A FAIR WARRIOR AND A FIEND-LIKE QUEEN

Through the plays *Othello* and *Macbeth*, William Shakespeare prods at Robert Cleaver's early modern warning, “If she be not subject to her husband to let him rule all household...things will goe backwarde, the house will come to ruine” (88). In his depiction of Desdemona and Lady Macbeth, Shakespeare interrogates male anxiety of female agency and companionate marriage in the context of the early modern society. In these plays, Shakespeare explores the potential unsexing of two military men and the societal anxieties that consequently arise. Both Lady Macbeth and Desdemona are confined within the misogyny of a patriarchal society, but navigate within that, gaining some personal agency. In the conclusion of both *Othello* and *Macbeth*, these strong female characters retreat into more stereotypical versions of dutiful, virtuous wives. We see, however, two diverse arguments arise through the two plays. Desdemona’s virtuous character in opposition to Iago’s villainy and misogyny, and the extreme nature of *Othello’s* conclusion suggest that Shakespeare challenges societal anxiety concerning female agency, not female agency itself. He invites readers and viewers to critique conservative views of femininity and the fear of companionate marriage. Through *Macbeth* on the other hand, Shakespeare seems to challenge the idea of companionate marriage, questioning its merit by pointing to the dangers of an unnatural woman and her influence on a man who loves her maybe too fiercely. While he comes to different conclusions, in both plays Shakespeare interrogates male concern about reciprocal relationships: that if a man is truly dedicated to his wife, he may lose control as head of the household.