Another Disruptive Widowed Mother: Shakespeare's Representation of the Countess of Rossillion in *All's Well That Ends Well*

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Shakespeare and the "Lusty Widow" Trope

It is generally maintained that widow characters in early modern English drama are represented to fulfill one specific image, according to which "[they] were seen as imperious in their chambers crowded with suitors, and lusty and demanding in their sexuality" (Brodsky 125). However, they are not allowed to keep their "imperious" and "demanding" attitude for a long time. In literary caricature, widows are usually inseparable from penniless suitors, and they are invariably deceived and exploited by these "virile young men, as the ladder for the ambitions of the Horatio Algers of the day" (Carlton 119). They are deprived of their husbands' inheritance and means for living as punishment for their lechery, which has driven them to betrayal of their late husband, i.e., remarriage. As Charles Carlton notes, the most obvious example of such caricature is now lost: *Keep the Widow Waking*, most probably co-written by Dekker, Ford, Webster and Rowley. Dekker, who calls widows "musty wine" (265) in *The Batchelars Banquet* (London: 1603), advises the "poor [who] wealth would acquire" to "get some rich old widow and grow wealth[y] by her" (qtd. in Carlton 118). Richard Hodgkins, who wrote a ballad referring to the same play (c.1624), also concludes thus: "sometimes that haps in an houre, / that comes not in seaven yeare, / Therefore let yong men that are poore, / come take example [of how to deprive widows] here, /.../ The play will teach you at the Bull" (qtd. in Sisson 106).

Turning down Carlton's argument that the trope is against the factual life of contemporary widows (122-123), Vivian Brodsky more persuasively demonstrates how this familiar image, though "exaggerated and parodied", "has at least some basis in historical reality" (126). Though rich widows of the upper class and those of the poor, lower class rarely remarried, "[t]he union of older widows and younger men was a *common* pattern of city marriages" in the contemporary London, especially for widows of craftsmen and tradesmen (Brodsky 127). In those days, when "[m]any marriages were broken after only a few years by the early death of one of the partners" (Wrightson 103), more frequently of husbands (Brodsky 123), neither widows nor their remarriage were uncommon. Nonetheless, savage caricature was prevalent and popular both in texts and plays. Carlton explains this phenomenon as a reflection of male fear for "posthumous cuckoldry" (125). Indeed, the shortness of widows' sorrow over their husbands' death and their quick remarriage are two major themes of such caricature. Carlton regards this early modern trope of the "lusty widow", along with the similarly common theme of cuckoldry, an example of Freud's argument on jokes that "people [laugh] at things of which they are consciously or unconsciously afraid" (124). However, his simplistic attribution of this phenomenon solely to the male audience's unconsciousness neglects the diversity of the audience and the multifaceted

nature of this trope. Though excluded from Carlton's argument, there must have been many groups of audience other than men fearing their "posthumous cuckoldry". The first group is that of women, perhaps even including widows themselves (Kehler, *Widows* 193). For them, this trope of a "lusty widow" must have been "an ideological weapon used to enforce a widow's continued celibacy" (Panek 7). By showing the tragic but ridiculous consequence of such conduct, the trope must have functioned as a powerful discouragement of remarriage. The other group is of young, penniless bachelors, or those 'potential' suitors, for whom it may have served as a serious encouragement for widow hunting. Indeed, we can verify this function of the trope from the historical record. As Jennifer Panek shows, Dr. Raven assailed Elizabeth Bennet, a wealthy widow, in the night of November in 1628, believing her to be sensual (1). Though his attempt failed and the consequence was disastrous, Dr. Raven's case not just shows the ideological influence on 'potential' suitors, but also on real life in general. In short, the "lusty widow" trope has at least three functions, two of which are explicitly didactic.

However, it is immediately noticeable that these two instructive functions are contradictory to each other. While a "lusty widow" trope instructs widows to preserve their celibacy, the same trope urges men to deprive it. In Panek's words, there is a "discrepancy between the accepted formulation that male anxiety about a widow's unrestrained sexuality led to the deployment of the stereotype of the lusty widow as a scare tactic to discourage remarriage, and the use to which this stereotype is put in so many comedies of the period" (9). Panek's argument not only turns down Carlton's "posthumous cuckoldry" theory, but also brings in a new perspective on this familiar trope. Also referred to in Panek, Linda Woodbridge's perspective on the supposed lechery of widows becomes very suggestive in this context. According to her argument, lechery does not refer to the literal sexuality of widows, but "the charge...was a smear tactic against assertiveness and liberty" made possible by the comparative autonomy allowed in widowhood (Woodbridge 178). Though concealed under a broader misogynistic discourse against female sexuality, the male anxieties represented in this "lusty widow" trope are directed not so much against their femininity as against their improper masculinity.

Woodbridge and Panek's attempt to distinguish lechery from widowhood not just makes us realize the male anxiety over widows' masculinity, but also allows us to discuss the representation of widows outside the "lusty widow" trope, in which the same anxiety over female autonomy is reflected in the figure of a widow. On this ground, we are now prepared to consider Shakespeare's representation of widowhood. In Shakespeare's plays, although there are many female characters associated with widowhood, it is often difficult to decide the extent in which it influences their psychology or actions. Widowhood is often merely one aspect of their multifaceted personality, or too insignificant to convey some dramatic or ideological effects. Dorothea Faith Kehler, in her inclusive study, counts thirty-one widow characters, including what she calls "seeming widows", those "characters who do not know whether their husbands are living or dead" (*Widows* 43). Thus she includes from Aemilia in *The Comedy of Errors*, whose husband comes back at the end, to Juliet, who kills herself immediately after her husband's death. However, it is problematic to explain all these characters and their actions in terms of their widowhood. Kehler concludes that Shakespeare's attitude toward widows is sympathetic (*Widows* 28), because not just he, "[u]nlike Middleton or his fellows who wrote city

comedy...seldom depicted widows as a target of satire" (*Widows* 193), but rather he "creates greater complexity, some qualification of traditional stereotypes, and the overdetermination that expands interpretive possibilities" (*Widows* 13). However, such "complexity" cannot be attributed simply to Shakespeare's attempt to extenuate widows from a negative image, especially when widowhood is merely one of the character's components.

That Shakespeare, rather than creating a uniform quasi-allegorical widow character, connects widowhood with other multiple components of a character is actually helpful for us to examine broader cultural perspectives. As Panek points out, Shakespeare rarely applies the "lusty widow" trope, and especially "comic plots of remarriage do not seem to have interested [him]" (5). There are, of course, a few general references about the shortness of widow's sorrow (*Much Ado About Nothing* 5.3.69-72, *Macbeth* 4.2.62-64), widow's sensuality (*Antony and Cleopatra*, 1.2.57-61), or widow's remarriage driven by the financial interest of suitors (Timon of Athens, 4.3.38-39). There is also one character that suits perfectly to the "lusty widow" trope in *The Taming of the Shrew*, and this "wealthy" (4.2.37) and "lusty" (4.2.50) widow remarries Hortensio, who must be younger and less wealthy, at the end of the play. However, due to her shallowness as a character and late appearance on the stage, she rather appears as a dramatic necessity to balance the financial and marital interests of three male characters.

While Shakespeare was "wary of the 'lusty widow' trope" (Kehler, "Certain Age" 23), he often presents widows as tragic, helpless figures who grieve over their deceased husbands. This "traditional image of deprivation", as Raymond A. Anselment calls it, is not at all new, as can be seen in the Old Testament (19). There, "the fatherless and widow[ed]" are presented as powerless and helpless (*Bible*, Psalm. 146.9; Isaiah. 1.17). They must be protected, and to abuse them invite God's indignation: "Do not take advantage of a widow or an orphan. If you do and they cry out to me, I will certainly hear their cry. My anger will be aroused, and I will kill you with the sword; your wives will become widows and your children fatherless" (*Bible*, Exodus. 22.21-23). This image must have been as familiar as the "lusty widow" trope. Indeed, we can see Juan Luis Vives, in *De institutione feminae christianae* (1523), which has been first translated into English by Richard Hyrde (London: 1592), quotes and comments on these references: "In widowhood, Christ the spouse will give his help to one who wishes to live a holy life" (314). This reference to the Old Testament provides two characteristics of widows: their predicament without a protector, and their lamentable cry.

Even when Shakespeare seems to depend on this traditional image, his widow characters appear problematically in the play. The first example is the Duchess of Gloucester in *Richard II*. Her only appearance in Act 2 Scene 2 is Shakespeare's invention (Forker 200). In this scene, the Duchess not just grieves over her murdered husband, but also tries to persuade Gaunt into vengeance. Calling her husband "Thomas, my dear lord, my life, my Gloucester" (1.2.16), she appeals to Gaunt's affection as a brother: "In suffering thus thy brother to be slaughtered / Thou show'st the naked pathway to thy life, / Teaching stern murder how to butcher thee" (1.2.30-32). However, her persuasion fails to move him to action. Calling the king "God's substitute" (1.2.37), he regards it improper to "lift / An angry arm against his minister" (1.2.40-41). As a consequence, in her despair and misery, she expires alone ("An hour before I came, the Duchess died" (2.2.97)), probably in her "empty lodgings and unfurnished walls, / Unpeopled offices,

untrodden stones" (1.2.68-69). Her last speech to Gaunt even gives an impression of distraction: "Lo this is all.—Nay, yet depart not so!" (1.2.63), "[b]id him—ah, what?—" (1.2.65).

Like the Duchess of Gloucester, Lady Percy in *2 Henry IV* is also a pathetic, but problematic, widow character. She is given a very limited appearance on the stage, which is, again, "almost entirely a Shakespearean invention" (Kehler, *Widows* 107). Her "moving eulogy" of her husband is touching, and her faithfulness to him contrasts clearly with Northumberland's betrayal of his son (Kehler, *Widows* 4). However, like the Duchess of Gloucester, she also attempts to influence Northumberland's political decision. Moreover, while the Duchess fails in her persuasion of Gaunt, Lady Percy's speech moves Northumberland and makes him "resolve for Scotland" (2.3.67). It is noteworthy that her persuasion of Northumberland is also driven by her personal affection for her husband: "Never, O never do his ghost the wrong / To hold your honour more precise and nice / With others than with him" (2.3.39-41). Shakespeare seems to imply that her intervention is the very cause of his fall, for Northumberland never appears on the stage again, as he is "by the sheriff of Yorkshire overthrown" (4.3.99).

At the beginning of *Richard II*, Richard enquires to Gaunt whether Bolingbroke's accusation against Mowbray is not driven by his vengeance: "hast thou sounded him / If he appeal the Duke on ancient malice / Or worthily, as a good subject should, / On some known ground of treachery in him?" (1.1.8-11). In the male realm of politics, it is improper to bring in something private. Nonetheless, both the Duchess of Gloucester and Lady Percy disturb this rule by appealing to their listeners' personal affections. These widows try to intrude into the political realm of men, bringing in their private sentiment improperly.

Widows appear most problematically, however, when Shakespeare conflates widowhood and motherhood in his female characters (Rose 310). We can see such examples in Tamora (*Titus Andronicus*), Constance, Eleanor, Lady Faulconbridge (*King John*), the Countess of Rossillion (*All's Well That Ends Well*) and Volumnia (*Coriolanus*). Except Constance and the Countess, Shakespeare clearly presents his widowed mother characters as masculine and formidable. Some of them are compared to men: Eleanor is a "soldier" (1.1.150), and Volumnia is asked: "Are you mankind?" (4.2.18). Some of them are too sensual: Tamora with her "foul desire" (2.3.79) is said to have "[n]o womanhood" (2.3.182), whereas Lady Faulconbridge has cuckolded her husband: "Hath she no husband / That will take pains to blow a horn before her?" (1.1.218-219). In the plays, their improper autonomy and exercise of power not only triggers the play's conflict, but often brings in a tragic consequence to the play. They are given this influential power at the cost of their positive image and audience's sympathy.

While his representation of widows and their autonomy appears to be thoroughly negative, Shakespeare seems to make Constance in *King John* and the Countess in *All's Well That Ends Well* an exception. In this paper, we will focus on one of these exceptional characters, the Countess of Rossilion in *All's Well That Ends Well*. When we look at critical opinions about this widowed mother, their responses are mostly positive. Bernard Shaw calls her "the most beautiful old woman's part ever written" (qtd. in Honigmann 80), and Vivian Thomas follows his praise by calling her "a woman of great feeling and perception" (65). Since the Countess appears as the least problematic character, she has been often excluded from the critical attention (Kehler, "Certain Age" 28). Even when the Countess is problematized, critics seem to refrain from

indicating her clearly as a problematic character. For instance, while Janet Adelman reveals the working of a maternal power that brings Bertram back to his home in her psychoanalytic study of the play, she maintains that the Countess "herself is kept innocent of agency" (79). Although, according to Adelman, "the Countess's binding maternal power is extended through" other female characters (80), who "act for her, relentlessly bringing Bertram home" (79), the Countess's intention "as an isolated character" is "kept deliberately shadowy" (80). For R. B. Parker, the Countess cannot be problematic on her own, unless she reminds Bertram his renowned father. Unlike Adelman, Parker considers that it is not his mother but his father, from whom Bertram tries to escape at the beginning of the play: "Like any adolescent whose widowed mother insists that he lives up to a formidable father, Bertram wishes to escape from Roussillon in order to establish an identity for himself" (100). Bertram's rejection of Helena is also explained in relation to his father: "His 'I know her well: / She had her breeding at my father's charge'...shows that he associates Helena with the home he is trying to escape" (Parker 101). However, as Kehler maintains, the Countess is in fact represented as a problematic character in the play ("Certain Age" 28-29). The play's conflict obviously centres on Helena's unequal marriage to Bertram, and Shakespeare clearly attributes this conflict to this female character. This paper will examine Shakespeare's representation of the Countess and how he indicates her motherhood and widowhood as disruptive of the society.

The Countess's Problematic Motherhood

According to Mary Beth Rose, the traditional Catholic discourse "conceptualize[d] motherhood as a private, almost pre-social interaction between mother and baby or small child" (300). A mother's role in children's education was "strictly limited to their early spiritual training", and mothers were prohibited from intervening to their "later public and socialized lives" (Rose 301). After the Reformation, however, their participation within the public, social realm was sanctioned, as the Protestant project to redefine a family distinguished "educating children and arranging their marriage" as a mother's obligation (Rose 307). The Protestant doctrine brought in a new aspect to the discourse, as can be seen in Thomas Bentley's *The Monument of Matrones* (London: 1582). In this "one of the earliest and largest devotional books published for women in England" (Atkinson & Stoneman 87), which contains "a variety of genres, from daily household prayers to longer theological meditations" (Atkinson & Stoneman 89), Bentley writes: "It is the mothers duety, as well as the fathers, to prouide a godly husbande for her daughter, or a virtuous wife for her sonne....The mother ought to haue great care in the marrying and bestowing of her children" (qtd. in Rose 307). The Protestant discourse encouraged a mother's active involvement in some particular public matters.

However, by describing motherhood "not simply in the rhetoric of early love and nurture but also in the vocabulary of social power", it inevitably empowered a mother as another authority within a family (Rose 307). William Gouge writes, for instance, in *Of Domesticall Duties* (London: 1622): "Though there be a difference betwixt father and mother in relation of one to another, yet in relation to their children they are both as one, and haue a like authority ouer them" (Ii3^{r}). While Gouge preserves the hierarchical relationship between wife and husband

(Rose 308), such recognition of the mother's authority contradicts the conventional gender hierarchy.

To resolve this paradox, the contemporary discourse often stressed a mother's lack of judgment in those public matters. The anxiety over the mother's problematic marital arrangement was one of such examples. According to Rose, "[t]he power of women to effect cultural change both by choosing socially unequal husbands and by arranging upwardly or downwardly mobile marriages for their children was widely acknowledged and feared in Renaissance England" (310). Whether fabricated or factual, we can see such anxiety represented in *Eastward Ho* (1605). In this play, Mistress Touchstone's arrangement of her daughter's ambitious marriage to a knight, which would make her daughter a lady and herself a noble's kinswoman, becomes a conflict. Through her marital arrangement, Mistress Touchstone and her daughter not just defy the father's authority, but also threaten the social order: "though my father be a low-capped tradesman, yet I must be a lady; and I praise God my mother must call me medam" (1.2.4-6).

Although the early modern English society was experiencing "a quickened pace of both upward and downward social mobility, leading over time to a significant modification of the profile of stratification" (Wrightson 140), there was "[t]he simultaneous insistence on rigid hierarchy", which distinguished the gentry from the rest of the population (Cox 136). In this society, "the word *gentleman* meant something tangible, substantial enough", "mark[ing] the exact point at which the traditional social system divided up the population into two extremely unequal sections" (Laslett 27). Such insistence on distinction, which indicates not "simply...social status" but also "wealth and power" of the gentry (Laslett 23), was most keen when marriage was concerned. For instance, John Ferne, a gentleman who has written *The Blazon of Gentrie* (London: 1587) "for the instruction of all Gentlemen bearers of Armes" according to its title page, maintains: "Gentleman, and holding by the noble seruice of knighthood...shall marrie the same pupil...although the woman be formed of a most excellent proportion of body, her yeeres tender, her beauty fresh, her portion rich, and her heritage very ample, yet for all this, here is a disparagement, and it is the vnequall coupling in yoke of the cleane Oxe, and the vncleane Asse" (B5^{r}). Much later, in the second decade of the seventeenth century, Massinger makes Lovell repudiates unequal marriages in *A New Way to Pay Old Debts* (c. 1625): "Were *Ouerreach*' states thrice centupl'd; his daughter Millions of degrees, much fairer than she is, / (How e're I might vrge presidents to excuse me) / I would not so adulterate my blood / By marrying *Margaret*, and so leaue my issue / Made vp of seuerall peeces, one part scarlet / And the other *London*-blew" (4.1.220-227). Though, as in the case of Ferne, Massinger's insistence on class distinction and purity of noble blood probably comes from his pride as a son of a gentleman (Massinger, vol. 1 xvi), we see antagonism against marriage between a peer and a commoner clearly indicated in these contemporary texts.

When compared with these texts and the play's source, William Painter's *Palace of Pleasure* (1566; 1575), the society in *All's Well* appears much more lenient toward Helena's unequal marriage. As Thomas points out, it is only Bertram, who considers "status is everything" and his marriage to "someone of Helena's social standing would be to suffer dishonor regardless of her personal qualities" (146). Still, the union appears as inauspicious in the play. When we compare

the denouement with Painter's ending, the distinction is conspicuous. In Painter, after the wife's begging and the husband's acceptance of his wife, the story not only ends happily, but also promises the couple's bright future: "from that time forth, hee loved and honoured her, as his dere spouse and wife" (qtd. in Hunter, *All's Well* 152). On the contrary, Shakespeare finishes his play by accusation and humiliation of Bertram, "run[ning] out of options" but to accept Helena (Thomas 65). As often noted, Bertram's last word is enigmatic: "if she, my liege, can make me know this clearly / I'll love her dearly, ever ever dearly" (5.3.315-316). As E. A. J. Honigmann points out, Bertram seems to imply, "if she can convince me that the child is mine—and not before" (82). Though righteously fulfilled, the "heavy repetition of 'if' and 'seems'" hardly promises their happy future (Parker 112). The audience is thus "left pondering the possible scenarios beyond the end of the play" (Thomas 166).

This problematic ending is not at all surprising, because the union seems to lack any mutual affection from the beginning of the play. In his departure to France, not just Bertram keeps silence while his mother admires Helena's quality, but also leaves as soon as Helena steps into their conversation. His last word to Helena is also least sympathetic: "Be comfortable to my mother, your mistress, and make much of her" (1.1.74-75). Stressing his superiority to Helena by calling the Countess "my mother" and "your mistress", it is almost impossible to imagine Bertram regarding Helena as a potential spouse. Helena's love to Bertram is also dubious in its nature. Though she is immensely in love with him, her admiration of Bertram is only directed to his appearance and not his inner quality: "'Twas pretty, though a plague, / To see him every hour, to sit and draw / His archéd brows, his hawking eye, his curls, / In our heart's table—heart too capable / Of every line and trick of his sweet favour" (1.1.91-95). As Helena unconsciously and righteously acknowledges, her love to Bertram appears as rather "idolatrous" (1.1.96). Although critics, defending Helena against her negative image as an "opportunist" or "a social climber" (Rutter 113), often stress the purity and integrity of her love to Bertram (Cox 149; Toole 138), their different social status at least seems to have intensified her desire by prohibiting Helena from pursuing the visible prey: "What power is it which mounts my love so high, / That makes me see and cannot feed mine eye?" (1.1.216-217). It is ironic, as E. M. W. Tillyard maintains, that Helena, "with so much intelligence and so firm a mind", "can be possessed by so enslaving a passion for an unformed, rather stupid, morally timid, and very self-centred youth" (112). After experiencing Bertram's unkind treatment, there remains no room for her previous idolatrous love (Parker 112). Not just it is an enforced marriage for Bertram throughout the play, but also the marriage is not an auspicious one for Helena, neither.

Like Chapman, Johnson and Marston in *Eastward Ho*, Shakespeare attributes this problematic marriage to a mother figure. In Painter, it appears that the king is responsible for this unequal marriage. Before even being asked, the king in Painter offers Giletta, Helena's original, to "bestow...uppon some gentleman, that shalbe of right good worship and estimation" (qtd. in Hunter, *All's Well* 147). After the king has recovered, Giletta chooses the Count Beltramo for her husband. The king is "very loth to graunt him unto her", "knowing full well" that "he is a gentleman of great honour" (Painter, qtd. in Hunter, *All's Well* 147). However, bound to his own promise, the king reluctantly urges the Count to accept Giletta and enacts their unequal marriage. On the other hand, Shakespeare indicates the Countess as the primary initiator of this marital

arrangement. Unlike Giletta who is so "riche" that many suitors throng around her, Helena cannot afford to initiate her marital scheme on her own (Painter, qtd. in Hunter, *All's Well* 145). Exposing Helena's real purpose, the Countess could have prevented Helena from her ambitious and potentially incestuous love (Adelman 80; Parker 101), by depriving her of the means to go to France. Instead, not just the Countess indicates that "a poor physician's daughter might be socially acceptable as a count's wife" (Honigmann 81), but also provides Helena with necessities to realize her wish by offering at the end of their meeting: "my leave and love, / Means and attendants, and my loving greetings / To those of mine in court" (1.3.250-252). After their marriage is enacted, the Countess declares: "It hath happened all as I would have had it" (3.2.1).

It is not just that Shakespeare makes the Countess responsible for the problematic marriage between Bertram and Helena; it is also significant that he stresses her motherhood as the cause of her disturbing marital arrangement. Though Shakespeare does not necessarily condemn unequal marriages in general, the distinction in social status between Helena and Bertram functions as deterrence to their inauspicious union in the play. The Countess removes this deterrence by contending her motherhood to both of them. At the beginning of the play, the Countess claims: "In delivering my son from me I bury a second husband" (1.1.1-2). Not just her speech and costume indicates her widowhood (1.1.SD), but also, as both G. K. Hunter and Russell Fraser point out, "a quibble on *delivering*" introduces "one of the leading ideas of the play", namely "[t]he intimate connection of birth and death" (Hunter, *All's Well* 3; Fraser, *All's Well* 41). The Countess here implies that "the delivery of a son into the world of responsibility is as a death to the mother, though as a birth to the son" (Hunter, *All's Well* 3). However, we should not forget that this is also a rebirth for the Countess as a mother. Though she dies as a wife of the Count and a mother of Bertram, with Helena "bequeathed to her overlooking" (1.1.36-37), she is reborn as a surrogate mother of a newly acquired daughter.

Assigned as a guardian of Helena, the Countess cherishes her adopted daughter as much as her own son, if not more. Indeed, while she seemingly laments over the death of her late husband and her son's departure, it is the memory of Helena's deceased father and Helena's "honesty" (1.1.42) and "goodness" (1.1.43) of which she talks at the beginning of the play. In her next meeting with Helena, the Countess calls herself "a mother" (1.3.134), contending that Helena, though an adopted child, should be regarded as fondly as her own: "'Tis often seen / Adoption strives with nature, and choice breeds / A native slip to us from foreign seeds" (1.3.140-142). It is important that Helena denies the Countess' proclaiming herself mother twice, in both cases referring to the difference between herself and the Rossillions. Helena first distinguishes herself as a servant of the Countess, correcting the Countess's word by calling her "[m]ine honourable mistress" (1.3.134). Then she makes a clear contrast between their social status, comparing her inferiority to their superiority in each sentence: "The Count Rossillion cannot be my brother. / I am from humble, he from honoured name; / No note upon my parents, his all noble. / My master, my dear lord he is, and I / His servant live and will his vassal die. / He must not be my brother" (1.3.151-155). Her "must not" not just denies the possibility, but also prohibits the conflation of two sharply distinguished status of the peer and the commoner. Nonetheless, the Countess insists on her motherhood ("Nor I your mother?" (1.3.156)) and finally makes Helena submit: "You are my mother" (1.3.157). Placing Helena "in the catalogue of those / That were enwombéd mine"

(1.3.139-140), the Countess declares: "Which of them both / Is dearest to me I have no skill in sense / To make distinction" (3.4.38-40). Blurring the "distinction" between a native son and an adopted daughter and allowing a marriage between a peer and a commoner, the Countess' action thus appears problematically in the play.

The Countess's Female Sexuality and Widowhood

Shakespeare stresses not just the Countess's motherhood, but also her female sexuality as potentially disruptive in the play. As often pointed out, "an excess of desire" makes Helena represented as "a disorderly woman" in the play (Schwartz 200). Knowing that her love to Bertram is almost equal to "love a bright particular star / And think to wed it" (1.1.85-86), her sexual desire nonetheless craves for Bertram and drives her into ambitious love: "The hind that would be mated by the lion / Must die for love" (1.1.90-91). However, it is not just Helena's desire which appears problematically in the play. Shakespeare also indicates the Countess's female sexuality as a problem, by forming complicity between the Countess and Helena through their common understanding of female sexual desire.

Before her meeting with Helena, the Countess explains the motive behind her support for Helena's unequal love:

> Even so it was with me when I was young.
> If ever we are nature's, these are ours: this thorn
> Doth to our rose of youth rightly belong.
> Our blood to us, this to our blood is born;
> ...
> By our remembrances of days foregone,
> Such were our faults—or then we thought them none.
> (1.3.124-127, 130-131)

As Kehler points out, the Countess identifies herself with Helena ("Certain Age" 28), with whom she shares the same "blood". Later in the play, this word reappears in the king's persuasion of Bertram to his disparaged marriage: "Strange is it that our bloods, / Of colour, weight, and heat, poured all together, / Would quite confound distinction, yet stands off / In differences so mighty" (2.3.119-122). While both of them speak on behalf of Helena, Shakespeare seems to imply more in the Countess's speech than that of the king. In her speech, this word, "usually glossed as "passion"" (Hunter, *All's Well* 27), is by no means devoid of sexual implication. As Fraser maintains, the Countess implies that "as we are born with blood a passionate disposition is born in our blood" (*All's Well* 58). The *Oxford English Dictionary*, under "blood", gives definitions that include "[t]he supposed seat of animal or sensual appetite; hence, the fleshly nature of man", simultaneously indicating two examples from Shakespeare's usage ("Blood" *sb.* 6). In *Lover's Complaint*, a young woman tells how ineffectual her effort to keep her "honour shielded" (151) has been in front of a lover's "appetite" (166): "Nor gives it satisfaction to our blood / That we must curb it upon others' proof, / To be forbod the sweets that seems so good / For fear of harms

that breach in our behoof " (162-165). The other example is in *The Tempest*, in which Prospero admonishes Ferdinand to refrain from premarital sexual contact with Miranda: "The strongest oaths are straw / To th 'fire i'th' blood" (4.1.52-53). Here again, "blood" is indicated as "the seat of strong passions, including sexual" (Mason Vaughan & T. Vaughan, *Tempest* 245).

The sexual implication particularly evident in the Countess's usage of the word can be supported by a similar sentiment later proclaimed by Helena. After her confession of love for Bertram, she begs for her mistress's understanding as following: "My dearest madam, / Let not your hate encounter with my love / For loving where you do; but if yourself, / Whose aged honor cites a virtuous youth, / Did ever in so true a flame of liking / Wish chastely and love dearly, that your Dian / Was both herself and Love, O then give pity (1.3.203-209). Comparing chastity with love, Dian with unnamed Venus, she asks for the Countess's "pity" by openly appealing to their common female sexual desire. Their latent meanings behind "blood" and "love" are in fact revealed in advance by the clown. That Helena is, if not only, also driven by sexual desire is articulated in the clown's parodying Helena's confession of love to the Countess. The clown, like Helena in later, asks for his mistress's permission "to go to the world" (1.3.18). While seemingly implies Helena's journey to France, the phrase derived from "the Catholic view of the essential carnality of marriage", is also sexually suggestive (Hunter, *All's Well* 22). When questioned for that reason, the clown refers to his carnal desire: "My poor body, madam, requires it. I am driven on by the flesh, and he must needs go that the devil drives" (1.3.28-30). As "a voice available to say the unsayable", the clown reveals "the physical basis" of female love (Snyder 23). We should not forget that Parolles, in his debate with Helena, has also referred to mother's sexuality earlier in the play: "To speak on the part of virginity is to accuse your mothers" (1.1.135-136). The Countess and Helena's common understanding of female sexual desire thus forms a bond between these women, sufficiently powerful to bring about Helena's unequal marriage.

It is interesting that Shakespeare forms the bond between two women through their common knowledge about sexuality. A pair of women who know both sexual desire and this marital scheme of Helena are clearly contrasted with the king and Bertram, both of whom lack the same knowledge. In the play, Shakespeare represents Helena's medical expertise as something erotic by giving it "a sexual edge" (Schwarz 213). When introducing Helena to the king, Lafew praises her skill as following: "whose simple touch / Is powerful to araise King Pépin, nay, / To give great Charlemain a pen in's hand, / And write to her a love-line" (2.1.74-77). His words, "araise" and "pen", evoke an image of erection, which is also brought back in the king's speech (Adelman 82): "she has rais'd me from my sickly bed" (2.3.112). Lafew also compares himself to "Cressid's uncle" (2.1.97), whose name has become "the eponym of pandars" (Hunter, *All's Well* 40; Fraser, *All's Well* 68). His description of the recovered king ("lustier" (2.3.27), "*Lustig*" (2.3.42)) are even more explicit. Paradoxically, as many critics points out, such misogynistic representation of Helena's medical knowledge inevitably implies the king's impotence. Not only the king is sexually defective, but also he seems to be ignorant of their plan throughout the play. As Lisa Jardine points out, "while the dowager Countess Rossillion is party to Helena's scheme", the king "is unwittingly made complicit in a marriage which disparages his ward" (55). Although his abuse of parental and royal authority seem to make him a formidable father, he appears "rather foolish by the convolutions of the plot" on account his impotence and ignorance (Parker

112). Also, Bertram is not just unaware of their scheme but also of the complicity between his mother and Helena. He is thus astonished and "changed almost into another man" (4.3.5) for his mother's unexpected response to his letter pledging her understanding. His own sexual prowess is highly problematic, though he admittedly proves his potency by getting Helena pregnant. Although we cannot tell the extent to which "his fear of sexuality and especially of being unable to fill his wife's sexual demands" has affected his rejection of Helena (Snyder 23), he is not just blind to the identity of his sex partner, but made vulnerable and ashamed by that ignorance: "when I was like this maid / I found you wondrous kind" (5.3.311-312). The play thus presents a figure, in which the sexually experienced women prevail over the sexually ignorant men.

It is not a mere coincidence that this reversal is mainly evoked in the conversation between the Countess and the clown, who insistently repeats the theme of cuckoldry to his mistress. Despite the fact that her sexuality is rather suppressed throughout the play, in his speech with the Countess, the clown repeatedly mentions the motif (1.3.39-55, 60-63; 2.2.24; 4.5.26-27).When the Countess orders him to fetch Helena ("do as I command you" (1.3.88-89)), the clown defies his mistress's authority by replying: "That man should be at woman's command, and yet no hurt done!" (1.3.90-91). Even when he seemingly obeys her order, he mocks his mistress by initiating a similar sexual image. When the Countess reconfirms her order ("You understand me" (2.2.63-64)), he replies: "Most fruitfully" (2.2.65). As both Hunter and Fraser point out, the clown's word "fruitfully" indicates child-bearing and makes "an obscene pun" with the Countess's word "understand" (Hunter, *All's Well* 49; Fraser, *All's Well* 75). The common image underlying these references is that of a "woman on top" (Jardine 53). Though Susan Snyder maintains that the clown's attack against "a situation where woman exerts power over man" is directed not to the Countess but Helena (22), it is obvious that the accusation is addressed to his listener as much as her adopted daughter. The Countess is thus signified as "a threat" both "in the social and in the sexual sphere" through the clown's speech (Jardine 53).

That Shakespeare represents the Countess as a widow becomes the most important in this context. As already mentioned in introduction, gender discourse in early modern England often represents a widow as a formidable figure; financially independent, sexually experienced and so potentially disruptive to the patriarchal gender hierarchy. Many texts exhort young men to refrain from marriage with widows, maintaining that "[w] idows could use their own sexuality to dominate a less mature husband" (Carlton 128). For instance, Dekker in *The Batchelars Banquet* maintains: "a lusty widow, of a middle age and much experience; who by the trial which she had of her first husband, knowes how to handle the secod" (263). Later, Alex Niccholes in *A Discourse on Money and Wiving* (London: 1615) also expresses a similar anxiety over the widow's experience and knowledge: "At the decease of their first husbands they learn commonly the tricks to take over the second or third" (qtd. in Carlton 128). Though neither her sexuality nor her remarriage literally become problematic, Shakespeare seems to transfer such an image of a widow in his representation of the Countess. It is indeed her husband's death and her widowhood that enables the Countess's active involvement in her son's marital arrangement. Shakespeare thus represents not just the Countess's motherhood but also her widowhood problematically.

Suppression of the Countess's Autonomous Power

Interestingly, however, while the Countess's autonomy appears problematically in the play, unlike that of other widowed mother characters, her autonomy does not bring in a tragic consequence to the play. Indeed, the Countess is the only figure that appears in Shakespeare's comedy, despite her improper autonomy brings in the play's conflict. As already mentioned, other widowed mother characters, i.e., Elizabeth, the Duchess of York, Margaret (*Richard III*), Constance, Eleanor, Lady Faulconbridge (*King John*), or Volumnia (*Coriolanus*), all appear in a play's tragic context. Although there are several widow characters in comedies, The Widow (*Taming of the Shrew*), Mistress Quickly (*2 Henry IV*) or Mistress Overdone (*Measure for Measure*), not just their motherhood is never mentioned, but also their autonomy is irrelevant to the play's conflict.

When we look at his widowed mother characters whose autonomy brings in the play's tragic consequence, we realize that Shakespeare eliminates a powerful male figure from his plays. For instance, in *King John*, there is no father figure on the English side, but only John whose kingship has been mainly acquired by his mother (Dusinberre 43). Not just Eleanor intervenes her son's first meeting with a French ambassador (1.1.5), but also advises John to accept Blanche's marriage to Lewis (2.1.470), to which John obediently follows. Although there is a father figure on the French side, he is also a weak ruler who cannot determine his political action. When John is excommunicated, the king of France is "perplexed" (3.1.147) and dependent entirely on Pandulph's opinion, "know[ing] not what to say" (3.1.147). Also in *Coriolanus*, while Shakespeare presents two surrogate father figures, Menenius and Cominius, these fathers are again powerless and even dependent on a powerful widowed mother especially in the latter part of the play. When they are deprived of any means to prevent Martius's assault on Rome, Cominius commits Rome to Volumnia's hand: "So that all hope is vain unless his noble mother / And his wife who as I hear mean to solicit him / For mercy to his country" (5.1.70-72). As these examples show, Shakespeare often excludes a powerful male figure from his plays when he represents widowed mothers' autonomy and masculinity as a source of tragedy. As Rose points out, "mothers are empowered when fathers fail" (310).

On the contrary, in *All's Well*, while representing the Countess's autonomy as problematic, Shakespeare simultaneously suppresses her influential power through his male characters. As we have seen above, while the Countess presents herself properly in mourning for her late husband, unlike his desperate widow characters who become helpless and miserable after their husbands' death, the Countess seems to be empowered through the death of her husband. At the beginning of the play, we see the Countess not just becomes a ruler of her household, but also tries to take over the role of a father. When Bertram asks his mother for her "holy wishes" (1.1.56), the Countess gives her son not just her blessing, but also some advice: "Love all, trust a few, / Do wrong to none. Be able for thine enemy / Rather in power than use, and keep thy friend / Under thy own life's key. Be checked for silence / But never taxed for speech" (1.1.61-65). As Hunter points out, the Countess's words remind us that of Polonius in *Hamlet*, in which he advices Laertes the proper social conduct (*All's Well* 7). Usually, these 'traditional topics of the "advice to a son"' are given from a father to a son (Hunter, *All's Well* 7; Thompson & Taylor, *Hamlet*

194). In this play, however, it is a widowed mother who teaches her son proper social conducts. Being a widow, the Countess seems to be given an opportunity to enjoy not just a status of a ruler, but also "the place of both father and mother" (Kelso 129). However, it is important to note that while she seems to take over her late husband's paternal role, it is soon deprived and occupied by the king, who is now a guardian of her son. The Countess's status as a mother of Bertram cannot detain her son, for, as Bertram maintains: "I must attend his majesty's command, to whom I am now in ward, evermore in subjection" (1.1.4-5). According to Lawrence Stone, though gradually declining, wardship was still a common practice for aristocracy in Shakespeare's England (601). While this allowed a king to exercise a power over his ward as a surrogate father, it deprived a widowed mother of her parental status (Stone 600). A surrogate father thus appears more importantly than a biological mother. Though the Countess seems to fulfill a father's place by presenting her son some morals, the very departure of Bertram indicates a forfeiture of her parental authority. It is also noteworthy that the king's taking over her parental authority is metaphorically connected to an image of her remarriage. This image, again, is brought in by another surrogate father figure, Lafew. At Bertram's departure, Lafew consoles the Countess and Bertram saying: "You shall find of the King a husband, madam; you, sir, a father" (1.1.6-7). Not just Lafew visually fills in the absent father's place on stage, literally depriving a mother of her son, but also thus invokes an image of "a symbolic family parented by the king and the countess" through his speech (Wheeler, qtd. in Kehler, 68). It is not a coincidence that a memory of her late husband is recollected by the king rather than the Countess. At his first meeting with Bertram, the king praises his deceased father's "humility": "Who were below him / He used as creatures of another place, / And bowed his eminent top to their low ranks, / Making them proud of his humility, / In their poor praise he humbled" (1.2.41-46). By treating Helena as equal to her superior, the king imitates or even embodies the Countess's deceased husband.

Her lack of power and subjection to the king are most clearly indicated in the consummation of her son's marriage. As Rose points out, while Shakespeare makes the Countess responsible for initiating this problematic marriage, it is the king who has an authority and power to "bring that marriage about" (310). Indeed, it is a threatening speech of this surrogate father, which ultimately defeats Bertram's objection. Exercising both his parental and royal authority, the king demands the filial obedience from Bertram: "Obey our will, which travails in thy good; / Believe not thy disdain, but presently, / Do thine own fortunes that obedient right / Which both thy duty owes and our power claims, / Or I will throw thee from my care for ever" (2.3.159-163). It is ironical that her lack of parental power seems to be first indicated by Helena, to whom the Countess expresses her entire support. After revealing Helena's love to her son, the Countess questions Helena about the real purpose of her journey: "Had you not lately an intent—speak truly—/ To go to Paris? /.../ Wherefore? Tell true" (1.3.214-217). Her question reveals that Helena, while asking for her mistress's permission and presumably financial support to realize her journey, has concealed its real purpose from the Countess. Helena consciously or unconsciously has known that her unequal marriage to Bertram, though most likely to be unwelcome to his mother, can be executed by the king without his mother's consent. While the surrogate father has a power to realize his ward's marriage, all this mother can do is to "stay at home / And pray God's blessing into [Helena's] attempt" (1.3.252-253). As a consequence, it is

only after the king's enactment that the Countess is given a voice to enforce Bertram his marriage. Even then, her speech clearly indicates her subordination to the king's authority. Reading her son's letter, the Countess reproaches her son thus: "This is not well, rash and unbridled boy, / To fly the favors of so good a King, / To pluck his indignation on thy head / By the misprizing of a maid too virtuous / For the contempt of empire" (2.2.28-32). Although the Countess refers to Helena's quality, her main concern is clearly on her son's defiance against the king. While Shakespeare attributes the play's conflict to this widowed mother and her autonomy, her power of influence is thus subtly suppressed by a male authority.

As the king deprives the Countess of her parental authority, the clown undermines it by defying and sexualizing her female autonomy. As already discussed, not just the clown defies her authority explicitly by crying, "[t]hat man should be at woman's command, and yet no hurt done!" (1.3.90-91), but also ridicules it by initiating a sexual image. From the beginning of the play, the clown appears as a "knave" (1.3.8), who disturbs the order of the Countess's household through his mischievous conducts. The Countess condemns the clown thus: "The complaints I have heard of you I do not all believe. 'Tis my slowness that I do not, for I know you lack not folly to commit them and have ability enough to make such knaveries yours" (1.3.9-12). It is important that the Countess not just refers to the clown's misbehavior but also her "slowness" in her speech. While she blames the clown's "folly", the disorder of her household is partially attributed to her own inadequacy as a ruler of her household. Again, it is interesting how Shakespeare relates the clown to the Countess's deceased husband. Though not mentioned until the last scene of Act 4, the clown is revealed as a remembrance of her late husband: "My lord that's gone made himself much sport out of him; by his authority he remains here, which he thinks is a patent for his sauciness, and indeed he has no pace, but runs where he will" (4.5.64-67). In the contemporary discourse about widows, we often encounter with a ghost image of a deceased husband. For instance, Vives, in *De institutione feminae christianae*, recommends a widow to "consider that her husband has not been altogether taken away from her, but that he is still alive with the life of the soul, which is the true and real life" (309). As "a free and pure spirit", Vives continues, a husband becomes "an observer and guardian not only of her external actions" but also of "her conscience" (310). The same sentiment is also indicated in Webster's description of "A virtuous Widdow" (c. 1614-1615). In this short account, compiled separately with his other thirty-one entries as *New Characters* in the sixth edition of Thomas Overbury's *Characters* (London: 1615) (Webster 439), Webster makes: "Her maine superstition is, shee thinks her husbands ghost would walke should shee not performe his Will" (478). Though not as explicit as the ghost in *Hamlet*, the clown thus appears as a haunting figure of the Countess's deceased husband, disrupting his household now maintained by an autonomous widow.

That Shakespeare represents the Countess along with male figures who are metaphorically connected to her deceased husband does not necessarily functions negatively to her image. Indeed, the king's enactment of the unequal marriage between Bertram and Helena, for instance, not just prevents the Countess's support of Helena from appearing extraordinary, but also takes over her responsibility to the play's conflict in some extent. As Hunter points out, the king is obviously against "[t]he institution of wardship", which entitles the guardian "to bestow his wards in marriage only with the proviso he did not commit "disparagement", i.e., marry them to

a commoner" (*All's Well* 53). According to Stone, wardship was "coming under increasing criticism at the end of the sixteenth and the beginning of the seventeenth centuries" (603), because wards were often forced to marry against their birth and will (601-602). It is possible to see the king as a representation of such a problematic guardian, and in this sense, the Countess's responsibility to the play's conflict is partially alleviated through Shakespeare's negative representation of the king. Still, it is important to note that the Countess is prohibited from enjoying her privileges as a widowed mother through these male characters that are related to an image of a husband. Although the Countess's image is very different from that of a "lusty widow", Shakespeare seems to appropriate a similar tactic to this trope, suppressing the widow's improper autonomy by subordinating her to another male authoritative figure.

This paper has reconsidered Shakespeare's representation of the Countess of Rossillion by comparing it with the other contemporary discourse about mother and widow. Although Shakespeare rarely appropriates the familiar "lusty widow" trope in his plays, like this common trope, his plays represent the anxiety over female autonomy in a figure of a widow or widowhood. In Shakespeare, widowhood is often conflated with motherhood, and most of his widowed mother characters appear as problematic in the play.

On the contrary, it has been generally maintained that Shakespeare represents the Countess in *All's Well* positively. However, his representation of the Countess is revealed to be as much problematic as his other widowed mother characters, whose autonomy bring in the very conflict into the play. Not just does Shakespeare attribute the problematic marriage between Bertram and Helena to this widowed mother, but also stresses her motherhood and widowhood as the origin of her problematic choice. Also we have seen how Shakespeare suppresses her influence by subordinating her to male authoritative characters that are metaphorically related to a husband figure. That Shakespeare attributes these factors to the Countess does not necessarily mean his primary concern was to insinuate a negative image about widowed mother. Still, the importance of these underlying stereotypes should not be underestimated.

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