Female Agency in Shakespeare’s Tragic Comedies

The three leading women of Shakespeare’s problem comedies enter their respective plays with virtually no authority over their own lives. This is not to say that men have unlimited control, as the men must answer to higher authority, the restrictions of their state in a time of war, the general public’s opinion, class boundaries, and the primal urge to be the greatest in numerous metaphorical phallus-measuring contests. These restrictions placed on the male characters are the precise reasons why the women are without agency altogether: the men feel as though they do not have enough power due to their restrictions, and so they exert whatever authority they have on whomever they can—either those below them on the chain of command or women, who have little to no authority. In order to have any control over their lives, the women in the problem plays resort to questionable tactics: even though Cressida shares feelings for Troilus, she refuses to give into him immediately in order to protect her only source of agency; Helena bypasses the socio-economic boundaries in order to get the man she (incomprehensibly) desires and secures her love with a bed-switch; and Isabella, faced with the powerful dilemma of self-preservation versus love for kin, finds a way to do both, though in a way that goes against her own virtues. The problems in the problem comedies do stem from the decisions the women make as an answer to a lack of agency, but these decisions are unavoidable if the women should have any say in the events of their own lives, and are therefore forgivable trespasses.

Of the three leading women in the problem comedies, Cressida is the one with the least control over her life. Her father has deserted the Trojan army to join the Greeks, and her only other relative, her uncle Pandarus, attempts to “sell” her to Troilus in order to move up the social ladder. Cressida realizes and even acknowledges this fact, calling her uncle a “bawd” when he leaves to get a token from Troilus for her (259). After he leaves, she reveals the true nature of her situation, and puts the terms of her dilemma into perspective:

Words, vows, gifts, tears, and love’s full sacrifice  
 He offers in another’s enterprise;  
 But more in Troilus thousandfold I see  
 Than in the glass of Pandar’s praise may be…  
 …she beloved knows naught that knows not this:  
 Men price the thing ungained more than it is. (260-267)

The sole possession that grants Cressida any authority is her virginity. To give into Troilus immediately is to give up all agency, for she believes that once he has gotten what he wants from her, he will no longer see any value in her, and if her virginity is gone and she should lose Troilus then she would truly have nothing. On the other end of this dilemma is the fact that the worth of her virginity will only fade with time as she becomes less and less desirable due to aging. It is the ultimate Catch-22: if Cressida loses her virginity, even on her own terms, she gives up any chance of maintaining agency, but if she retains her virginity, she will only have power until her youth fades.

When Cressida decides that she will sleep with Troilus, she makes the decision to get as much out of her situation as possible. Unfortunately for the new lovers, Cressida is swiftly forced to reunite with her father in the Greek camp, where she quickly falls for her escort, Diomedes. Unlike when she pledges herself to Troilus, her relationship with Diomedes seems to lack any motive. Here a question must be asked: is Cressida simply lustful? Is her initial refusal of Troilus simply a game or a way for her to extend the attention he has given her? She is quick to forget Troilus and fall in love with another man, while Troilus simply sees red and lusts for revenge, the jealous rage associated with someone truly in love. When Cressida made the decision to give up her agency it was the only true possibility for her, but now it seems as though it was for nothing, as Diomedes surely would have heard that she has slept with Troilus, but he does not seem to regard the fact as important. Of course, since Cressida’s motives for loving Diomedes are not made clear, it cannot be said whether or not she made a conscious decision to love him or whether she had any regard for her agency. All that can be made clear is that had she refused Troilus’ advances, he would not have been in a state of blind fury at the end of the play, and she would not have given up her only source of agency.

Isabella is much like Cressida in that her worth lies in her virginity, the difference being that Isabella wishes to preserve her virginity indefinitely. By joining a nunnery, she will remove herself from the temptations of the outside world, where, as a virgin, she would be seen as an untapped source of pleasure for the lascivious men of the city. Before she can do so, however, she is presented with a difficult decision by Angelo: either preserve her virginity and let her brother die, or give up her virginity, her own “life,” and save her brother’s life. She eventually devises a plan (or rather, the disguised duke gives her the idea) to use Mariana in a bed-switch, and later to expose Angelo as an adulterer. Later in the play, we see that the plan fails anyway, as Angelo refuses to release Claudio for fear of revenge.

The problem with Isabella’s decision is the fact that she uses sex as an answer to her dilemma. While her solution may contain deceit with a positive overall outcome (Angelo did betray Mariana’s love, after all), she still goes against the virtues that she holds most dear. She is more than willing to allow Mariana to take her place in the bed if it means that she is able to retain her virginity. The end of the play complicates matters even further, as the duke proclaims that he will marry Isabella, yet Isabella is not allowed a response. This is perhaps suggesting that Isabella does not truly retain agency after all, and that she will still submit to the higher authority of the duke. Her life still seems to be directed without her own input, despite her efforts to maintain control.

Helena’s modes to secure agency are perhaps the most perplexing of the three women. For her, virginity plays the opposite role that it does for Cressida and Isabella, holding her back from actually achieving agency. After curing the duke and being granted Bertram as her prize, he flees the city, telling Helena that he will not accept the marriage as legitimate if she is not able to bear his child. Since he is absent, however, this cannot possibly come to be. She is the only one of the three women who is eager from the very beginning to lose her virginity but she finds herself unable to get what she desires. This lends to the idea that men have the drive to maintain power over women: Helena is throwing herself at Bertram, and even though the duke promises to raise her rank before the marriage is finalized, Bertram still resists her.

Later in the play, Helena devises a bed trick with the opposite intentions that Isabella had. She plans to switch herself with Diana in order to be impregnated by Bertram, and later exposes this fact to Bertram, who has no choice but to accept her as a wife. The entire affair raises issues with Helena’s ultimate authority. Why does she want a husband who does not return her love and who will likely desert her again in the future? Why does she not value her virginity as highly as Cressida or Isabella? The answer to both of these questions seems to be that she has discovered the only plausible answer to “the female question.” As the woman of the three who has the greatest agency at the end of the play, she proves that the withholding of virginity is not key to securing power, nor is wasting virginity on a man who will not provide some sort of benefit in exchange. Cressida wastes her virginity on Troilus, who has not promised marriage, while Isabella retains her virginity until her power is stripped from her—Helena, on the other hand, uses her virginity to secure a man of high rank, which raises her social status and secures her financially.

The true problem of the problem plays is that they do not offer a true solution to the question of agency versus satisfaction. While it is true that Helena does eventually have her way, it is doubtful that the relationship will see the two living happily ever after. The other two women have lost all sense of power but seem better off for it, as Cressida has Diomedes and Isabella has the duke, both of whom give the reader no reason to doubt that the relationship will work. Power without happiness is surely not the solution that the women search for, nor is utter submission to higher power with a more positive outcome. All three of these plays suggest endings in which the loose ends have been tied and the characters are ready to live lives full of love, but given the circumstances of how these loves came to be and the roles the women characters had in determining the outcomes, the endings are not easily acceptable. In reality, the plays are likely meant to challenge the notion that there is a singular answer to the woman’s struggle for agency .