back to life in front of the assembled court are not addressed to her husband, but to the divine power on whose justice she relied throughout the trial: "you gods, look down, and from your sacred vials pour your graces upon my daughter's head" (V.iii.121-23). She then asks Perdita to tell her where she has lived all these years and how she found her way back to her father's court. The story she wants her daughter to tell her is not a ghost story whispered in confidence, but a public account, even though Perdita will only give her report after the curtain has fallen. The last words Hermione speaks in the play are also addressed to her. She promises to tell her daughter more about how she has spent the time of their separation, "knowing by Paulina that the oracle gave hope thou wast in being, have preserved myself to see the issue" (V.iii.125-28).

The silence that follows upon this announcement is a notable exception in the series of queens discussed. Hermione needs no further words to convey her unconditional love for her daughter. She has said everything she wants to say at this point. We are left with the sense that all the evil Leontes had projected onto her was not only his self-delusion, but also debunked as a collective fantasy regarding queenship. Whether this double vision of the queen has been completely dissolved once the statue becomes a woman again, remains open to interpretation. The evil suspicion Leontes was so suddenly overwhelmed with could well erupt again. As this serial presentation of queenship in his plays illustrates, it is part and parcel of the patriarchal political culture Shakespeare's plays both reflect and comment on.

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