THE PRODUCTIVITY OF WOMEN’S ANGER IN SHAKESPEARE’S TRAGEDIES

A Thesis Presented

By

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ABSTRACT OF THESIS

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In Shakespeare’s tragedies, women’s anger is either presented as unreasonable and dangerous. Women’s anger is also read as something else instead—such as madness or lamentation. Is it possible, however, to understand a woman’s breaking point as a breaking point—as a feminist snap? In this thesis, I use Sara Ahmed’s “Feminist Snap” as a framework to understand how women’s anger is misrepresented and ignored. According to Ahmed, when women can no longer take the consistent dismissal of their emotions and identities, they snap. Ahmed acknowledges that the snap is a type of crisis, but she also argues that the snap can be triumphant and productive. I pinpoint the breaking points of Ophelia, Lady Macbeth, Tamora and Lavinia and how the feminist snap can be used to discuss their anger. Before delving into specific Shakespearean tragedies, I unpack the ways in which early modernists understood a woman’s breaking point. Through early modern notions of bodies and emotions, I trace how the concept of a woman was viewed as transgressive and how the early modern patriarchy policed and regulated women. The cultural policing and regulation of women bleeds into literature; the patriarchal structures in *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, and *Titus Andronicus* impede Ophelia, Lady Macbeth, Tamora, and Lavinia from expressing anger outright. In each play, the feminist snap becomes something different. In *Hamlet*, Ophelia’s snap is her madness—she is momentarily free from patriarchal standards. In *Macbeth*, Lady Macbeth snaps for political power and to fuel her bloodlust. In *Titus Andronicus*, Tamora seeks revenge and the snap becomes tool for violence and Lavinia inherits the violence of Tamora’s snap. In each Shakespearean tragedy, the women complicate notions of the feminist snap and while their anger is momentary, women’s anger in these Shakespearean texts threaten patriarchal standards and challenge ideas of productivity.
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Introduction: Punishing Early Modern Women’s Anger

The early modern idea of women’s anger was that women were believed to be more susceptible to anger than men. The idea of an easily angered woman splintered into the idea that a woman’s anger was more volatile and unstable than men’s anger. The early modern patriarchy utilized this idea of women’s anger as a justification of male control over women. From a male-dominated literary perspective, the figure of the raging, hysterical female is neither an unexplored nor ignored literary figure. One could perhaps argue that women’s anger is only made visible when anger is presented in its extreme forms: rage, fury, and wrath. In Shakespeare’s tragedies, the anger of his female characters is controlled and policed by the patriarchal society in which each text is set. Whether the reader is situated in fictionalized versions of Denmark, Scotland, or ancient Rome, the women in each text respond to the power structures—that are built to disenfranchise women—with anger. Anger, however, is not an emotion that women are allowed to express. Therefore, anger creates fractures, fissures, and fault lines within the character arcs of each of these women; these women all reach their breaking points. To discuss a breaking point, I echo Sara Ahmed’s idea of the feminist snap and how a woman will inevitably snap when she is consistently pushed to her limits. While Shakespeare's tragedies ultimately end with the deaths of these women, women’s anger, specifically, threatens the potential collapse of the authority of the patriarchy and the binary identities that uphold male power.

In my thesis, I privilege *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, and *Titus Andronicus* and the women that I focus on are, respectively, Ophelia, Lady Macbeth, Tamora, and Lavinia. In this thesis, I examine the ways in which the aforementioned women are pushed to their breaking points, the ways in which they perform anger, and how anger fractures their readabilities. I discuss *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, and *Titus Andronicus* in this specific order because I think that understanding and
pointing out the feminist snap gets more complicated with each character I analyze. Even though I am approaching this project with a feminist perspective, I do not have the desire to label Shakespeare as a feminist writer or thinker. What I think is critical about Shakespeare is that he created women whose anger, or alternative forms of anger, creates staged moments that are tense, vibrant, and haunting. What I do want to do in this project is to extract women’s anger from the misogynist conversation that views women’s anger as unreasonable and unproductive. The gendering of anger posits women’s anger as unstable and incoherent, while male anger is productive—which is the key difference between male and female anger. Men are allowed to take action, to get revenge. Taking initiative and taking action are perceived signs of strength. Men are also given public platforms. Men are allowed to be publicly angry. Men can start wars. Women are expected to lament and mourn. While there is a certain productivity to lamenting, which I will explore later with Ophelia’s complicated grief for Polonius, the act of lamenting itself falls in line with the patriarchy’s ideal of the passive woman. Lamenting, instead, is a call to action for men to enact revenge for their grieving women.¹ Since forms of male anger are allowed to publicly take up space, I aim to argue that women either have to masquerade their anger so as not to seem villainous or the women redefine themselves as either unsexed or inhuman to, momentarily, claim political power or seek vengeance. Regardless of the timing of the characters’ anger, their anger signals a breaking point.

In the Shakespearean plays that I analyze, all of the women reach a breaking point. The timing of the breaking point is malleable; characters reach their breaking point immediately or the audience is privy to the progression towards a breaking point. In “Feminist Snap,” Ahmed explains how a pressure placed on a woman’s body and emotions pushes a woman to snap.

¹ See Lesel Dawson and Fiona McHardy’s *Revenge and Gender in Classical, Medieval, and Renaissance Literature* (2018).
Ahmed claims, “If pressure is an action, snap is a reaction.”\(^2\) To cope with the pressure that is continuously added to her, a woman has to strengthen her resilience to the pressure. Once the pressure degrades a woman’s resilience, this leads to her breaking point. A woman snaps when the pressure done to her body becomes, simply, too much. She was asked to be too resilient. Ahmed asks, “When you don’t take it, when you can’t take any more of it, what happens? The moment of not taking it is so often understood as losing it. When a snap is registered as the origin of violence, the one who snaps is deemed violent.”\(^3\) While Ahmed does not want to read women as violent, one is unable to read certain characters—such as Lady Macbeth and Tamora—as anything but violent. Regardless, it is useful to analyze Lady Macbeth and Tamora through Ahmed’s idea of the feminist snap.

The feminist critics and writers that I cite and will cite in my thesis see productivity and value in women’s anger. In *Good and Mad: The Revolutionary Power of Women’s Anger*, Rebecca Traister sees women’s anger at the core of political and social progress in the United States. Ahmed sees her own anger as a way of finding happiness, tracing the feminist roots in her family, and as empowerment for other marginalized women. Utilizing the contemporary feminist ideology that “the personal is political,” Ahmed and Traister use anger to understand what it means to be a woman and to use it as personal and political fuel to shape their identities and stories. Gwynne Kennedy writes on how early modern women writers responded in anger to their male-enforced inferiority. Traister, Ahmed, and Kennedy all interrogate how women’s anger has been misunderstood and how that misunderstood anger can be recuperated.

How a character’s identity is fleshed out is contingent upon how she performs her anger. The surface-level identity of women throughout these plays dictates that the women occupy


\(^3\) Ibid., 189.
either end of the virgin-whore binary. All of the women in these texts appropriate rage, in that the women seize control of an emotion culturally denied to them, and use their anger to take action in their respective plays. Ophelia uses her anger as freedom; she lets loose all of the words that she never got to say. Lady Macbeth demonizes her role as a maternal figure in order to take part in violence and political conspiracy. In Titus Andronicus, women’s anger is intrinsically tied to revenge. Tamora wants revenge for her murdered first-born and Lavinia’s snap becomes a part of a collective Andronici snap. The rage of Shakespeare’s tragic women are signals of a threat to their respective patriarchies and momentarily, but significantly, disrupt their normative female identities. What is complicated about female rage, is that it is an emotion that is not overt—especially when performed by characters that are deemed as holy and virginal, such as Ophelia and Lavinia.

In this project, I want to examine the tension of collapsing binaries. I’d like for us to dwell on the tense in-between of silence and hysteria, revenge and lamentation, the virgin and the whore, and the seeable and the hidden. Shakespeare’s tragedies are fixated on what happens when binaries are threatened because fragile binaries signal the dismantling of power structures. Women are, particularly, implicated because their roles as mothers and caregivers ensure that a legacy continues. Therefore, a woman who operates in a way that induces patriarchal anxiety of any kind is a threat. Each of the women that I analyze are a threat in their own way—whether it is immediately or something that grows along with the plot.

One way that a threat is legitimized is if the threat incites fear. In other words, men view an angry woman as a threat. Male fear of disobedient, raucous women also contains anxiety. Mark Breitenberg’s Anxious Masculinity in Early Modern England argues that in the concept of masculinity is an inherent anxiety. Breitenberg argues that the early modern patriarchal culture which consists of “individuals whose identities are formed by the assumption of their own
privilege must also have incorporated varying degrees of anxiety about the preservation or
potential loss of that privilege.”⁴ In other words, having to justify their status by assuming a
woman’s natural inferiority puts men in a precarious position of power. Men keep and justify
their power through myriad ways.

A question that arises is how did the anger of an early modern woman become something
so reviled? One possibility is that the early modern understanding of a woman’s nature was as
something imperfect. Early modern scientific discourse establishes a woman’s inferiority as, not
only a part of a cultural understanding, but also something inherently imbedded within a woman.
Thus, these scholarly fields—that are keen on truth, discovery, and observation—accept a
woman’s inferiority to a man as a natural truth.⁵ In a 1634 translated version of Ambroise Paré’s
Of Prodigies and Monsters, Paré’s reports his findings on people who identify as men and were
born female. While Paré acknowledges the existence of trans men, trans women are, Paré argues,
impossible.⁶ In regards to the potential of a trans women, he states that “you shall finde, in no
historie men, that have degenerated into women; for nature alwaies intend’s and goe’s from the
imperfect to the more perfect, but not basely from the more perfect to the imperfect.”⁷ Paré
thinks that, fundamentally, men are perfect and women are imperfect. What is useful about
Paré’s observation is that the idea of women as naturally imperfect continues to emerge

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⁴ Mark Breitenberg, Anxious Masculinity in Early Modern England (Cambridge: Cambridge
⁵ Early modern scientific discourse predates the scientific method, however, early modern
thinkers influence the Scientific Revolution that is to come. See Abraham Wolf’s A History of
Science, Technology, and Philosophy in the 16th and 17th Centuries (1935).
⁶ While Paré would have used the term “hermaphrodite” in his work, I substitute
“hermaphrodite” with “transgender” since the former is rarely used in a contemporary context.
⁷ Ambroise Paré, “Of Prodigies and Monsters,” in The workes of that famous chirugion Ambrose
Parey translated out of Latine and compared with the French, (London: Printed by Th. Cotes,
throughout the early modern era. Not only is the physical body of a woman considered to be imperfect, a woman’s emotions are sought to be controlled as well.

Humoral theory also established the inherent imperfections of a woman’s emotions. Lisa Perfetti explains that the early modern discourse on humoral theory believed:

that that the female body was colder and moister than the male body. This inferior heat in women, which was used to explain many female ‘imperfections,’ tended to produce the notion that women were more emotionally volatile than men, whose hot and dry constitution kept them more stable.8

While aligned with Perfetti’s description, Gwynne Kennedy’s description of early modern emotions explicitly defines an emotional, volatile woman as angry. Kennedy argues that early modern “women are believed to get angry more often and more easily than men because of their physiological, intellectual, and moral inferiority to men. A women’s anger is a sign of weakness that confirms her innate inferiority and her need to submit to male authority.”9 In conjunction with the binary of perfect and imperfect, there is now a binary of stable and volatile—with, respectively, men as the former and women as the latter. The natural imperfection of women also stipulates that women are more likely to exhibit certain emotions that are frowned upon. Thus, emotions are separated and categorized into masculine and feminine spheres. I believe that it is crucial that we examine the subjugation of women’s bodies, and subsequently their emotions, through an early modern scientific perspective because the concept of male superiority defined women’s inferiority to men as a natural truth. While Paré’s observations on sex changes and humoral theory are not the sole examples of early modern women’s oppression, Paré and humoral

theory establish that a woman is naturally inclined to experience emotions that are more volatile and unstable because of the natural imperfections of her physical body. The scientific discourse on women suggests that women are, naturally, moments away from their breaking point.

How did early modernists view a woman’s breaking point? In 1603 Edward Jorden published *A briefe discourse of a disease called the suffocation of the mother*. Understood as the first English book on hysteria, Jorden’s treatise claims that, perhaps, a woman’s unruly behavior is neither indicative of witchcraft nor demonic possession, but hysteria. The first sentence of Jorden’s book reads, “The paſsiue condition of womankind is ſubject vnto more diſeaſes and of other fortes and natures then men are: and eſpecially in regarde of that part from whence this diſeaſe which we ſpeake of doth arife.” Here is how Jorden reached that conclusion: the womb, which Jorden also calls the “mother,” is positioned as an organ that, somehow, has control over the rest of the body and the woman herself. Joanna Levin argues that the signs of supernatural possession are now “relocated within the female body, especially within her sexual and reproductive functions.” The womb itself is made to be supernatural. The woman is no longer read as a witch, but as a hysteric. Jorden’s text is critical because he signals a gradual paradigm shift towards trying to medicalize female deviance. By attempting to de-

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10 Jorden’s text was inspired by a 1602 legal case in which Mary Glover, a teenage girl, accuses Elizabeth Jackson, a older woman, of witchcraft. Michael MacDonald cites Stephen Bradwell, an early modern physician who apparently had the most objective account of the court proceedings. According to Michael MacDonald’s historical account of the case, Glover accused Jackson and her daughter of fraud. Furious by the accusation, Jackson curses Glover. Suddenly, this incident becomes a case of a woman’s anger. Glover claims that it is witchcraft while Jorden claims it as hysteria. Jackson’s anger becomes open for interpretation. Jorden claims that Glover was not a victim of Jackson’s supposed witchcraft, nor does he claim that Jackson had a legitimate right to be angry. Instead, in a court of law, Jorden argues that Glover was a victim of a disease inherent to women: hysteria.

11 Edward Jorden, *A briefe discourse of a disease called the suffocation of the mother Written vpon occasion which hath beene of late taken thereby, to suspect possesion of an euill spirit, or some such like supernaturall power*, (London: Printed by J. Windet, 1603), A1r.

legitimize supernatural possession, Jorden transforms the female witch into a hysteric. While Jorden attempts to placate male fears of the female witch by deeming her hysterical instead, the fear of the female witch nevertheless persisted. Levin argues that the gradual move from the female witch to the female hysteric “benefits patriarchy rather than women” because “new ideologies ensured that more and more would subscribe to patriarchal expectations.”\(^\text{13}\) Levin continues her argument by citing Marianne Hester who notes that trying to “end...witch hunts” led to “new, and more effective, means of controlling women by men” and Dympna Callaghan who argues that the female hysteric was no longer a “disturbing threat to phallic power.”\(^\text{14}\) The hysteric, while not as fearful as the witch, was not a symbol of a “patriarchal feminine ideal” in that she did not meet the “demands of ‘chastity, silence, and obedience.’”\(^\text{15}\) In returning to my original question of how breaking points were understood, the breaking point seems to have been misinterpreted as something that would be naturally induced by the womb. A body that is simultaneously passive, unruly, and hysterical seems to always be experiencing some kind of breaking point—a woman’s body constantly exists in contradictions. These contradictory patriarchal ideologies lead to a definition of a woman that is inherently fractured. She is somehow both passive and unruly. Male authorities re-work their definition of “female” so that the concept of woman itself is still confined within masculine ideas and desires. Male desires of chastity, silence, and obedience exemplify the fact that the patriarchy wants invisible women. Women who are not invisible are punished by, ironically, being made visible.

\(^\text{13}\) Levin, “Daemonologies,” 24.  
\(^\text{14}\) Ibid., 25.  
\(^\text{15}\) Ibid., 24.
In 1655, Ralph Gardiner published a pamphlet that depicts a man walking a woman with a scold’s bridle.\textsuperscript{16} At first glance of the pamphlet, a contemporary viewer with, perhaps, little to no knowledge of the bridle may not realize that it was intended as punishment.\textsuperscript{17} An examination of the woman’s facial features and her posture does not reveal that she is going through something belittling and humiliating. Not immediately recognizing the horror of the scold’s bridle is important because it brings up questions of readability that seem to follow discourse on women. Throughout this thesis, I want to challenge what is considered readable since there is, as there usually is, more to the picture. The scold’s bridle was a specific brand of punishment. There was not a universal kind of scold’s bridle, but the varying forms of it served a universal purpose—to punish and humiliate unruly, gossiping women. The scold’s bridle was a public form of punishment and the woman was either paraded throughout the town or made to stand in a public part of town for hours. The scold’s bridle, which resembled an iron muzzle, pushed the punished woman’s tongue into her mouth and, essentially, made her unable to speak.\textsuperscript{18}

Because the bridle gave a woman a snout-like quality to her and because the bridle performed the same actions as a horse’s bridle, the scold’s bridle extended the early modern fixation with the metaphor of a woman as a horse and a man as the rider. Kennedy notes that, “the horse/rider analogy succinctly asserts men’s superiority to women and naturalizes it by aligning it with emotional self-control.”\textsuperscript{19} In conversation with Kennedy, Lynda Boose also


\textsuperscript{17} The bridle went by a variety of names: brank’s bridle, witch’s bridle, or just as branks. The Online Etymology Dictionary notes that the word “branks” is of unknown origin.

\textsuperscript{18} I want to point out that there is a morbid obsession and oral fixation with women’s mouths—an intertwined site of agency and sexuality.

\textsuperscript{19} Kennedy, \textit{Just Anger}, 1.
remarks on how the scold’s bridle brought the early modern metaphor of the woman-as-horse into physical reality and that there was most likely “a connection that led first to a metaphoric idea of bridling women's tongues and eventually to the literal social practice. Inside that connection, even the verbs ‘reign’ and ‘rein’ come together in a fortuitous pun that reinforces male dominance.” An unruly woman was punished to soothe patriarchal anxiety. She becomes animalistic, humanoid, and void of agency. The scold’s bridle rendered the punished woman as someone (or something) feral who needed to be tamed.

Power structures that insist upon silencing, torturing, punishing, and humiliating women point to a masculine culture that is intent on policing the bodies and emotions of women—because of the patriarchy’s fear of transgressive women. The gendering and policing of emotions, specifically anger, make it so that a woman is deemed transgressive, unwomanly, and animalistic if she displays her anger or enacts revenge, an action brought on by anger. Female subversiveness is seen as a patriarchal threat. Considering that agency has such a fraught connection with anger, women may not even realize that they are angry. The word anger itself is

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20 Lynda Boose, “Scolding Brides and Bridling Scolds: Taming the Woman’s Unruly Member,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 42, no. 2 (July 1991): 199.
21 In 1991, Boose marked the absence of discussion surrounding the scold’s bridle—despite the pervasive nature of it. She noted that historians circumvented discussions surrounding the scold’s bridle due to a lack of “reliable documents.” The notion of reliability is worth investigating here. It cannot be that historians disagree on whether or not the scold’s bridle existed. Boose writes about an English antiquarian, T.N. Brushfield, who “report[ed] so exhaustively on scolds’ bridles and female torture” and that without Brushfield, “we would have known almost nothing about these instruments except for an improbable-sounding story or two.” The fact that reliability is questioned is also curious because Traister notes that the Tower of London features a “features an internally spiked metal neck collar dating from 1588.” Therefore, physical instantiations of the bridle are documented and exhibited. So how does history define reliability? From my perspective, questioning reliability comes across as though the torture of women does not merit intensive research. Whose story are we privileging and whose history are we advocating for by claiming a lack of reliability? How do we do justice to the stories of women that have been lost to history?
not enough to encompass the varying degrees of anger. Words such as fury, rage, wrath, mad, and madness come into mind. These manipulated and intense forms of anger stem from the same emotional space, but evoke different sensations and a different performance level. When anger is dismissed and when a woman is pushed to her limits, pressure builds within a body. In each of the women I analyze, anger is made either outright apparent or builds and intensifies inside the women. What is fascinating about Shakespeare’s angry, tragic women is that for a handful of acts, binary identities and the authority of the patriarchy are threatened and the patriarchy can potentially collapse. The moments in which the women snap are arguably the most dangerous, the most subversive because the feminist snap threatens to topple the patriarchy.

**Ophelia, Mad and Free**

Ophelia’s anger simmers throughout *Hamlet*. Since her anger is not immediately outright and because the explosion of anger is her madness, Ophelia’s anger gets mis-read as a passive and tragic form of madness. The productivity of her anger, however, is most apparent in her madness. Her madness allows for a freedom; she allows herself to be incoherent. Therefore, while Ophelia is not angry at the beginning of *Hamlet*, her words allude to her anger and foreshadow her later madness. Before Laertes departs for France, Ophelia seems to play with the notions of gender roles that Laertes wants her to subscribe to. When Laertes tells Ophelia to be mindful and wary of Hamlet’s love for her, Ophelia toys with Laertes. Ophelia says:

Do not, as some ungracious pastors do,

Show me the steep and thorny way to heaven

Whilst like a puffed and reckless libertine

Himself the primrose path of dalliance tread

And rocks not his own rede. (1.3.47–51)
Ophelia is aware of the hypocritical men in power who deem that she must act in a certain way, but who do not follow their own code of conduct or honor. Ophelia is unafraid to speak her mind to Laertes. She is not angry here, but she is clearly displeased. Ophelia’s candidness and fearlessness, however, become a different story when Polonius enters the scene. With a seeming awareness of what Polonius will say—which is a similar awareness to how Ophelia notes patriarchal hypocrisies—about a potential relationship between her and Hamlet, Ophelia, initially, tries to defend Hamlet and by proxy, herself. When Polonius tells her that she “speaks like a green girl” and to “think [of herself] a baby,” Ophelia attempts a rebuttal (1.3.101, 105). Ophelia claims that Hamlet “importuned [her] with love / In honorable fashion,” and through this declaration, Ophelia implicitly argues for her sexual and romantic autonomy (1.3.110–111). Ophelia’s objection, however, falls on deaf ears since Polonius does not believe her. Polonius’s dismissal of Ophelia is what Ahmed would call an irritation. In conversation with Sianne Ngai who describes irritation as a “‘minor negative affect,’” Ahmed likens irritation with infection; “things eventually come to a head,” Ahmed argues. For Ophelia, this will come true in time. For now, however, Ophelia responds to Polonius with a soothing, “I shall obey, my lord” (1.3.136). That Ophelia is not surprised by Polonius’s disbelief can suggest that Ophelia has been collecting and storing irritants within herself long before the play started.

For Ophelia, _Hamlet_ is full of irritants. From Ophelia’s perspective, _Hamlet_ is a story in which past irritants are remembered and the weight of the irritants within the play’s arc becomes too much for her. Therefore, while Ophelia may not be explicitly angry at the beginning of the play, Ophelia’s anger burned beneath her surface for a long time. Ophelia’s character arc can be summed up by how the closest men in her life fail her. Laertes does not do anything productive

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23 Ibid., 190.
to help Ophelia while she is still alive, Polonius dismisses her and offers her up as a tool in a plot against Hamlet, and Hamlet breaks her heart. While Laertes and Hamlet let Ophelia down, the focus of Ophelia’s anger is Polonius. Without any further textual insight into Ophelia’s interiority, her obedience to Polonius can either rend Ophelia as a character who unthinkingly accepts a paternal authority without question or her obedience may be a calculated decision. As seen by Ophelia’s responses to Laertes, an immediate obedience is, potentially, out of character to an audience, but not out of character to Polonius. In the conversation (or confrontation) between Polonius and Ophelia, the unspoken power dynamic between them becomes heightened. Polonius perceives Hamlet a threat to Ophelia’s passive femininity. Here Ophelia has to negotiate her emotions. She decides that this is pressure that she can handle. This is pressure that she has handled her entire life; for now, she can be resilient. Unfortunately, the irritants pile up with every act of the play and the pressure ultimately becomes too much for her when Polonius dies.

Afraid and concerned, Ophelia confides in Polonius that Hamlet had come to her “as if he had been looséd out of hell” (2.1.84). Polonius asks Ophelia if Hamlet is “mad for [her] love” and Ophelia responds “My lord, I do not know, / But truly I do fear it” (2.1.86–88). What is the “it” here? Polonius interprets the unspecified “it” to mean that yes, Ophelia is afraid that Hamlet has gone mad because of her. Polonius disregards Ophelia’s initial uncertainty and decides that Hamlet is, indeed, mad for Ophelia. Rather poetically, Ophelia explains that Hamlet “raised a sigh so piteous and profound / That it did seem to shatter all his bulk / And end his being” (2.1.95–97). The audience knows that Hamlet has encountered his father’s ghost; in a way, Hamlet has to re-start the mourning process. While Polonius interprets Hamlet’s piteous and profound sigh as lovesickness, the audience knows that it is grief. Ophelia, even without knowing what the audience does, is hesitant to read Hamlet as lovesick. It seems as though a
character who is adept at hiding truth and masquerading emotions in order for survival, is also adept at recognizing when things are not what they seem. Polonius regrets his actions, but then seems to place this guilt onto Ophelia:

POLONIUS: I am sorry—What, have you given him any hard words of late?

OPHELIA: No, my good lord, but as you did command

I did repel his letters and denied

His access to me. (2.1.107–111)

Depending on varying interpretations, Ophelia’s response can be performed with differing levels of acidity. Her response can be potentially interpreted as a continuation of her panic and concern. It can be read as a helpless plea of confusion and that Ophelia wants to ensure Polonius that she did not defy him. On the other hand, Ophelia’s response can be an example of built-up irritation spilling out. It can be read as disbelief, as a how dare he accuse me when I did exactly what he said? I would like to imagine that this is a scene in which Ophelia’s past irritants rattle inside her and the rattling gets louder and louder.

It could be that Ophelia’s anger stems from Hamlet’s rejection and that Ophelia is angry because Hamlet, simply, does not understand her desires. In a discussion on angry lovers, Kennedy argues that:

The worthy, constant female lovers who are ignored, abandoned, or rejected by the men they love are angry, but because they also want their lovers back, they refrain from direct, hostile accusations and open displays of anger. The virtuous, bereft woman instead communicates her anger indirectly...Expressions of anger to the inconstant male lover never succeed in restoring the love relationship.24

24 Kennedy, Just Anger, 122.
Kennedy’s description of a worthy, constant, virtuous, and bereft lover does in fact sound like a rather apt description of Ophelia. While there is definite space to argue that Hamlet’s disregard of Ophelia angers her, this is not where Ophelia snaps. She mourns for him; she laments him. Ophelia laments, “O what a noble mind is here o’erthrown!” (3.1.149) and that “And I, of ladies most deject and wretched, / That sucked the honey of his music vows…O woe is me / T’have seen what I have seen, see what I see!” (3.1.154–155, 159–160) What is interesting here is the heightened performativity. There are two kinds of audiences operating here—one is Polonius and Claudius and the other is the stage audience. Why does Ophelia play up her lamentation here? While these are not the only two answers, perhaps she knows that she has an audience or perhaps she genuinely believe that she is the sole cause of Hamlet’s madness. As a reader, I would have wholeheartedly accepted her grief without question if not for the words: “see what I see.” Moreover, if these lines can be read as indirect anger, Ophelia’s ire is directed towards Polonius and not Hamlet. Ophelia demands her audience—specifically her father—to do as she does, to examine and close-read through her vision. She relies on her sight to find out the truth because she knows that words can carry double meanings. Ironically, according to the text, the last words that Polonius specifically says to Ophelia is, “How now, Ophelia? / You need not tell us what Lord Hamlet said; we heard it all” (3.1.177–179). What is fascinating here is that Ophelia’s appeal to see things the way she does is immediately contradicted by Polonius who does not need Ophelia to speak because he heard everything that he needed to. Polonius does not need Ophelia’s eyes or her words, he has his ears. Ophelia does not respond to this.

Perhaps, Ophelia does not snap because of Hamlet, no matter how cruel his pressure is, because she understands that he is grieving. The emotional labor and torment that Hamlet puts her through is certainly no excuse, but maybe she is willing to understand that Hamlet cannot simply “cast [his] nightly colour off” (1.2.68). Due to how open for interpretation the text of the
play is, the reader and the audience are presented with a choice here. We can either decide to read Ophelia as either Laertes or Polonius does, and by doing so we can agree that Ophelia cannot discern the authenticity of her and Hamlet’s relationship on her own. The other choice the reader and the audience are presented with is to believe Ophelia that Hamlet’s affections for her were honest and legitimate. Thus, Hamlet’s sudden cruelty to her would be a sudden shock. With this version of Hamlet, Hamlet’s cruelty adds onto the pressure that is already on her. Ophelia, however, is still willing to be empathetic towards Hamlet. Ophelia’s willingness to understand—her empathy—is unique in that those who matter the most to her are not willing to share that same empathy for her.

Ophelia’s breaking point is Polonius’s death. Barbara Smith argues that from Ophelia’s perspective:

The loss of [Ophelia’s] father—her link to emotional security once she can no longer trust in her own perceptions—is the final, fatal assault on her tenuous mental stability and survival instinct. The issues of perceptual and emotional dissonances, lover's rejection, paternal loss, and the deprivation of knowledge with which Ophelia struggles throughout the play, combine explosively, engendering pitifully—but not surprisingly—madness and suicide.25

Polonius’s first and last words to Ophelia all negate or subvert Ophelia’s perceptions of reality. In the beginning, Polonius makes Ophelia doubt her emotions and his last words to her immediately contradict what she had said. Throughout Hamlet, Polonius defined Ophelia’s perceptions. He understands his role as the patriarch to mean the gatekeeper of truth. No matter how adamantly the patriarchy propagates its authority, the fall of the patriarch is inevitable. What

happens to the subjugated woman then? For Ophelia, the death of her father is not only a loss of security, but a loss of a patriarchal lineage that defined her identity. Ophelia’s explosion, as Smith describes it, is both tragic and exhilarating. Irritation: the events of the play have now come to a head. The death of Polonius ignites an inability to grieve and an onslaught of anger. She cannot fully grieve nor lament a man who continually mis-read her or did not bother to read her at all. The inability to grieve renders Ophelia’s emotions unproductive and without agency because lamentation seems to be the only mode of emotion in which Ophelia knows how to manipulate. She can hide anger through lamentation, but that she cannot grieve means that she cannot perform her anger. The cognitive dissonance that ensues results in an anger that becomes Ophelia’s infamous madness.

By refusing to grieve, Ophelia also snaps the familial bond between her and her father. Ahmed describes the snapping of bonds as a crisis:

> Sometimes we have a crisis because a bond we thought was sustaining ends up not being as sustaining as we thought. We can have a bond not only to another person but also to an idea or ideal: a bond to a father can be a family bond, for instance, a way of investing in the very idea of the family. One of the pressures we live under is to preserve some bonds, at almost any cost.²⁶

One of the tragedies of the patriarchy is how its malignant nature defines the family and domestic life. Where is the love between Ophelia and her father? That she cannot grieve in the proper way signals how unbearable Ophelia’s relationship must have been. The patriarchy’s weight was too much for Ophelia to bear and it exhausted her.²⁷ While the other characters believe that the grief for Polonius is what overwhelmed her, Ophelia’s madness also suggests

²⁷ Ibid., 198.
that she is grieving for herself. There is no denying that a patriarchal society will not let a fully realized version of herself live.

Even though Ophelia’s madness marks her imminent death, there is freedom and power in her mad speech. What is freeing about Ophelia’s snap is that it seems to be a final act of rebellion—snapping is the only kind of resistance that she can employ. She can no longer be resilient. In snapping, Ophelia’s anger finds freedom, but her madness renders her frantic and disconnected. In her bawdy and tragic love songs, we cannot seem to discern whether or not she attacks Hamlet for his coldness or whether she is mad at Polonius for constantly policing her identity as an immature, untouched female caricature with no agency. I do not want to argue that Ophelia is never angry at Hamlet, but the fact that she snaps because of Polonius’s death suggests that what these two men mean to her individually resonate differently with her. It also shows that the snap is cumulative; it seems as though the snap is an isolated action, but there is a history to it. In Ophelia’s flower speech, she unleashes everything that she kept locked:

There’s fennel for you, and columbines. There’s rue for you, and here’s some from me.

We may call it herb-grace o’ Sundays. O, you must wear your rue with a difference.

There’s a daisy. I would give you some violets, but they withered all when my father died. They say a made a good end. (4.5.177–181)

The herbs and flowers that Ophelia gives out are not accidental. There is purpose behind the plants. This is a far cry from an Ophelia who claimed to Hamlet that she thinks nothing (3.2.106). The flowers are a careful mix of antidotes—potentially poisonous—and symbolic representations of faithfulness, marital infidelity, repentance, and ingratitude. The contradictory meanings signal the contradictions within herself. For a moment, she allows contradictions to

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28 The footnotes in the Norton edition state that columbines were associated with ingratitude and infidelity, fennel with flattery, rue with repentance, and daisies with faithfulness.
exist on the stage. Ophelia commands that the theatre, the audience, and the rest of the characters bend to her rules and determines how she wants to command authority.

Ophelia drowns off-stage. Murkiness and unreadability follow Ophelia to her death. The one who brings Ophelia back on-stage is Gertrude. Gertrude’s role here is interesting because she too complicates the snap. Gertrude refuses to let Ophelia break away from the text without telling the audience what happened. In her monologue, Gertrude speaks of an audible snap: the breaking of the branch. Gertrude’s monologue eerily mimics the floral motifs that Ophelia previously utilized. While Gertrude continues Ophelia’s mixed metaphors of repentance and infidelity, she eroticizes Ophelia’s death and is cruder with her floral language than Ophelia was:

There is a willow grows aslant a brook²⁹
That shows his hoar leaves in the glassy stream.³⁰
Therewith fantastic garlands did she make
Of crow-flowers, nettles, daisies, and long purples,
That liberal shepherds give a grosser name,
But our cold maids do dead men’s fingers call them.
There on the pendent boughs her crownet weeds
Clamb’ring to hang, an envious sliver broke,
When down the weedy trophies and herself
Fell in the weeping brook. (4.7.137–146).

²⁹ The Norton edition notes that the willow was “an emblem of mourning and of forsaken love.”
³⁰ Gertrude talks of “his hoar leaves” which Stephen Ratcliffe argues that “the personal pronoun ‘his,’ when coupled to ‘hoar’ (Q2 reads ‘hoary’) sounds for a moment like ‘his whore’—clearly a misapprehension of the line’s sense but one that is nonetheless pertinent to a play in which the potential sexual promiscuity of the victim who drowns has been of concern to a number of different characters. The language of hoar and whore collapses into the word “horror.” Does Gertrude refer to Ophelia here as Hamlet’s whore or does she express horror at the scene of a death?
Why is it that Gertrude is the one who reports Ophelia’s death? The feminist snap becomes fraught here. Gertrude does not let Ophelia disappear without shedding light on Ophelia’s drowning. Stephen Ratcliffe and Harmonie Loberg, however, view Gertrude as the one who does snap Ophelia away from the text. Stephen Ratcliffe argues for the possibility that Gertrude might have intentionally harmed Ophelia and that “Though I cannot prove my theory—there is no hard evidence, no ocular proof to support it—it cannot be disproved either, again because no one in the play can be called forward as an eye witness to what happened...What we can say with certainty is that Gertrude, in reporting Ophelia’s death, removes her—in effect kills her—from the play.”31 Harmonie Loberg takes Ratcliffe’s argument one step further to claim that Gertrude, without a doubt, murdered Ophelia. Loberg argues that the only reason why there is no “acknowledgment of this guilty party [is] related to Gertrude’s sex/gender. Because our general understanding of aggression is limited to physical force, we mistakenly assume that females, the physically weaker sex, are less aggressive than males.”32 While I believe Loberg’s argument to be provocative, I do not align my reading with her reading. I do not have a definitive reason as to why I do not view Gertrude as a murderer, other than that the beauty in the poetry of her lines do not speak to me as violent. Furthermore, I do not see Ahmed’s theory of the feminist snap here as something violent. Can we think of the snap as something that strengthens the bond between women? Ahmed describes that the snap can also be a “genealogy, unfolding as an alternative family line, or as a feminist inheritance.”33 When referring to a genealogy of the snap, Ahmed specifically refers to the snap as something she inherited from her older female relatives. Within Hamlet, I posit the snap as something the women can inherit from one another—especially since

a family of multiple women are a rarity in *Hamlet*. Gertrude does not have a daughter and Ophelia’s mother is absent from the text. Furthermore, a reverse genealogy is created here considering that Ophelia is younger than Gertrude. In Gertrude’s monologue, she inherits Ophelia’s snap. Could Gertrude’s phallic allusions be performed with a level of sharpness, roughness, and brittleness that the snap needs? The breaking of the tree branch midway through Gertrude’s speech signals an audible snap. Ahmed argues that, however, “We do not always know what follows a break. If a snap is a stopping point, things start up again.”

The branch snaps, but Gertrude continues to speak for Ophelia. As the only woman left in *Hamlet*, Gertrude takes up the task of lamenting. The oddness of Gertrude’s language, however, can suggest that she is not solely lamenting, but also masquerading her anger as Ophelia did.

Ophelia can smother her anger and negotiate her emotions, but *Hamlet* is a play in which the pressure becomes too much for her. Ophelia’s snap happens off-stage. Since the majority of her interiority happens off-stage, this demands that the reader look back at the text and find what led to her snap. It is difficult for a reader to pinpoint where in the text Ophelia is angry because a considerable amount of potential productive character analysis happens off-stage or is hidden between what she says. Shakespeare, however, has left clues. While Hamlet uses madness as a disguise, madness for Ophelia is a brief, violent, tragic moment in which she does not have to subscribe to patriarchal abuse. Ophelia’s unreadability and her madness need to be read as resistance to and anger against the patriarch(y) that demanded resilience from her. Ophelia’s anger simmers throughout the play until it snaps and releases itself catatonically.

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34 Ibid., 194.
The Unsexed Snap of Lady Macbeth

While I have advocated for women’s anger as productive, what happens when said productivity is, in fact, just as dangerous and volatile as male-written early modern literature suggested? How do feminist critics grapple with the extreme fury of an unsympathetic woman? As an unsexed being, Lady Macbeth collapses the binary between man and woman. Nevertheless, she is not completely androgynous either. She simultaneously enters the space of the tense in-between of binaries, but also operates outside of binary understandings as well. Like Ophelia, Lady Macbeth makes herself unreadable. What is unique to Lady Macbeth is that she makes herself unreadable by donning gender ambiguity. Lady Macbeth’s decision to make her gender incoherent allows for her to use her rage without permission from men. In immediate contradiction to Ophelia, Lady Macbeth knows how to summon her anger—and her anger is unapologetic and brutal. The suddenness of her anger and fury blindsides the audience. The audience does not see Lady Macbeth negotiate her emotions the same way that Ophelia did with Laertes, Polonius, and Hamlet. For Ophelia, the feminist snap was a temporary freedom—something that gave her momentary authority and agency. Therefore, it does not seem that Lady Macbeth’s anger falls neatly into that categorization of the snap because she does not wait to snap to find freedom. Instead, Lady Macbeth gives herself permission to assume agency by using anger as a transformational tool. The timing of Lady Macbeth’s snap and the brutality of her fury contests Ahmed’s argument of the snapped woman as not the origin of violence. Perhaps Lady Macbeth’s snap does deem her as violent, perhaps we can assume that violence originates with her.\textsuperscript{35} The immediacy of Lady Macbeth’s snap dissuades an audience from seeing her in a sympathetic light. It seems that if a text wants its reader to see a certain character as sympathetic, their snap comes later in the text. If a text wants to persuade its reader to see a character as

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid.,189.
villainous, her snap happens immediately or without warning. The timing of the snap determines whether or not a reader will be convinced to find the reasonings behind the snap. If a snap seems to happen without a warning, then a reader is asked to look for hints. On the other hand, if a snap is a part of a character’s identity from the start, then a reader is more convinced to see a character as unsympathetic. Lady Macbeth complicates the productivity of the feminist snap by using it for violent acts.

An aspect of the relationship between Lady Macbeth and Macbeth is that Lady Macbeth has the willingness to go to the extreme that Macbeth does not. Lady Macbeth actually positions Macbeth’s inactive nature as perverse:

Yet do I fear thy nature.
It is too full o’th’ milk of human kindness
To catch the nearest way. Thou wouldst be great,
Art not without ambition, but without
The illness should attend it. (1.5.14–18)

Lady Macbeth appropriates the voice of the patriarchy and condemns Macbeth for the fact that his emotions lack productivity. She feminizes Macbeth by saying that he is full of milk as though Macbeth would have been the one to nurse their children. Previously, I discussed Edward Jorden who described womanhood as a passive condition and introduced the fear of the female hysterical. While Jorden started a burgeoning cultural shift that moved the fear of the female witch to the fear of the female hysterical, Lady Macbeth halts the shift and solidifies the supernatural terror of a woman’s anger. Lady Macbeth subverts this by claiming that Macbeth is the passive one. From Lady Macbeth’s perspective, Macbeth’s male privileges are wasted on him.
Since Lady Macbeth believes that she needs to assume an authoritative role to fulfill their political ambition, she demands to be unsexed. Here Lady Macbeth snaps a bond between her and gender identity as a sacrifice for the bond between her and her husband:

Come, you spirits
That tend on mortal thoughts, 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. Come to my woman’s breasts
And take my milk for gall36, you murd’ring ministers,
Wherever in your sightless substances
You wait on nature’s mischief. (1.5.38–48)

From a performance aspect, Lady Macbeth’s words conjure up a metaphorical storm. With every word, the language becomes more violent. Her repeated demands for the spirits to come to her mirror claps of thunder. The act of unsexing requires cruelty and unrepentant remorse. By declaring herself as neither male nor female, Lady Macbeth circumvents all of the early modern male authorities I previously established. Lady Macbeth manages to do this because identity and power hinge on discussion of concepts inherent to one’s gender. If she is neither sex, she

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36 The way that Kennedy notes the different definitions of the word “gall” is worth pointing out. Kennedy writes that “galled means diseased or rubbed raw from repeated rubbings; the disease presumably, is, pride and a refusal to accept the male master’s control or correction, however slight. It may also be anger at enforced submission. The raw spot suggests repeated resistance or disobedience, a self-inflicted injury from willfulness and insubordination. In both cases, a healthy condition means willing submission to men’s authority and direction.”
operates outside of Paré’s definition of male perfection and female imperfection. If she is not entirely male, she cannot be entirely consumed by masculine anxiety. Lady Macbeth is neither fully hysterical nor fully possessed by demons; she is both the female hysteric and the female witch. The witch is no longer placated. Instead, she seems to possess the demons herself. Lady Macbeth’s rage allows her to be an unsexed, androgynous anomaly.

Lady Macbeth is not the only angry woman in the play. Lady Macduff is a character who seems to only exist so that her tragic end can be used as Macduff’s revenge. Lady Macduff, however, is an angry woman and the reasoning of her anger inverts all the things that we do not find sympathetic about Lady Macbeth. The exchange between Lady Macduff and Ross in the beginning of Act 4, Scene 2 is such an intriguing one. Thinking that her husband is a traitor, Lady Macduff interrogates him:

LADY MACDUFF: What had he done to make him fly the land?
ROSS: You must have patience, madam.
MACDUFF: He had none. His flight was madness. When our actions do not, our fears do make us traitors.
ROSS: You know not whether it was his wisdom or his fear.
LADY MACDUFF: Wisdom—to leave his wife, to leave his babes, his mansion, and his titles in a place from whence himself does fly?
ROSS: My dearest coz, I pray you school yourself. (4.2.1–8, 14–15)

Lady Macduff’s anger that her husband has left her and their children competes with Ross’s attempts to neutralize Lady Macduff’s anger. Ross does not empathize with Lady Macduff’s insistence and her frustration. Ross tries to manipulate Lady Macduff into thinking that her feelings are not legitimate by trying to halt and circumvent her interrogation, by telling her that she does not know what her husband is thinking, and to “school” herself. The word “school” here
strangely reminds me of scold. How can we read Lady Macduff’s anger in conversation with Lady Macbeth’s? Lady Macduff captures our sympathy in a way that Lady Macbeth does not. They are however, both threats to their masculine sovereignty. Oddly precocious, Macduff’s son fully believes that his father is not dead and tells his mother that “If [Macduff] were dead you’d weep for him” (4.2.61). This eerily echoes Lady Macbeth’s desires to “stop up” her passage to remorse. Lady Macduff does not mourn the absence of her husband. In fact, Lady Macduff’s angrily condemns her husband’s flightiness and calls him a traitor. Lady Macduff becomes a pillar of maternal power; she and her children have been abandoned. It seems preposterous that Lady Macduff would be anything but angry, and yet Ross tells her to, essentially, calm down—something that sounds like nails on a chalkboard to a woman who is angry. Yet, Lady Macduff, unconsciously or otherwise, is powerful here. She demands answers from Ross, she condemns her husband for his actions, and becomes a maternal and moral powerhouse that refuses to accept answers without question.

The maternal and androgynous power within Lady Macduff and Lady Macbeth exposes the uselessness of their husbands and the fatal mistakes that they make. Lady Macduff has to watch her children get murdered and then she is eventually murdered as well. Lady Macbeth has to constantly goad Macbeth and challenge his masculinity to fuel their political desires.

Lady Macbeth’s desires do not assuage her guilt. She starts sleepwalking and her guilt becomes madness. Unlike with Ophelia who found freedom in her madness, Lady Macbeth’s madness takes away all of her freedom. The onset of Lady Macbeth’s madness can be read from multiple perspectives. Perhaps by assuming masculinity, Lady Macbeth inherits the anxiety imbedded within masculinity. Perhaps, the guilt got to be too much for her. Lady Macbeth’s
The gentlewoman reports all of her symptoms to a doctor. While the gentlewoman and doctor speak, Lady Macbeth enters the scene, and the doctor and the gentlewoman watch her. This scene becomes a question of how a man or a woman would read Lady Macbeth’s madness. The doctor remarks that “you see her eyes are open,” but the gentlewoman says, “Ay, but their senses are shut” (5.1.21–22). The doctor performs a surface-level reading of Lady Macbeth, but the gentlewoman comments on what is actually happening below the surface. When the doctor and the gentlewoman realize the seriousness of Lady Macbeth’s madness, the doctor scolds the gentlewoman. He tells her, “Go to, go to. You have known what you should not” to which the gentlewoman replies, “She has spoke what she should not, I am sure of / that. Heaven knows what she has known” (5.1.39–41). While this gentlewoman may not know the full and sordid details of Lady Macbeth’s proclamation to be unsexed nor of her hand in the murders, the gentlewoman inadvertently becomes the voice box for the power structure that will not let Lady Macbeth’s transgressions go unpunished.

While Lady Macbeth is singularly punished through madness, there is a collective of women who are centered around her. This collective of women, however, operate off-stage. What is interesting here is that Lady Macbeth’s productivity and her actions—the heights of her violence—were also moments of isolation. She unsexes herself with no one around and in Act 2, Scene 2, she takes bloody daggers to pin Banquo’s murder on the guards—but she does this off-stage. Lady Macbeth does not take the audience with her. In Act 5, Scene 5, there is a stage

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37 The gentlewoman is oddly loyal to Lady Macbeth. When the doctor asks if Lady Macbeth had said anything, the gentlewoman replies that she will not “report after her.” This suggests that there is a some form of off-stage alliance between women in Macbeth. Considering the utter annihilation of women, perhaps a community of women can be seen as an extension of maternal power.

38 Interestingly, the conversations between men and women in Macbeth remind me of the Kennedy’s idea of the analogy of the woman as the horse and the man as the rider. It seems as though that the men in this play, Ross and the doctor, try to chastise the women and try to bridle them. The women, however, do not automatically accept subjugation.
direction of “a cry within of women” (5.5.7 s.d.). Again, the reader is left with questions. We know later that this is the scene of Lady Macbeth’s death, so is it Lady Macbeth’s gentlewoman discovering the dead body at the same time? Or if we believe that Lady Macbeth definitively committed suicide, is it the gentlewoman witnessing the moment Lady Macbeth snaps and decides to kill herself? Perhaps, on a more abstract level, the cry of women could signal a collective feminist snap or a signal that all of the women are removed from the play. For a character who has had so much movement throughout the play, it is odd that Lady Macbeth’s death is not on-stage. Does her gender ambiguity merit an ambiguous death? What can be said for certain is Macbeth’s ambivalence to clamour and discord. Macbeth questions the noises and to Seyton’s disconcertingly straight-forward answer of “It is the cry of women, my good lord,” Macbeth replies, “I have almost forgot the taste of fears” (5.5.6–8). It seems as though once Macbeth is made up of the “undaunted mettle” that composed Lady Macbeth, the need for her in this play disappears (1.7.74).

Lady Macbeth’s rage is violent and dangerous. She embodies the raging, hysterical female that the patriarchy so fears, but she nuances the feared female figure by unsexing herself. The act of unsexing allows her to take action when Macbeth will not or cannot. She dons ambiguity as though it will transform her body into a weapon, but she does not actually transform her body. Lady Macbeth’s rage both confirms and defies the thinkers of the early modern patriarchy. Lady Macbeth also challenges and nuances feminist criticism that wants to reclaim the language surrounding the language of women’s anger. The raging, hysterical female character and the productivity of anger collapse into an ambiguous, dangerous Lady Macbeth.

**When Women Take Revenge in *Titus Andronicus***

In *Titus Andronicus*, the feminist snap becomes vengeful and violent. While the Shakespearean version of an early Roman patriarchy is still the ultimate hierarchical structure
that polices women, what incites the feminist snap is when identities and families are under attack. Unlike Lady Macbeth and Ophelia, Tamora uses her anger to fuel her obsession for revenge. Once Tamora and her family are captured by the Romans, her resilience is nearly gone. Tamora uses the rest of her resilience to beg for mercy for her son’s life. Titus, however, refuses and demands that Tamora’s son be killed as a sacrifice. Bizarrely, Titus tells Tamora to be calm as though Tamora is in the wrong for trying to keep her son alive. To Saturninus, Tamora promises vengeance against Titus. Like Lady Macbeth, Tamora does not wait for permission either. Instead, she tells Saturninus to leave her alone so that she can “make them know what ’tis to let a queen / Kneel in the streets and beg for grace in vain” (2.1.451–452). Tamora grieves for her son, but she also is angry at the humiliation that Titus has put her through. While Lady Macbeth needed to assume masculinity to take on productivity, Tamora isolates herself away from masculinity.

On top of Tamora’s thirst for revenge, she also is the locus of male fears. As the queen of the Goths, Tamora becomes the exotic Other that is both sexualized and racialized. Furthermore, it is relatively understood that since Tamora is a conquered queen without a husband present, she is a widow. Jo Eldridge Carney stipulates that, perhaps, while Tamora’s Gothness was indeed socially troubling, her status as a widow heightened her status as an Other. Of the widow from the early modern understanding, Carney argues that “the lascivious woman and the grieving wife coalesced in a figure common in early modern popular culture: the sexually unrestrained widow...the fear of the widow was widespread, for she was seen as sexually practiced but independent, outside the confines of male control.”39 The female figure that incites fear is not only the witch or the hysteric, but the feared archetype includes the widow as well.

The seeds of Titus's fractured allegiance to Rome are planted when Titus falls out of favor with Saturninus coupled with Saturninus’s decision to have Tamora as his wife instead of Lavinia. Titus’s allegiance will unravel further and further with the progression of the revenge plot. That Tamora easily replaces Lavinia suggests a mutual interchangeability and that women can be exchanged easily. Tamora and Lavinia are, needless to say, sharply contrasting characters. The reversal of their character arcs suggest, however, their potential interchangeability and how they seem to haunt one another. Tamora could have very well been the enslaved queen who was mutilated and tortured. Lavinia could have been the empress. That would keep the sanctity of the virgin-whore binary intact; the virgins are extolled and glorified while the whores are punished. Male control is never questioned. This is, however, not the case in Titus Andronicus. The binary continues to collapse. So that the Roman patriarchy can preserve its legacy, Tamora and Lavinia are punished when they perform transgressions or when the body is—what Levin would describe as—no longer the patriarchal feminine ideal.

Tamora and Lavinia collide. What is compelling about their interaction is that, especially in Shakespeare’s tragedies, it seems rare for women to be in the same scene, let alone talking to one another. Their interactions are a perverse inversion of the mother and daughter binary. Tamora orders her sons, Chiron and Demetrius, to prove their loyalty and allegiance to her by murdering Bassianus and raping Lavinia. After Bassianus is stabbed, Tamora threatens Lavinia and Lavinia angrily declares, “Ay, come, Semiramis, nay, barbarous Tamora, / For no name fits thy nature but thy own!” (2.2.118–119) The early modern discourse of humoral theory and discussions of female imperfection—which insinuates that there is something transgressive inherent to femininity—emerges again. Lavinia, however, takes this discourse of imperfection and humours one step further in that Tamora’s nature is so monstrous that it cannot be made comparable to others. The monarchical hierarchy, we know, is critical to the aristocracy within
Shakespeare’s tragedies. Especially with Titus, the anxiety of leaving behind a legacy and ensuring a lineage is embedded throughout the play. For Lavinia to remove Tamora from a lineage of vengeful queens tells the audience that Tamora’s fury is undefinable, perhaps even apocalyptic. About this, Ahmed might say that Tamora can no longer pass on her feminist snap nor can she inherit one since she is removed from any genealogy. Lavinia disrupts Tamora’s place within a tapestry of female monarchs and declares Tamora’s nature as something, inherently, unnatural. Tamora’s identity as a barbarous queen is wholly her own. This is a queen who is operating outside the limits of female transgressions or redefining them. If Tamora had embodied Semiramis, Tomyris, or any other subversive female queen known throughout history, Tamora’s monstrosity would not be as provocative. Tamora enters the realm of the uncanny. Her unnaturalness is something that Lavinia recognizes, but she cannot entirely define which makes Tamora unknowable. Tamora will later use this unknowability to snap her connection to her humanity in order to become Revenge.

In terms of Lavinia’s anger, Lavinia knows that if she is raped, she will be disgraced. She tries to convince Tamora to kill her instead of letting her sons rape her:

‘Tis present death I beg, and one thing more
That womanhood denies my tongue to tell.
O, keep me from their worse-than-killing lust,
And tumble me into some loathsome pit,
Where never man’s eye may behold my body;
Do this, and be a charitable murderer. (2.2.173–178)

40 Eugene M. Waith’s footnotes in the Oxford edition (1984) of Titus Andronicus describe Semiramis as a “legendary Assyrian queen famous for her beauty, her military conquests, and her lust.” He also speculates that the name “Tamora” originated from “Tomyris,” “a Scythian queen famous for her cruelty.”
Lavinia’s attempt to preserve her threatened womanhood prevents her from speaking; her womanhood is a barrier to exerting her own agency even though she knows that her life is threatened. What is immediately contradictory about Lavinia’s statements is that she purports that she cannot speak, but then continues to plea with Tamora. To Lavinia, their gender identity is an essential mode of being that Tamora cannot violate. Lavinia does not need to be specific about what her womanhood is preventing her from saying out loud, because she knows that Tamora will recognize the implications of what Lavinia does not say. In this moment, Lavinia is relying on their respective womanhood to persuade Tamora to see Lavinia as Lavinia sees Tamora. When Tamora does not comply, Lavinia no longer recognizes Tamora’s sex. Tamora snaps away from a notion of shared womanhood and in return, Lavinia forcibly removes Tamora from being a woman. Lavinia proclaims, “No grace, no womanhood? Ah, beastly creature, / The blot and enemy to our general name! / Confusion fall—” (2.3.182–184). Lavinia’s last words are her snap. The end-stop here is a textual and audible interruption and disruption. Lavinia’s anger emerges when she realizes that bargaining with Tamora is futile and her anger allows her to be embroiled in the revenge plot between Titus and Tamora. In terms of Ahmed, what is fascinating here is that, initially, Tamora’s removal from a lineage made it seem as though she had no genealogy. Lavinia, however, inherits Tamora’s snap. Lavinia specifically inherits the violent aspect of Tamora’s snap. Here the snap becomes a cruel thing. The snap becomes merciless and solely seeks revenge.

As the Roman empress, Tamora is given the political power that Lady Macbeth so desired. As a mother, queen, and a widow with multiple sexual relationships, Tamora is the ultimate example of a female threat to the patriarchy. And yet, Tamora will not placate her sexuality nor will she try to mold her multiple identities to fit patriarchal ideologies. Instead, the amalgamations of her identities become Revenge. For Tamora, the entirety of *Titus Andronicus*,
is her attempt to seek revenge on Titus for her slaughtered son. Since Rome showed no mercy to her children, she shall not be merciful either. As Revenge, Tamora tells Titus that “[she] is not Tamora. / She is thy enemy, and I thy friend. I am Revenge, sent from th’infernal kingdom” (5.2.28–30). Instead of the demons possessing her or she possessing the demons, Tamora uses her anger to transform herself into a demon that she stylizes as Revenge. In a way, it seems as though Tamora’s revenge necessitates for her to snap with her humanity.

In terms of revenge, Titus decides to avenge Lavinia for her. Can men experience the feminist snap or does the snap only belong to women? 41 Titus’s honor-killing of Lavinia is a violent and cruel moment, both for the characters in the text and to the reader. Titus, however, does not use his masculine, patriarchal authority in the ways that one expects him to. Titus kills Lavinia only after he exposes the hypocrisies of the Roman patriarchy. Once Titus falls out of the Roman emperor’s favor and once he comes to terms with the decimation of his family after he tries to cope with Lavinia’s assault, he recognizes the futility of his dedication to Rome. The fascinating thing about the bond between Titus and Lavinia is that the love that was absent between Ophelia and Polonius is apparent here. The familial bond does not snap, but strengthens. After Lavinia’s traumatic event, her whole family embodies her pain. Titus darkly comments that, “‘Tis well, Lavinia, that thou hast no hands, / For hands to do Rome service is but vain” (3.1.79–80). Titus does not reject Lavinia, however, he knows that, in the Roman tradition, she is no longer the patriarchal ideal. Deborah Willis pushes back on feminist criticism which asserts that Lavinia’s family ignores her pain. In fact, the Andronicus family does the opposite. Willis argues that:

41 A potential answer to this more or less rhetorical question would be “yes,” since a “no” would suggest that men cannot be feminists.
When family members are murdered, raped, or severely injured…the other members of the family also feel damaged, as if a part of the self has been lost or killed along with the family member. The enhanced, family-based group identity that anchors individual self-image comes under attack, its honor put in question.\(^{42}\)

The collective familial self is what gives the Andronicus legitimacy, credibility, authority, and agency; their reputation is intrinsically tied to the patriarchy. This includes Lavinia as well. Therefore, can Lavinia’s rape and mutilation anticipate the collective snap of the Andronicus? Regardless, Lavinia’s anger is hard to place. Her anger is there when Tamora rejects their shared womanhood. While Lavinia’s anger becomes difficult to read, I include her in this discussion of women’s anger because anger can still be an option for her when *Titus Andronicus* is staged. The character has no hands and cannot speak, but anger can be creatively staged. While Lavinia can no longer be audible, she is still visible.

For Tamora and Lavinia, their anger and their snap are fueled by their desire for revenge. The violence of the snap becomes heightened in *Titus Andronicus*. Tamora’s snap becomes so vicious that she transforms herself into Revenge. On the other hand, when Lavinia’s womanhood and her agency is snapped away from her, she falls into Titus’s revenge plot—whether she makes the choice to do so is open for interpretation. The theatre is a space in which the norms of society are allowed to be blurred and Shakespeare takes this implicit permission to raise questions that he decides to leave unanswered. Shakespeare is adamant about exploring the subterrain and how to find meaning and truth within sub-text. Whenever Shakespeare questions societal norms, he questions the strength of the patriarchy. In a bloody revenge narrative such as

\(^{42}\) Deborah Willis, ““The Gnawing Vulture”: Revenge, Trauma Theory, and *Titus Andronicus,*” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 53, no. 1 (Spring 2002): 30.
Titus Andronicus, Shakespeare tests the Roman patriarchy and challenges anxious masculinity through the women.

**Conclusion: The Triumph of Women’s Anger**

The anger of Shakespeare’s tragic women ultimately wounds the characters. In the context of a tragedy, anger requires a sacrifice. Anger takes Ophelia’s sanity. Lady Macbeth sacrifices her gender and her identity. Tamora desires revenge for her sacrificed son. Lavinia is assaulted, mutilated, and made into a sacrifice. For each of these women, anger is either subtle or volatile. These moments are, however, momentary. These fleeting moments of anger do not bring about a feminist revolution. In fact, these tragedies end with a promise of a new patriarchal order that will take the place of the previous one. The legacy of the patriarchy is protected. Nevertheless, these brief moments of women’s anger are threats. The fact that these moments can even happen at all suggests that the power structures in these tragedies are unstable—the very same thing that a woman’s anger is described as. What happens when these brief moments are anything but brief? What happens when women’s anger—whilst still believed to be a unstable and violent threat—brings about legitimate change?

On January 10, 2018, the Washington Post suspended reporter Joel Achenbach for “90 days over ‘inappropriate workplace conduct’” towards current and former colleagues. The Post did not publish the specifics of the allegations, but we can only speculate how Achenbach must have abused his power before his suspension. In Good and Mad, Traister notes that Achenbach wanted to bring back the brank’s bridle when he suggested that Hillary Clinton needed a “‘radio-controlled shock collar’” for when “‘she got screechy.’” This was in 2008. In the decade

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44 Traister, Good and Mad, 62.
between this remark and Achenbach’s suspension, Achenbach wins awards and publishes books. What has he done to women in that decade? Achenbach’s suspension is rare in that men in power and men who are extolled rarely pay for their actions. Achenbach’s suspension is, however, only 90 days. Achenbach releases a trademark apology, but Traister’s connection between his remarks on Clinton and his allegations from his co-workers shows that his misogyny has history. In the early modern era, the woman-as-horse metaphor was made literal through the scold’s bridle. From a contemporary context, Traister argues that, while the scold’s bridle is no longer implemented, the sentiment of the metaphor still exists.45 Women in the twenty-first century are not removed from patriarchal violence and slander either.46

While the publication of Kennedy’s *Just Anger* predates Traister’s book by a decade and its subject matter by approximately 400 years, Kennedy’s analysis on how early modern women’s anger is suppressed and how Traister depicts the anger of contemporary American women’s anger echo one another. Kennedy notes that early modern women’s anger is suppressed on four grounds: that it doesn’t exist, it is groundless, it is dangerous and hostile, it is trivial and harmless.47 Traister argues that:

Women’s anger will be—as it has long been—cast as ugly, unappealing, dangerous, something to be shut down or jeered. Nothing, we have long been assured, is more unattractive in a woman than anger, and those messages will be especially damaging—as they have always been—to nonwhite women. But these are all strategies that have been used to get people, including women themselves, to look away from, disregard, and

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45 Ibid., 51.
46 Traister’s discussion of women and feminism is much more inclusive in her book than in my thesis. She writes on black women, Latinx women, native women, Asian women, LGBTQ+ women, women of different socioeconomic statuses, and intersectionality with grace and with a fierce agenda of the personal as political.
suppress one of the great drivers of social upheaval and political change in [the United States]: their own fury.\textsuperscript{48}

Traister envisions a world in which women—all women—are allowed to be angry. No longer will the anger of a woman result in her death and no longer will a patriarchal identity be placed upon a woman. The patriarchy was correct in thinking that it had to be afraid of women. Traister envisions a country in which threats to the patriarchy are not seen as momentary female disruptions. I do not believe that Traister envisions a world in which the patriarchy does not exist. She calls to the future in a way in which the feminist struggle continues, but instead without hesitation and doubt, women’s anger will be seen as productive, good, and triumphant.

\textsuperscript{48} Traister, \textit{Good and Mad}, 43.
Bibliography


