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DIRTY SLUT: AN EXPLORATION OF MARGARET IN
SHAKESPEARE'S *MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING*

by

LAUREN ASHLEE STREET

B.A., Middle Tennessee State University, 2010

A Thesis

Submitted to the Faculty of the

College of Arts and Sciences

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

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A Thesis Approved on

APRIL 15, 2013

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First, I must acknowledge my father, mother, and sister as my foundation, mortar, and keystone. Without their unshakeable love, I would crumble.

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ABSTRACT

DIRTY SLUT: AN EXPLORATION OF MARGARET IN

SHAKESPEARE'S *MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING*

LAUREN ASHLEE STREET

APRIL 15, 2013

Throughout the past eleven years, my process as an actor has been influenced by my education in theatre, personal experiences, and changing views on literary figures and socio-political issues. Through the lens of a minor Shakespearean character, I examine my current process and relationship to the playwright and director and analyze the implications of my onstage representation of sexually active women. My views on gender politics prompt me to scrutinize the script, and I discover a tiny detail that confirms my character is innocent of the betrayal of her mistress and reaffirms my confidence in Shakespeare's abilities as a writer. However, I find the overall production repressive to women.

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INTRODUCTION

In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Oscar Wilde writes, “Good artists exist simply in what they make, and consequently are perfectly uninteresting in what they are.” However, does not an artist create out of what they are? The artist’s personal history and values will have an influence on the work of art itself. It cannot be avoided. What follows, then, is an examination of the parts of my personal history that contributed to the creation of Margaret in William Shakespeare’s *Much Ado about Nothing* as presented by the University of Louisville in November 2012.

There is not much to Margaret on paper. She is a flat stock character with a single function in the play that could have been carried out by Ursula if Shakespeare had written *Much Ado about Nothing* more efficiently. Even so, she still managed to give me quite a fit. How does an actor give a full life to a character who was given so little thought by its creator? It can be, and almost was, maddening.

Stock characters are easy to put on a stage. They lack subtext. Stock characters tend to be easy solutions for plot holes, used when the playwright is in a time crunch (or merely lacks skill.) I have yet to work with a director who paid much attention to stock characters once the role had been cast; indeed, for each stock character I have played, Margaret not excepted, the director barely bothered to give me notes on the performance after the blocking period ended. If the playwright did not work very hard on a character, and the director is happy so long as the character does not steal focus and can be heard, why should the actor bother pouring her soul into such a role? For me, it is a matter of personal integrity, and I was determined to use the twelve weeks I was to spend with Margaret to give her my very best.

To my surprise, I stumbled onto a dilemma. I would never have guessed a character like Margaret or a show like *Much Ado about Nothing* would fly in the face of principles that have

become very important not only to me, but to women everywhere. I became increasingly uncomfortable with the role, unsure of how to handle the situation in which I found myself.

II

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE: AVERAGE JOE

Sometimes, my opinion of the playwright affects my approach to a role. I admire Tennessee Williams tremendously, and my work on his plays tends to be intricate because I enjoy it so much. Truthfully, my work on every role should be as detail-oriented, and I strive to make it so, but when my opinion of the script or its creator is low it is difficult to motivate myself to work quite as hard. My feelings about William Shakespeare have undergone vast changes over the course of my life, and my struggle to relate to such a revered figure significantly impacted my relationship to Margaret.

I can recall my first time reading William Shakespeare with the same clarity as my baptism; in a way, it was a kind of holy experience and evoked in my twelve-year-old heart the same reverence I felt in church. The television program *Wishbone* had taught me his work was not only important, but something truly special that I wanted to experience for myself. I sat on the floor of the Clarksville-Montgomery County Public Library in front of the books with 800-level call numbers searching for *Romeo and Juliet* and running my fingers over the worn brown fabric of the spine with the gold lettering. I hugged it to my chest as I made my way downstairs to my favourite overstuffed chair in the far corner of the children's reading room. For once, I was alone; the large room was dim and quiet except for the rumbling from the HVAC unit that switched on and off periodically in such a way that I always imagined the library as a living thing breathing easily around me. I kicked off my pink flip flops and pulled my feet up in the blue chair. I remember being oddly nervous as I opened the cover and inhaled the wonderful old-book smell of the yellowing pages as I read, for the first time, "Two households, both alike in dignity."

For many years, I regarded William Shakespeare with the same fear I owed to God. Like God, he was distant and lofty, never to be questioned and never blasphemed. The similarity of Shakespeare's language to the King James Bible created a link in my mind that suggested his

work was the ultimate truth, and no matter how we mere mortals struggled to understand, he would always be slightly beyond our comprehension.

High school happened at once too quickly and too slowly, and somewhere in that strange fast-slow experience, I became fed up with literary analysis. During a unit on Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, my class learned of Huxley's psychedelic drug use, and from then onward I questioned the validity of everything I read. As a teenager, I had very definite opinions, and my opinion of substance abusers was decidedly low. It seemed all the writers on my required reading list were drunkards or drug addicts. I saw no reason to consider the words of F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemmingway, or Jack Kerouac with any more seriousness than those of Jay Buck and Sweet Man, the harmless but certainly whiskey-soaked vagabonds who loitered outside my grandmother's restaurant hoping for scraps and loose change.

I took this rebellious attitude a step further. Did a writer's sobriety give his words any more importance than, say, my father's simply because they were published in a textbook? I decided it did not. These wordsmiths were just people, like any other person I knew, and I was free to take their thoughts with a grain of salt, just as I would any stranger's.

In my last year at Clarksville High School, I auditioned for Lambuth University in Jackson, Tennessee. I was awarded an acting scholarship on the spot and invited to interview for a prestigious academic scholarship. During this interview, the topic of poetry interpretation was introduced, and I was asked to give my thoughts on *Romeo and Juliet*. Fueled by my distaste for the vices of revered writers, my remarks were something to this effect:

I think we give writers too much credit for being clever. Does anyone honestly think Shakespeare meticulously choose each and every word in each of his plays and sonnets? Of course not! Dude was on a deadline. Some of the lines in *Romeo and Juliet* are there for no other reason than they filled space and sounded good enough at the time.

I was being unfair and hostile, but years later as I started rehearsal for *Much Ado about Nothing* my opinion of the Bard was not much different. George Bernard Shaw coined the term "bardolatry," which refers to the treatment of Shakespeare as a genius of mythic proportions, as though every word in every play stemmed from some magical part of this god-like man's mystical,

unknowable brain, and for many years I held this belief. I thought the belligerence of my later teenage years had ended my reverence, but soon realized I was wrong.

As I was reading *Much Ado about Nothing* with an eye on Margaret and trying to piece together her specific sequence of events, I found myself wildly confused. I could not figure out whether or not Margaret had willingly betrayed her mistress Hero, or if she had been an unknowing pawn in Don John's plans to hurt Claudio. This information was vital to my portrayal of Margaret's relationship to each of the other characters, yet Shakespeare left me with almost nothing on which to base my choices. I tried to make sense of her association with Borachio, but could not find any concrete evidence of her guilt or innocence. I wondered if the lack of evidence was intentional on the part of the playwright. John Patrick Shanley intentionally leaves the audience wondering about the guilt of the priest in *Doubt*, but unlike Shanley's priest, Margaret's guilt is not the focus of *Much Ado about Nothing*, so withholding that information from the audience was curious. *Could the lack of information be a mistake?* I wondered. *Can Shakespeare even make mistakes?*

One night, as I was surfing the internet for lectures about the Bard, hoping for a little insight, I found a TED talk given by Sir Ken Robinson in February 2006, during which he said the following:

You don't think of Shakespeare having a father, do you? Do you? Because you don't think of Shakespeare being a child, do you, Shakespeare being seven. I never thought of it. I mean, he was seven at some point. He was in somebody's English class, wasn't he? How annoying would that be? Being sent to bed by his aunt. "Go to bed now... And put the pencil down. And stop speaking like that, you know, it's, it's confusing everybody."¹

So little is known about Shakespeare the man that it is easy to forget he was a human being. In 2006, I had traveled to Shakespeare's boyhood home and the cottage he had shared with his wife and children, yet whenever I thought of him, all I could picture were the stuffy, slightly pretentious portraits in my English textbooks. I never imagined ink stains on his fingers or

¹ Robinson, Ken. "Ken Robinson Says Schools Kill Creativity." Lecture. 28 Sept. 2012. *TED: Ideas worth Spreading*. June 2006. Web. 25 Mar. 2013.
<http://www.ted.com/talks/ken_robinson_says_schools_kill_creativity.html>

writer's block. I never pictured him playing with his children or quarreling in a tavern. I never imagined Shakespeare hanging out with friends.

My bardolatry had lasted longer than I realized, and it had been a great disadvantage to my performances. When I was cast as Laura Wingfield in Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie*, I researched the writer himself and discovered the piece was based on his personal life. I drew on biographies and documentaries which gave me a wealth of information that helped fully develop my character. For other playwrights, I could use their personal history to invent details about the real-life person who might have been the inspiration for my character and use these inventions as a foundation for my work. However, because I had for so long deified Shakespeare, I cut myself off from my own imagination and severely limited my performances. My church discouraged me from wondering whether Christ had ever had a crush on a girl, and insisted that a holy figure would not have had such trivial human experiences; in the same way, I had discouraged myself from imagining what Shakespeare had been like in real life, and if the people in his life had inspired his work the way that Tennessee Williams' family inspired his. I knew I needed to pull Shakespeare out of the holy place I had created for him in my mind.

I was not alone. In an interview regarding the creation of the screenplay for the 1998 film *Shakespeare in Love*, Marc Norman and Tom Stoppard revealed how humanizing Shakespeare helped them:

Norman: [Shakespeare] was a professional writer, and as soon as I saw he was a professional writer I knew he was broke, he was horny, and he was starved for an idea.

Stoppard: And the young writer was just like us when we were young writers. He happens to be called Will Shakespeare and he's a lot better, but roughly speaking, he has our problems.²

I was going to play a sex scene in *Much Ado about Nothing*, but it had never occurred to me that the author of that play, who had fathered children, could experience sexual arousal. His lasting popularity had clouded the fact that he was working class, just like my character, and just like me. I had never thought about the ways in which the Bard of Stratford on Avon and the budding actress and playwright from Henrietta, Tennessee were alike. Suddenly, I could envision

² *Shakespeare in Love and On Film*. Dir. John Madden. Perf. Marc Norman and Tom Stoppard. Universal Pictures, 1998. DVD.

Shakespeare sitting in a tavern talking shop with his contemporaries or pressing his head into his hands when trying to overcome writer's block, just like I do. I began to wonder if his original work, like Tennessee Williams', and like mine, was derived from personal experience.

What sets the artist apart from the layman is the artist does not simply experience life; he observes and records it. Writers (and actors) listen to the world around them. They watch how other people behave. They retain what they hear and see, and, whether directly or indirectly, these experiences influence their work. Shakespeare's own work supports the idea that he was out in the world experiencing it for himself when he writes in *Hamlet*, "The purpose of playing, whose end, both at the first and now, was and is to hold as 'twere the mirror up to nature." (3.2.20-22) In order to use art to hold a mirror up to nature, the artist must first see the world for herself. Shakespeare had to observe the world around him in order to use his skill to show it its own face. He could not have crafted stories that ring with human emotion without having those emotions himself, and those only come from personal human experiences. To quote American playwright Jeff Gottesfeld, "You can't write what you don't know."³

During the rehearsal when I said Margaret's line, "Will you then write me a sonnet in praise of my beauty?" (5.2.4-5) for the first time, an idea struck me. Could it be that Shakespeare had used a line he heard organically in his daily life? *Of course women were after Shakespeare to immortalize them in verse!* I thought. Some woman could have actually said that to Shakespeare and his art, in this moment, could be an imitation of his life. I felt silly that this had never occurred to me before.

Zan Sawyer-Daily, Associate Director of Actor's Theatre of Louisville and one of my professors, encourages her classes to daydream about their characters, and so I tried daydreaming about Margaret as if she had been a real person, just like Laura Wingfield had once been Tennessee Williams' sister before she was filtered through her brother's imagination. If Margaret was based on someone Shakespeare knew in real life, what was their relationship? Perhaps they were sex partners, or perhaps they were simply acquaintances. She may have been a bawdy girl at a tavern he frequented, a world-wise laundry maid in service to one of his

³ Gottesfeld, Jeff. "Act 1." *A Heart Divided: A Play*. Woodstock: Dramatic, 2004. 17. Print.

patrons, or an orange girl who worked at The Globe. Regardless, if he knew her, and drew inspiration from her for this character, then could not many moments in the show be based on his experiences? When Benedick fails to capture his feelings for Beatrice in a poem, should I assume this never happened to the great Shakespeare? In that moment, he could easily be making light of his own writer's block, and when Margaret laughs at Benedick, perhaps that is Shakespeare laughing at himself. I did not much care if I was correct; the scene was more accessible and my character's laughter gentler and more amiable when I pictured the author making sport of himself.

Humanizing Shakespeare loosened chains that had constrained my previous performances of his work. I found myself able to relate to his work, not as a sketch artist might to Michelangelo, but as Marc Norman might to Tom Stoppard: as equals, and as partners in collaboration. In productions of Shakespeare I had worked on before, I was as afraid to "screw up" as I had been afraid to sin as a child, and that fear forced me to keep the text at a safe distance. When I pulled Shakespeare down off the pedestal on which I had placed him, it was as if the temple veil had been torn in two and I was free to meet the man I had for so long revered from a timid distance. It was time to get my hands dirty.

III

ON YOUR MARK! GET SET!

Character development starts with the script. What are the given circumstances? What do I know about my character based on what the playwright has given me? This list of basic facts serves as the foundation on which the rest of the character will be built. I find it most useful to do this work before rehearsals have started so I am able to make the most of my time in front of the director.

Margaret is an Italian and a waiting gentlewoman to Hero, the governor's daughter. Her service to Hero is not indentured; she indicates a desire to marry so she will not always have to "keep below stairs," (5.2.10) or, remain in service. Her reference to the Madonna in Act 3 scene 4 indicates a Catholic upbringing. She is quick-witted, perceptive, and makes dirty jokes. Her willingness to break decorum around Hero and Hero's failure to reprimand Margaret for this suggest a closer relationship than that of mistress and servant; they are friends. Beatrice, on the other hand, does reprimand Margaret for her wise-cracking, which suggests they are not close. She rejects Balthazar's advances during the ball scene, yet allows Borachio to convince her to put on Hero's garments and "talk with" him on the night before Hero's marriage to Claudio.

Margaret and Hero probably also favor a great deal; though a convention of the Elizabethan stage allowed an audience to believe a person had been fully disguised by a simple change of clothes, logic also says two Italian women will probably both have dark hair and dark eyes, and since Margaret seems to fit into Hero's garments, they probably have similar figures while their friendship suggests a closeness in age. Benedick allows Margaret to flirt with him without a reprimand and concedes that she deserves a "sonnet in praise of [her] beauty," (5.2.4-5) which further suggests a resemblance to the ingenue, Hero.

Armed with the facts and reasonable conclusions afforded by the script, I was ready to start rehearsal.

IV

GO!

Much Ado about Nothing was directed by Professor James R. Tompkins. Rehearsal started early in September, and from the first day the work was long and hard. Professor Tompkins is maddeningly detail-oriented. He employs a technique I call “dogging.” This is a term I picked up from my high school theatre teacher, Barbara Wesner, which I have not heard widely used elsewhere. “Dogging,” as I had previously experienced it, is a point in the rehearsal process when the director and actors tear the script down to individual moments and work out the kinks in each one before putting it all back together. The productions I have worked on that have had a dogging period have by far been the most successful, and I always make time in my rehearsal schedule for dogging when I direct. When I am acting and the director forgoes this step, I always try to do it for myself on my own time.

Professor Tompkins uses this method from the first day of the rehearsal process forward rather than waiting until the actors are off book. He expects his cast to be ready to work from the moment they step into the rehearsal room and will stop to tweak each moment as it arises in the process of blocking. This lends an atmosphere of professionalism and respect for the craft to each rehearsal, and keeps the cast focused on the task at hand; however, it can quickly become tiresome and frustrating.

At the first rehearsal we blocked the opening scene, which ran roughly fifteen minutes in production. Blocking that scene took three and a half hours to complete because Professor Tompkins frequently stopped the cast to give notes about inflection. He talked with the actors in detail about the meaning of the words they were saying, and updated a few to suit the modern concept which had been previously determined for the show. He tried several different arrangements for the cast and several different entrances for the army before he found a satisfying combination.

When I direct, I prefer to wait to “dog” a show until each scene has been fully blocked and the actors have had a few run-throughs with the script to ensure they are comfortable with the material. I like to let them get completely off book so they have a solid foundation on which to play and build a full, dynamic character. With Professor Tompkins at the helm, this work starts on the first day and does not stop until the show has opened, and each rehearsal drags on for hours. If the cast is committed to the work, this technique is invaluable; however, after weeks of constant stop-and-go, the actors become frustrated and the director’s critiques frequently go unheeded. I do not mind getting notes on inflection or physicality, but it is much easier to implement those notes when I have already committed the lines and blocking to memory and can work without a script in my hands. I doubt my cast mates feel differently; in fact, I overheard a few of them saying after rehearsal on a few different occasions, “I wish he would just let me get through it!”

With all this heavy-handed direction, I expected to have a harder time than I did. I thought I would have to endure a barrage of criticism, and I was surprised when that turned out to be a false assumption. Among amateur actors, there is a saying about directors that goes, “If you are not getting notes, it means one of two things: your work is fine, or it is so bad the director cannot be bothered to fix you.” While we were still in the blocking phase, which took several weeks thanks to Professor Tompkins’ constant dogging (as opposed to the few days blocking normally takes,) I received frequent direction regarding my physicality and the stage pictures I was creating. Once the show was blocked, however, I was seldom given notes, and that terrified me. It is my habit to try to improve myself without being prompted. If I feel I turned in a bad rehearsal, I take the initiative to correct myself before the next one. I try to bring something new to the table whenever I can, and I am used to getting feedback from the director as to whether I should keep or throw away whatever new thing I tried that night. Professor Tompkins rarely gives notes on moments that are working, and so I was left after each rehearsal trying to discern whether my work was fine, or if it was so bad he did not want to bother fixing it.

Trying to find new approaches to a stock character is exhausting. This is not because there are so many different choices to explore; quite the opposite, in fact. However, this task was made somewhat easier thanks to the nature of the text.

There is a certain amount of freedom in classic drama, which is hard to find in modern work, that comes from the near absence of stage directions. In a playwriting class I took as an undergraduate, my professor set a challenge before the students to use as few stage directions as possible.

Smart actors should be able to figure out what they are supposed to be doing based on their dialogue. If a character says, 'Ouch!' obviously he needs to stub his toe, run into a door, or something within the context of the scene to prompt that line; or else, his scene partner needs to swat him with a newspaper or pinch his arm. The playwright who attempts to direct the play through the stage directions is a weak playwright indeed.⁴

I practice this principle in my own writing, and appreciate it when another playwright whose words I am to perform allows me the same liberty. While many directors ignore the stage directions as printed anyway, another reason my playwriting professor gave for limiting their inclusion, as an actor I often find it difficult to toss them away entirely, and they limit my performance.

Act 5, scene 2 begins with a moment of privacy between Margaret and Benedick. Originally, I was blocked to cross diagonally from upstage right to the vomitorium downstage left, as if I were on my way to visit Borrachio in jail, and was intercepted by Benedick. There was nothing wrong with the moment. Everything made sense and was justified in the context of the action. However, it was rather plain, and did not quite capture the sense of fun and games that Professor Tompkins was striving to incorporate wherever possible, so he gave Jake Beamer (Benedick) and I free reign of the scene. We played with the idea that Margaret was sexually attracted to Benedick, teasing him with her line, "Will you then write me a sonnet in praise of my beauty?" and running her fingers up and down his chest suggestively on her line, "To have no man come over me. What, should I always keep below stairs?" This version got two runs: first, with Benedick wary of Margaret's advances; second, enjoying them to the point he almost forgets about his letter to Beatrice. Again, both worked well enough, but were not as playful as we felt the moment could be.

⁴ Anderson, Deborah K. Playwriting I. Boutwell Dramatic Arts Building, Murfreesboro, TN. Aug. 2008. Lecture.

Then, we tried having Margaret stumble upon Benedick rather than the other way around, and found something great. Beamer was seated “in the orchard” working on Benedick’s sonnet, and I walked onto the stage as if I wanted an orange to eat when I “noticed him” there. Without telling him what I was planning, I quietly walked up behind him and peered over his shoulder to see what he was writing and simply waited there. Beamer eventually grew impatient and turned around to see what was taking me so long. He was not expecting to find me standing immediately behind him, and when he discovered me at his shoulder he shrieked. He did not yell, gasp, or holler. He shrieked. It was hilarious; I doubled over with laughter and could barely catch my breath. We continued the scene without stopping, and exposed a friendship between the soldier and the maidservant we had not yet explored. The implication of Margaret’s sonnet line changed entirely from sexually suggestive to a sisterly teasing. The weight of the emphasis fell to the personal pronouns with the addition of an indicative gesture on my part toward the ink and paper, thereby telling the audience exactly what Benedick had been penning. The moment was clear, played to both characters’ less obvious sensibilities (his of sensitivity and hers of platonic camaraderie with men) and created the jovial atmosphere we had been attempting to capture. With the addition of a bit for Beamer in which he tossed a crumpled piece of paper over his shoulder to accidentally hit me in the face, we had found business that suited our production perfectly.

This moment was eventually cut, simplified to merely entering the stage together in mid-conversation, but that initial discovery was a gift. Moments such as that one, when Beamer shrieked like a little girl and we played out the scene on the energy of his shriek and my laughter, are one of the reasons I love performing, and performing classic texts in particular. Stage directions are like road signs guiding the actor toward a specific destination, and without them the actors are free to blaze their own trail. Moments like that are rarely found anywhere but off the beaten path.

ME, MYSELF, AND MARGARET

Outside rehearsal, I was working on Margaret using a process I started developing in high school and have added to and subtracted from as my training enabled me to do so.

I never had formal theatrical training before my three years under Barbara Wesner's guidance at Clarksville High School in Clarksville, Tennessee, and while my skill has grown and my style has changed, much of what she taught me about preparation remains an integral part of my process. For our first show together, *Hide and Seek* by Lezley Havard, she gave the cast a homework assignment. She asked us to write a background story for our characters based on the facts we could find in the script (the given circumstances) and fill in the blanks from our own imaginations. I was reluctant to get started, afraid my character biography would sound foolish, but once I did, I could not stop writing. As you can imagine normally happens when you give students of any age a writing assignment without a length requirement, the majority returned from the weekend with less than a page to show for their efforts. I had written three and a half.

Since that first assignment, I have created a backstory for almost every character I have played. I am not sure whether my audience can tell a difference in the performances for which I have forgone my "actor's homework," but I can feel a difference in my level of preparedness. Without my background sketch, I lack passion on stage, and sometimes find it difficult to "stay on stage," in other words, to keep my mind focused on the task at hand. The more detailed my backstory, the better my performance.

My early backstories were third person fiction, drafted in the style of the short stories I was fond of writing as a child. I was a freshman in college when Professor John Mauldin gave the assignment to write one in first person. This revolutionized my technique, and I have not written a backstory in third person since. I took the change a step further after Mauldin's class, incorporating into the first person narrative a stream-of-consciousness style for the most powerful

memories. This is particularly useful as it allows me to use the vernacular established by the playwright, ingraining her (occasionally, his) speech pattern in my brain. Sometimes, when I find myself lost in the writing, it seems almost as if the character is telling me her story and I am simply copying it onto paper.

I start developing a character history with basic information on the age and social class of my character. I give my character a middle name and last name if the playwright has not provided them, a birthday, and a zodiac sun sign. These trivialities are often irrelevant to the action of the story, but real people know these details about themselves, and I have discovered writing these insignificant details fulfills two distinct goals. First, I enjoy thinking up these intricate details, and they feed my imagination in a way that helps me avoid passing judgment on my character (a grave error; regardless of the actor's opinion of her character's morals, she should always approach her role with empathy.) Secondly, having a wealth of detail about my character allows me to think as my character would while I am on stage. Too often an audience can spot an actor drifting, losing focus because he does not have anything to do for several pages but cannot leave the stage. Barbara Wesner called this "dropping out." If I am thinking like my character, I free myself to listen to my cast mates and react as my character would to the information I take in. I do not have to fret about my next line, because thinking and responding like my character helps the dialogue flow in an organic fashion; her lines become my natural responses to the information I take in. Those nit-picky details give me the power to create the life of another person onstage.

I created a few personal memories for Margaret, though they have no real relevance to the story, but it was equally important to incorporate the given circumstances of the script as much as possible, as well as the production concept. The inclusion of modern technology like cell phones allowed me to set the backstory in the present, and saved me from having to do tedious research into the Elizabethan period to unearth facts about the typical life of waiting gentlewomen.

I daydreamed about the woman from whom I felt sure Shakespeare had stolen the line, "Will you then write me a sonnet in praise of my beauty?" What was she like? Based on the easy banter of Margaret's interaction with Benedick, I decided he must have enjoyed her company.

She was a friend, I thought, but never a lover. She teased him and aided him in the pursuit of another woman, perhaps even Shakespeare's Dark Lady. I created a movie about her in my mind, then changed her birth date from 1587 to 1987 and adjusted the details accordingly.

I always include a little bit in my backstories about the characters with which mine interacts for the purpose of establishing my character's impression of them. For Margaret, I needed to touch on Hero, Beatrice, and Benedick, since those are the only three other characters with whom Margaret seems to have a personal relationship. I made mention of Borachio, even though they never actually interact in the script. I decided against using Shakespeare's English, as I might have done were the production elements emulating the period; instead, I imagined how Margaret would talk if Shakespeare had written her for the twenty-first century and used that vernacular to let her speak for herself. (See Appendix A.)

VI

WALK THIS WAY

Once I created a picture of Margaret in my mind, the next step in her development was to establish her physicality and vocal tone. There is a certain set of behaviors, postures, and vocal qualities that indicate to an audience a character's level of sexual experience, which I assumed was vast in Margaret's case. I fell into these behaviors because they were easy, obvious choices, though I soon realized just why choosing to employ them was a mistake.

The stereotypical "sexy" female has a more revealing manner of dress than a "chaste" woman. Her center of gravity is located in the hips, and her walk is slow and controlled (unless the character also lacks intelligence, in which case the walk is much faster, creating the "jell-o on springs" illusion made famous by Marilyn Monroe in *Some Like it Hot*.) Her eyelids are half closed and her mouth is pouting and upturned, at once receptive to a man's advances and attentive, even adoring, of his every word. Her voice is husky; rather than speaking, she seems to purr. She touches things with the pads of her fingers gently and slowly. Her slowness is an act of sexual aggression; by taking her time, she is asserting a confidence that cannot be shaken. She is perceived to enjoy any discomfort caused by her actions.

This was the kind of foundation I was building for my interpretation of Margaret; yet, after a few weeks of rehearsal in this spirit, I found myself uncomfortable with those choices. It was roughly three weeks into rehearsal when one of my fellow actors and I were horsing around outside the rehearsal room and he, referencing my character, called me a "dirty slut." I laughed and dropped into the husky-voiced persona I had developed for her and carried on joking with him. On the drive home, as I was remembering that exchange, it dawned on me how unfair it was to think of Margaret as a slut.

I assumed Margaret slept with Borachio based on the conclusions drawn by Claudio, Leonato, and Don Pedro that prompt them to call Hero a wonton and a stale. Yet, the script does

not provide any interaction between the two underlings to confirm that suspicion. While the references to Margaret talking to Borachio through her mistress's chamber window could easily be an allusion to intercourse, particularly Borachio's retelling of the event to Conrade in Act 3, scene 3, they could just as easily be taken literally; perhaps all that truly passed between Margaret and Borachio were words.

The addition of a sex scene to our production only confirms one instance of intercourse for either character; there is no evidence in the script or the production to suggest Margaret's sexual history outside of my acting choices. Borachio could just as easily have been her first lover as her fifteenth. *So what if she had been with fifteen men?* I thought. Does a woman's enjoyment of intercourse automatically make her a bad person? By assuming Margaret was promiscuous, adopting the attitude that promiscuity is inherently bad, and therefore cultivating stereotypical features for her, I had been judging my character. I was ashamed of myself.

It was so easy to call Margaret a slut. Her function in Shakespeare's comedy is to be seen at Hero's window with Borachio, be mistaken for Hero by Don Pedro and Claudio who then assume Hero cheated on Claudio and thus throw a hitch in the young lovers' marriage. She could easily be cut out of the show otherwise; why Shakespeare bothered to write her into the script is still a mystery to me considering her window scene was, like a Greek execution, banished to the world of "offstage" until our director made the decision to add it to the show. Margaret's purpose was to be sexy and make sex jokes. Did that function justify my depiction of her as simply a slut? I decided it did not. I knew I was taking the cheap way out.

Adding to the shame I felt for looking at my character through so narrow a lens, I realized I was a hypocrite. After all, I do not see my own sexuality in this light. I do not see myself as a slut, a dreg of society. I do not want people to think less of me simply because I will not be a virgin on my wedding night, if I even choose to have a wedding night. Margaret rejects the advances of Balthazar at the dance, (the Messenger in our production) an action that suggests self-confidence instead of the reckless promiscuity which can sometimes result from desperation for personal validation through affection. I am comfortable with my behavior and with my body; so, I realized, is Margaret.

After discussing this with Professor Tompkins, I made the choice to take Margaret in a different direction. Instead of a stereotype of female sexuality in the class of *Who Framed Roger Rabbit's* Jessica Rabbit or *Sex and the City's* Samantha Jones, I chose to portray Margaret as a strong, confident woman who knows what she wants out of life, is unashamed of her body, and who is loyal to those she loves. The half-closed eyes were more discerning, the pouting lips stretched into a knowing smile. Her walk was a moderate pace with the center of gravity in her abdomen. Her voice was clear and playful, and her touch, though gentle, was deliberate.

One afternoon six weeks into rehearsal, everything changed.

VII

DOES THIS NOSE MAKE MY BUTT LOOK BIG?

It was a Friday, after class and before rehearsal, when Professor Tompkins pulled me aside. "I've been thinking about your character," he said.

Thank God, I thought. Admittedly, Margaret is not the focus of *Much Ado about Nothing*, but she was important to me, and I had been feeling a bit ignored in rehearsal. In such a long rehearsal process, bringing something new to the table each night was more of a challenge than my imagination could match. I work well with a six week rehearsal period; eight weeks is sometimes a stretch, and twelve weeks of Shakespeare was wearing me out mentally. Professor Tompkins has an eye for the intricate details of a moment. I have seen him spend ten to fifteen minutes working a single line of dialogue or bit of blocking. I happily anticipated what he wanted to discuss with me, assuming it would be a way to improve some of the ideas I had been playing with each night.

"I've been thinking about Margaret's relationship to Borrachio," he said, "and I've been looking at you and Richard together." Richard Ribuffo was the actor playing Margaret's lover, an Irish-Italian man in his mid-thirties with sandy, thinning hair, small eyes, and a dumpy build. "You're a very pretty girl, Lauren," said the professor, "so please understand what I'm about to say is based on casting, not on your abilities."

He told me my work had been very clever, which was a great relief. However, he did not buy into Margaret's attraction to the drunkard. "I don't think an audience will believe a woman who looks like you would go to bed with a man who looks like Richard," he said.

In fact, I would not choose Ribuffo as a partner (regardless of his appearance,) so Professor Tompkins' disbelief had a justifiable basis strictly regarding my personal taste in men. However, it had never occurred to me that an audience would not accept the two of us together.

Television shows pair average looking men with attractive women in sitcom teams all the time. While my face is worth a second look, my figure leaves much to be desired when compared to the status quo in the entertainment industry; had we asked a television producer, he might have told us he did not believe Ribuffo would go for me. Yet, our looks were the reason Professor Tompkins gave for his complete overhaul of my character. He asked me to get rid of Margaret's sex appeal, confidence, strength, and brains. Moreover, he wanted me to give her a thick accent and make her quite stupid so Beatrice would have reason to be truly surprised when she said, "Since when have you professed intelligence?" (3.4.67-68)

Beatrice does refer to Margaret as a fool, and Margaret's dialogue with Hero in Act 3 scene 4 is structurally similar to other Shakespearean fools (namely, Feste's chiding of Olivia's grief in Act 1 scene 5 of *Twelfth Night*) yet fools traditionally possess more wisdom than their socially superior counterparts, not less. Additionally, Margaret's words, while bordering on lewd, are quite witty and her discernment of Beatrice's pining heart is completely on point. I did not agree with the decision to make Margaret stupid; however, after six weeks of rehearsal with six to go until the show closed, I was bored and frustrated enough to give the stupidity angle a try.

Professor Tompkins worried the audience would want to see Margaret punished for her compliance in the scheme to ruin Hero's wedding. He insisted the audience needed to like me so they would not expect my character to be punished alongside Don John, Borachio, and Conrade, and that a bumbling, ugly Margaret would induce more sympathy than a bold, pretty one. He asked me to start wearing a prosthetic nose in rehearsal to get used to being unattractive, and play with a few different accents or vocal patterns that would sell to the audience Margaret's lack of brains.

"So, just to clarify," I said, "this is the girl in high school whom everyone likes well enough but is under no circumstances getting asked to prom."

"Exactly," he said.

That night at rehearsal, we ran through all of the scenes in which I had lines several times, so I had the opportunity to try a few different approaches at one go. I began the evening as a shy putz without a distinct accent, hunching my shoulders forward and speaking quickly and

quietly without making eye contact with my scene partners, to see if I could make Margaret endearing yet unintelligent without committing to a regional dialect. This was uncomfortable; by closing myself off physically, I felt as though I was denying my scene partners anything to play with, which goes against all my training. An actor should be constantly giving of herself to her audience and to her scene partners. Closing myself off, even when justified by an innate shyness in my character, was exceedingly selfish of me considering the script did not demand this.

For the next scene we worked that night, I tried a plain, simple country girl. Her accent was thick and her wits were slow. She stuck her neck too far forward for good posture and left her mouth open even when she was silent. She wanted very much to be included in her surroundings, but her simple-mindedness prevented her from fully understanding what was taking place. In that moment, it worked well. My cast mates, usually doing homework while offstage, sat up and paid attention to the scene and laughed along appreciatively. I was having fun with the wide-eyed country bumpkin stereotype to which I had often fallen victim in my youth.

During a break, I spoke to Beamer Beamer about the beginning of Act 5 to get his input on what to try with these new parameters given to me by our director. He suggested I try a Valley girl, just for fun, and after playing with the southern California dialect, I thought it was a viable option to show Professor Tompkins. I had to make sure Margaret from the Valley did not read as a bright, popular type, like Cher Horowitz in the 1995 movie *Clueless*; rather, I needed her to come across as positively idiotic. I borrowed Elaine Carroll's impression of Mary Kate Olsen in her hilarious web series *Very Mary Kate*, pushed my breasts out and walked on tip-toe. My cast mates laughed loudly enough that I almost feared for the integrity of my ear drums. They loved it! I felt I had found the right avenue.

After rehearsal that night, since I had not been told during the note session which interpretation Professor Tompkins preferred, I pulled him aside. He preferred the country girl, although he admitted the Valley girl was the funniest of the three. His problem with the Valley girl was her status. Even though she was obviously a hopeless idiot, her California dialect put her in a higher social class than he felt the character justified, and as such she was unlikable. He said audiences would default to the offensive regarding upper class characters anyway, and stupid

little rich girls such as I had shown him with the third interpretation of Margaret were targets for animosity. The country bumpkin, regardless of her intelligence, was obviously lower class, and lovable despite her shortcomings. The smart things the character says sounded like “good ol’ homespun wisdom” when filtered through a backwoods Southern accent.

My character work up to that point was now useless. I rewrote Margaret’s backstory and moved her home town from Washington, D.C. to Gulfport, Mississippi. Additionally, I changed her favorite pastime from reading to recreations involving “critters in the woods.” On a positive note, Margaret would no longer be mistaken for a slut; an ugly, stupid country bumpkin would go to bed with a drunkard like Borachio because no one else would have her and thus elicit pity, not derision. She was sweet despite her witless bumbling, guaranteed to make an audience want to hug her and explain to her the facts of life. Gone were her self-confidence and independence. A woman so totally clueless and submissive to her superiors was not a threat to anyone.

VIII

WIVES, SUBMIT TO YOUR HUSBANDS

I realized not long after that rehearsal the elements I lost were the elements that made some men uncomfortable. Relishing my own sex appeal, taking pride in my strength and independence, and willingly matching wits with men rather than playing down my mind to bolster a man's ego had lost me more dates than they had gained. Was I now being told an entire mixed-gendered audience would be less likely to respond positively to Margaret for these same reasons?

What is it about confident, capable women that is so threatening? Why must a woman who is unashamed of her sexuality consistently be put down? Why did Professor Tompkins feel the need to hide Margaret's powerful femininity to gain an audience's approval? I no longer bought the line that the change of my character was necessary to sell her choice of sex partner. A Margaret with her head held high despite the "common" nature of her actions was an affront to masculinity.

Historically, women have been dealt with much more harshly than men when they disobeyed their society's code of sexual conduct. For example, the Holy Bible gives instructions on how to deal with a woman who is not found to be a virgin on her wedding night in Deuteronomy chapter twenty-two. It says a new bride unable to provide proof of her virginity if it is required by her husband should be stoned to death on the threshold of her father's house. A man who rapes an unmarried virgin, however, should be fined fifty shekels and married to the woman without the possibility of divorce. In other words, an unchaste woman is an "evil" that must be purged; a rapist is punished under what amounts to a "You break it, you buy it" policy.

This deep-seated need to repress female sexuality boils down to a desire by men for a social control that stems from complementarian theology; that is, the belief that men and women,

though equal in worth and dignity before God, have unequal yet complementary gender-based roles in the home and in society:

A husband is understood to have a God-given responsibility to provide for, protect, and lead his family. A wife is to collaborate with her husband, respect him, and serve as his helper in managing the household and nurturing the next generation... The Complementarian view holds that women may not appropriately hold... leadership roles that involve teaching or authority over men.⁵

Consequently, when women are quiet and submissive, busy nursing babies and obeying their husbands, fifty percent of the world population is knocked out of the competition for power, leaving control in the hands of men and men alone.

I doubt the majority of people who take issue with female leadership recognize complementarianism as a source of their discomfort. The prevalence of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, all of which promote complementarianism and whose principles have bled into secular American culture, accounts for the widespread stance that a woman is less capable in the workplace because her natural disposition, though well-suited for child-rearing and homemaking, renders her ineffective in "a man's world." Men who believe their role is to provide for a woman can feel emasculated when a woman is capable of providing for herself.⁶ Some men are uncomfortable around a woman who speaks her mind or makes more money than her male peers because in their minds she has no use for a man and they no longer understand how to relate to her. In my own experience, I have been put down for simply refusing to let a man pay for my share of a meal and scolded by female friends for not "letting him be a man." Many men think letting go of their complementary role as provider would leave them useless, and as such resist changes in society that encourage or empower women to take care of themselves. Some women are also uncomfortable with ladies who reject traditional gender roles.⁷ Nonconformity requires

⁵ "Complementarianism." *Theopedia*. The Christian Web Foundation, n.d. Web. 25 Mar. 2013. <<http://www.theopedia.com/Complementarianism>>.

⁶ Willman, Marissa. "Girl Talk: Being The Breadwinner Sucked." *The Frisky*. N.p., 18 June 2012. Web. 25 Mar. 2013. <<http://www.thefrisky.com/2012-06-18/girl-talk-being-the-breadwinner-sucked/>>.

⁷ Bussel, Rachel Kramer. "Slut Shame: Attacking Women for Their Sex Lives." *Alternet*. N.p., 1 Apr. 2011. Web. 25 Mar. 2013. <http://www.alternet.org/story/150473/slut_shame:_attacking_women_for_their_sex_lives>.

courage, and those who choose to conform to complementarian ideas may feel guilty by or jealous of a woman who takes charge of her circumstances rather than relying on a man.

The double standard regarding sexual purity in men and women is one way by which those who subscribe to complementarianism attempt to keep power in the hands of men. Young women are encouraged to retain their chastity in ways young men are not. Events such as “purity balls,” where teenage girls pledge to their fathers to remain virgins until marriage, which have no equivalent for teenage boys, reinforce the Biblical idea that unchaste women are evil while unchaste men are just succumbing to their baser instincts. A woman’s body is simply a piece of property, the ownership of which transfers from her father to her husband at the time of marriage.⁸

A woman who challenges her “place” is a threat to complementarian ideology. By asserting her sexual autonomy, a woman denies men the ownership of her body and, by taking responsibility for her own well-being, creates competition for power. Margaret, through her confidence and wit, her exercise of choice in partner, and her daring refusal to be shamed by her actions, was a walking challenge to the patriarchy.

I felt my legs had been cut out from under me. I did not wish to reinforce a negative stereotype of women who choose to have sex outside the confines of a marriage, yet the depiction of this woman as a simple-minded pawn was equally disempowering. Unfortunately, by the time I had gathered the courage to articulate my discomfort, the decision had become a part of the concept for the show. My scene partners had made their own acting choices based on Margaret’s unattractiveness and stupidity, and Zhanna Goldentul’s makeup design had been approved by the production team. I was stuck.

⁸ Valenti, Jessica. "Pledging Virginity to Dad: A New Doc Explores the World of 'Purity Balls'" *Religion Dispatches*. N.p., 10 July 2012. Web. 25 Mar. 2013. <[http://www.religiondispatches.org/archive/sexandgender/6135/pledging_virginity_to_dad:_a_new_doc_explores_the_world_of_'purity_balls'](http://www.religiondispatches.org/archive/sexandgender/6135/pledging_virginity_to_dad:_a_new_doc_explores_the_world_of_'purity_balls'>)>.

IX

WHO'S THE BOSS?

Who has the ultimate power over the events that take place on stage? What does it mean to be a part of an ensemble? Is the playwright a god and all other artists simply priests obligated to serve him? Is the director a king whose decrees must be observed under penalty of banishment? Can the cast's noncompliance hold a show hostage?

In one of my first classes at the University of Louisville, Introduction to Graduate Studies, Dr. Russell Vandenbroucke posed a question to the class about the creative power of the actor. Essentially, he asked us if actors are the potters or the clay. Should our own artistic goals have priority over the other members of a company?

The actor has a responsibility to the script, the production team's concept, and the director's vision, I thought. My own ideas about my character should take a back seat to how my director perceives the role. It was not my place to argue with the playwright; by accepting a role, I had figuratively signed a contract requiring me to express his or her ideas as fully as possible, regardless of whether I shared those values. I was someone else's artistic medium made up of my personal experiences, my understanding of the world and the people in it, and my ability to control my body and voice and make decisions for my character to justify his or her behavior in the context of my director's blocking choices and vision of that character. I saw myself not as the painter, but the canvas. I saw the actor as the least powerful cog in the machine of a production; her influence, ideas, and decisions were always at the mercy of the rest of the production team and were easily overruled. I was not alone in this line of thinking; the Los Angeles based Circle Players' 1945 Code of Ethics lists the following as one of its rules:

I shall not let the comments of friends, relatives or critics change any phase of my work without proper consultation; I shall not change lines, business, lights, properties, settings or costumes or any phase of the production without

consultation with and permission of my director or producer or their agents, and I shall inform all people concerned.⁹

I have been asked by directors to perform a wide variety of actions, from crying on cue to taking off my clothes to hiding my gender in service of the production. I have had my decisions about what to do with my body and voice overturned, and I consented to change my work to please the director.

Allowing my artistic voice to be muted was relatively easy in the past because I usually agreed with the message those changes were sending to my audience. Now, for the first time, I was being asked to create something in direct conflict with my convictions. My director was asking me to contribute to misconceptions and the kind of micro-aggressions that lead to the repression of my own gender and the unbearable self-importance of a certain type of man. I was angry, and ready to just play Margaret my way despite what Professor Tompkins asked of me.

My body is not public domain. My voice belongs only to me. I am not a canvas to be purchased and used at will by another artist. It is only through my consent the director's vision of my character is made manifest. I am not a puppet and the director is not a puppeteer; I have total control over the actions of my body on the stage. The foundation of a production is the consent of actors. While it is true noncompliance could cost me a job, what stops the actor who takes my place from refusing the demands of the director as I did, and the actor who takes his place, and so on? The playwright might require an actor to say the word, "cunt" twenty-seven times over the course of the play, but without the consent of an actor, that word will not be uttered. The director might require nudity of a cast, but without the consent of actors, there will be no naked bodies on the stage.

As an actor, I have the power to say, "No," to the director and the playwright. The condition of the use of my abilities is my sovereignty over my body and my voice. However, the director has sovereignty over his name and the production which will bear it, and the playwright has sovereignty over her words. Each party has the power to say, "No," to each of the others. If a

⁹ Thielke, Janet. "A 1945 Code of Ethics for Theatre Workers Surfaces | LA STAGE TIMES." *LA Stage Times*. N.p., 11 Aug. 2009. Web. 25 Mar. 2013. <<http://www.lastagetimes.com/2009/08/a-1945-code-of-ethics-for-theatre-workers-surfaces/>>.

playwright does not give a company the performance rights for her script, there will be no work for directors or actors, though refraining from allowing a director creative control of the material could mean the playwright will wear a tighter belt. A director can fire a stubborn actor and, realistically, will be able to find a suitable replacement, yet risks compromising the overall quality of the production in the event a suitable replacement cannot be found. If all parties staunchly refuse to consider the creative input of others, there will be no show and no paycheck for anyone.

Ensemble, then, requires all artists concerned to respect each other's jurisdiction over their portion of the output. Ensemble requires communication and compromise with all parties bearing equal responsibility for the end product, which means each one's input bears equal weight. Part of this requires each party to find the courage to articulate matters of concern or discomfort rather than indulging in self-pitying behavior or gossip. It also requires all parties to take responsibility for their own work without blaming anything they may consider lacking on another person. Theatre is a collaborative medium, and when a company works as an ensemble (rather than a theocracy with the playwright in the position of a god, a director-run dictatorship, or an anarchist state bending to the whims of the actors,) the play belongs in equal measure to each artist involved.

Professor Tompkins does respect his cast and our ideas, as evidenced by the many instances he asks for our input, but in this instance I did not have the courage to challenge his decision. Though my convictions told me to speak up, somehow whenever an opportunity to voice my discomfort presented itself I lacked the nerve to even open my mouth. I still cannot discern whether my cowardice was a result of the years I believed that the director's word was law, I was truly afraid for my diploma, or I feared Professor Tompkins would think I did not want to make Margaret ugly and stupid out of pure vanity. Ultimately, I shoved my disgruntled conscience gagged and bound into a closet in the back of my mind and took responsibility for my performance. For one show, one weekend, I could bottle my concerns and just get through with the production. For many years, that has been my mantra. "Suck it up, Street. This will all be over soon. Just do it and be done with it." I comfort myself knowing that I will have the freedom to create my own work once I leave my role as a student artist behind.

As a student artist, the pressure to bow to the whims of other artists and their vision is greater because those other artists are grading my work and those grades determine whether I obtain a degree. That degree is the foundation for my future. Outside academia I am an artistic equal to my collaborators, and there is less pressure to accept their choices without question. If I pursue a career as a professional actor, I will have the ability to seek out companies that champion work I believe in, like the Tennessee Women's Project, and if I accept a job that requires me to go against my beliefs, it will be my choice and not a departmental requirement. Perhaps I will be a teacher and I can train my students to listen to and respect one another. I can teach them how to compromise and when to hold fast to their ideas. I might create work for myself after the model of Anna Deveare-Smith or Eve Ensler. If I choose to pursue playwriting, I can create work for specific audiences about their communities in the style of the Cornerstone Theater Company. I might even form a company and develop a new performance style altogether. I honestly do not know where my career will take me. In five years, I might be selling tee shirts on the banks of the Harpeth River, and that life has its appeal, too. Whatever I am doing, there will be times I disagree with my collaborators, and when those times arise, I will have more power to change my situation that I do now as a student.

For now, for the last time, I could deal with my frustration in silence. I think that must be what "selling out" feels like. I never quite understood that expression before this production.

X

TOBACCO FARMER'S DAUGHTER

The false nose helped hide my confidence, but it was ultimately insufficient. I stopped wearing makeup in rehearsal and started wearing unflattering clothing. When I was a teenager, my mother insisted looking good would help me feel good; as it turns out, the opposite is also true.

I had to develop a new physicality for Margaret. I moved her center of gravity up from her abdomen to her shoulders. To further hide her femininity, I added a slight sway to the shoulders and a stillness to the hips that projected masculinity and a life of hard labor. She bent slightly forward from the waist when she walked; the overall effect felt rather apish.

Unintentionally, I overdid Margaret's stupidity for a few rehearsals in a row, so Professor Tompkins asked me to drop it. While I was playing the goal of "to understand what is happening," through obstacles such as "I am afraid of Beatrice," and "I do not know what Hero's words mean," I took it too far and was caught mugging. In a private conversation, the professor and I concluded the dialect made Margaret sound ignorant enough. I laughed, remembering an old Jeff Foxworthy joke: he said when Northerners heard his Georgia accent, they "automatically deducted 100 I.Q. points," which he blamed on the fact that Southerners, though by no means stupid, "can't seem to keep the most ignorant amongst us off the television."¹⁰ We were banking on that very preconception of backwoods people in our audience based on the skewed representation in the media of rural life.

The dialect I was employing certainly did not suggest a high level of education. I call it my "tobacco-strippin'" dialect. It is a version of the regional dialect spoken by the people in my hometown of Henrietta, Tennessee. Similar to the Eastern Kentucky accent used by Jake Beamer in our production, the "tobacco strippin'" dialect is grittier than my natural rhythm of

¹⁰ Foxworthy, Jeff. "Southern Accent." *Games Rednecks Play*. Warner Bros, 1995. CD.

speech. A nonspecific Tennessee dialect is too forward in the mouth, and the stereotypical “Scarlet O’Hara” Southern accent relies heavily on the lazy tongues of coastal dwellers in such cities as Charleston, South Carolina and Savannah, Georgia. The “tobacco strippin’” dialect is placed farther back in the throat and utilizes more vocal fry (friction in the vocal chords caused by damage or excessive phlegm that can be simulated by increasing tension.) It comes from people I heard conversing in my grandmother’s diner over coffee or sweet iced tea as I waited tables at lunchtime during the sweltering Tennessee summers; these were people who worked the earth growing tobacco, corn, or soy beans, supporting themselves through small-time farming yet not successful enough to hire outside help. These men engaged their wives and children in the field work, and those wives and children came to imitate the coarse vowels and rough consonants of the farmers. For the sake of comprehension, I added in a little of the smoothness of my father’s Pegram, Tennessee accent with its extended vowels, and the result sounded not unlike my great aunt Donna Allen.

There was little more I could add to her characterization. Acting is just exerting control over the voice and body, and with her dialect and physicality set, all that was left was to sell her to an audience. Yet, I remained unsatisfied with her purpose. Was Margaret guilty of betraying her mistress or not, and what message did that send to an audience? Would they wonder? Would they care?

XI

WILL THE DEFENDANT PLEASE RISE?

Did Margaret know what she was really doing when she succumbed to Borachio's advances? In our production, she consented to sleep with him, and called him Claudio while he called her Hero, just as Borachio assures Don John will be the case in the text. Since the moment was executed in silhouette, her clothing is irrelevant, yet the lines that suggested she wears Hero's garments during the act were not cut, so the audience was meant to think she was indeed dressed as her lady. Does all this mean Borachio informed her of the entire plot, which seems to be his intent when he lays out the plan before Don John in Act 2, scene 2? If so, why is she not punished? On the other hand, when questioned by Leonato in Act 5, scene 1, Borachio swears Margaret is totally ignorant of his malevolent scheme. If he is telling the truth, how in the world did he convince her to participate?

With this conflicting evidence in the script, Margaret's guilt was left up to our company to determine for ourselves. Professor Tompkins, though occasionally referring to her as a slut during rehearsal and at least once insisting she was aware of the intended result of her rendezvous with Borachio, remained adamant that the audience should not want to see Margaret atone for her sins. Punishing Margaret would mean removing her from the line of false brides presented to Claudio during the final scene, and that would throw off the balance of the moment. The practical joke was funnier if both Margaret and Ursula participated. The director's gavel had fallen, and Margaret was proclaimed, "Not guilty!"

That decision left me to justify her actions in the context of her innocence. How did Borachio convince her to put on Hero's clothes? What kind of woman allows a man to call out another woman's name in bed without kicking him to the curb?

When explaining his plan of action to Don John, Borachio tells the bastard of his intention to have the onlookers, "hear me call Margaret Hero, hear Margaret term me Claudio." (2.2.43-44)

This suggests he had every intention of telling Margaret what was going on. How could he have explained his desires otherwise? Yet, when interrogated by Leonato, Borachio sticks up for Margaret, insisting, "...she knew not what she did when she spoke to me/But always hath been just and virtuous/In any thing that I do know by her." (5.1.302-303)

While discussing all this with Richard Ribuffo, he brought up a point I had not considered. Perhaps the two were role-playing as their lord and lady. This justified the use of Hero's garments and the calling out of the names, though it was kinkier sex than I could imagine anyone having. I thought role-play involved generic types rather than specific individuals, like the policeman and the criminal or the pilot and the flight attendant. What kind of person would role-play as someone she knows? I put aside my revulsion; servants role-playing as their masters was the only idea that made sense in the context of the given circumstances. Furthermore, if ugly Margaret was sleeping with Borachio because he was the only man who would have her, I could stretch her desperation to include this as a condition of his consent, which explained how he could get her to go along with the plot without filling her in on the horrible details.

In the script as written, Borachio and Margaret never interact, nor are they required to be onstage at the same time. I wondered if the roles had once been doubled, or played by the same actor. If Margaret and Borachio were played by the same actor in the original production, that would make Leonato's line, "This naughty man / Shall face to face be brought with Margaret," (5.1. 297-298) particularly interesting, since to do so literally would have required a mirror. While pondering whether or not the playwright meant anything "deep" in that moment, another idea presented itself. There are two scenes missing between Margaret and Borachio; the sex scene, and another which had totally bypassed my notice. Leonato had Borachio brought before Margaret for further interrogation, after which Leonato concluded, "...Margaret was in some fault for this / Although against her will as it appears / In the true course of all the question." (5.4.4-6)

Borachio confessed to Margaret! How else could Leonato know she participated in the plot against her will? He had to have seen her reaction when Borachio told her the truth, face to face! I could not believe that had escaped my perception. My character really was innocent. Shakespeare had indeed answered the question of her guilt, and none of us had been savvy

enough to see it written plainly on the pages before us. After the mental gymnastics I had put myself through on Margaret's behalf, this revelation was a sweet reward. That kinky genius deserved the credit I had been denying him since high school after all.

The confirmation of Margaret's innocence settled another issue. I had been uncertain about what to do during the first wedding scene in Act 4. As Margaret listens to the Prince and Claudio attest to seeing and hearing "Hero" at the window with Borachio between twelve and one the night before, she knows they are mistaken. She knows Hero is totally innocent, but she does not speak up in Hero's defense. Previously, this had been justification of Margaret's guilt; now armed with proof of her ignorance, I had to change my performance in that moment entirely. Instead of looking coolly on, eyes hard and mouth set so as to avoid showing Margaret's enjoyment of her lady's humiliation as I thought befitted a servant who would consent to such a betrayal, I was able to react empathetically to the news. Margaret held her encounter with Borachio close to her heart, I decided; seeing the destruction it caused someone she loved was painful. Added to her hurt was the fear of telling the truth. After all, if Leonato was so violently angry with his own daughter, how much worse would he be with a lowly maid, not to mention one who had so wronged his precious child? How could she own up to her actions in front of the entire town, the Prince included? I was finally able to play the moment to my own satisfaction.

In my mind, I constructed the rest of the story. I imagined Borachio's confession and Margaret's teary-eyed apology to Hero. I saw Hero's forgiveness of the maidservant and renewed the girls' friendship to fuel the joyful greeting we had blocked in the final scene. I was only sorry I had not seen what was now so obvious to me sooner. I am not sure it would have made a difference in the end, but I would have slept a little better each night after rehearsal.

SEX AND COMEDY

Satirist John DeVore wrote, "An orgasm is just laughter on a serious mission,"¹¹ and I agree. Sex is funny. At its most basic, intercourse is two people fumbling around in the dark sweating and grunting like pigs in the mud. Many religions claim this is supposed to be intimate and meaningful, a divine gift reserved for heterosexual spouses. Hollywood depicts intercourse as a moment of magic in which both partners are completely satisfied while their hair somehow remains pristinely in place. Regardless of the passionate connection being made (or not being made) and the myriad emotions involved, sex is always at least two people trying to impress each other while gyrating and making animal noises, and that is funny. America's solemn treatment of intercourse just adds to its humor, like the ridiculous clown made more ridiculous by the strict dignity with which he conducts himself. We knew the sex scene would get laughs no matter what we did and no matter how seriously we played it, and rightly so. Laughter can make a taboo subject accessible; in a culture where open, honest discourse about human sexuality is in short supply, too many people are coming to base their expectations about sex on pornography.¹² I was happy to take part in a depiction of heterosexual intercourse that did not involve multiple screaming orgasms and positions that would intimidate a circus contortionist.

I was determined not to feel awkward about playing this moment with a man I barely knew in front of my teachers and my students, though my resolve to maintain a somber attitude toward the scene only served to make those rehearsals even more awkward than they had to be. Every time we came to the sex scene in rehearsal, something different happened. Some nights,

¹¹ DeVore, John. "Mind Of Man: Funny Women Are A Natural Resource." *The Frisky*. N.p., 9 June 2010. Web. 26 Mar. 2013. <<http://www.thefrisky.com/2010-06-09/mind-of-man-funny-women-are-a-natural-resource/>>

¹² Castleman, Michael, M.A. "The Real Problem with Porn: It's Bad for Sex." *Psychology Today*. N.p., 31 July 2012. Web. 25 Mar. 2013. <<http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/all-about-sex/201207/the-real-problem-porn-its-bad-sex>>.

Ribuffo and I danced, and others he kissed my hand and led me offstage. Some nights, at a loss for what to do, we just stared at each other without touching and improvised dialogue befitting a cheesy pornographic movie. I was deeply grateful for Michael Hottos's decision to backlight the moment; performing in silhouette saved me from having to sell my "enjoyment" with my face. In spite of all my mental preparation, I still managed to turn four shades of red at each performance, but thankfully no one was able to see it.

The physicality was basic. I lowered myself onto my hands and knees, Ribuffo held my hips, and we rocked back and forth. Our vocals did most of the work. The first time we had the staircases and were able to get into the position Professor Tompkins wanted, Ribuffo and I both imitated stereotypical "porno" orgasms; that is, exceptionally noisy and punctuated by too many interjections. It was a relatively short moment, and when I came offstage one of my cast mates made a joke about premature ejaculation. That gave me an idea.

At our first dress rehearsal, when the sex scene rolled around, I contributed vocally to the moment but with slightly less energy than I had been exerting during the previous runs, and when Ribuffo "climaxed," I took a pause and then let out a disappointed sigh. Daniel Hill had invited a group of students from Indiana University Southeast to that rehearsal, and their laughter was positively raucous. I was instructed by both Hill (who had been assisting Professor Tompkins by coaching the cast vocally) and Professor Tompkins to keep what I had done.

Much Ado about Nothing opened to a house filled with students who made no effort to hide their displeasure at being forced to sit through an evening of Shakespeare. Laughter was sparse and weak, yet that disappointed sigh after Borachio "finished too fast" cracked them up. Sex is rarely the beautiful event Hollywood and abstinence-only sex education programs want to tell us it is; one partner might be having a great time while the other is bored. That young, disengaged audience recognized the humor in intercourse and showed their appreciation of an "honest" (that is, not unduly beautified or held to a holy standard) depiction of a common bedroom problem with raucous laughter.

Traditionally, the second night of a run is less successful than an opening night performance. Known as "second night slump," the cast loses the anticipation that fueled their

energy for opening night and the audience responds in kind, creating a downward spiral in energy for both patron and performer. Somehow, our second night jumped up in energy exponentially, and our audience was older and much more engaged. If I could get a good laugh during the sex scene out of the dead opening night audience, I was thrilled to think of how the second night's crowd would respond.

The stage lights faded and the cyclorama lights came up as Ribuffo and I entered for the sex scene. The audience was already giggling at Marvin Gaye's "Let's Get it On," recognizing the ironic use of pop music and anticipating what was about to happen. Everything was going well. Ribuffo "finished." I paused and took a breath, but before I could exhale, Ribuffo jumped in and stole the disappointed sigh from me. The audience erupted.

I was furious! I had come up with that bit, I had played it successfully since dress rehearsal, and he had stolen it from me. I fumed about it for the rest of the evening. Added to my anger was a sense that I was silly for getting angry, which only made me feel worse. I was so upset by the time I got home I cried into my pillow, cycling from fury at Ribuffo to shame for being so upset over one silly little bit to frustration with myself for invalidating my own emotions by judging them. I finally decided I was not just being a brat. Had Professor Tompkins made the call to give Ribuffo the sigh, though I might have felt a little deflated, I would have been fine with it because I trusted Professor Tompkins to look out for the best interest of the show. What Ribuffo had done was out of pure self-interest. It was horrible form on his part, as bad as stealing someone else's line because he thought he could say it better. A river of nasty words ran through my brain, and biting them back took more effort than I really had the energy to exert.

My mind was racing, and I cast about in my mental rolodex of old professors to see if at any point someone had talked about a situation like this in class and offered advice about how to deal with it. I came up with nothing. By three o'clock the next morning, I was exhausted yet unable to sleep. I could not let it go. Finally, my cried-out, tired eyes landed on the textbook I taught in my acting classes, Robert Cohen's *Acting One*, and I remembered a question raised by one of my students earlier in the semester.

I had been lecturing over the four basic principles of playing realism: Goal, Obstacle, Tactic, and Expectation. One of my students raised his hand. "So, basically, this class is teaching us how to manipulate people?"

"Do not be tempted by the Dark Side, young padawan," I joked, adopting Yoda-like sagacity, but I saw his point. I teach my students how to use Goal, Obstacle, Tactic, and Expectation in the real world as well as onstage. Here was a chance to practice what I had been preaching.

The first step in using the G.O.T.E. model is to identify the character's Goal. What did I want? I wanted my bit back. That was simple enough. It was tangible, quantifiable, and clear.

Next, I had to identify my Obstacle. It was more than simply "Richard is a dirty thief." What had caused him to steal the bit from me?

"It was working," I said to myself. It had gotten a big laugh every night. Ribuffo wanted people laughing at him. If laughter was the barometer, it appeared none of his other scenes had been well received; he stole the sigh to soothe his ego. Ribuffo's ego was the Obstacle.

Cohen separates Tactic and Expectation in his text, but I see more use in them when thought of together. Cohen insists an actor's Expectation should always be "to win," which can sometimes lead to an actor to pursue an unrealistic tactic. I see more value in considering what the actor expects a certain tactic to accomplish. For example, if I chose a tactic such as, "to scream at Ribuffo," I could reasonably expect him to respond by yelling back at me, and such hostility would not be a good indicator that he would agree to give me my bit back.

Tactics should always serve to circumvent the Obstacle, which in this case was Ribuffo's ego. I needed to choose tactics that would placate his ego and not damage it. I thought through a few options, and finally decided my best course of action was to come up with a different bit for him, make him think it was his idea, and reinforce it by showing him how he would look bad by keeping my bit without suggesting anything negative about him personally.

"Hey, Richard," I said when I saw him the next day, "the sex scene went really well last night!" He took the bait, and once I had his attention, I was able to express "concern" over his character. I worried Borachio was not the kind of guy who would feel bad about ejaculating too

quickly, particularly with a woman whom he was being paid to sleep with and for whom he had little to no feeling.

“I see your point,” he said, “but...”

I interrupted before he could convince himself of his own logic. “Don’t you think it would be hilarious if he sort of stretched and grinned, very pleased with himself, and then Margaret was the disappointed one?” My grandmother used to use this technique on people; by beginning a question (which was, in reality, a statement of her opinion masquerading as a question) with the words “don’t you think,” she was allowing the person with whom she was speaking to claim her statement as their own idea.

I had stroked Ribuffo’s ego, explained why the bit did not work for Borachio, offered him his own bit to take its place, and all that was left was to reinforce my point by gently threatening his fragile ego. I pointed out that if a man stops in the middle of intercourse and makes an unhappy sound an audience might think he had lost his erection.

“I hadn’t thought about that before,” he said. “Let’s do it your way.”

My student was right after all. Goal, Obstacle, Tactic and Expectation are as effective in real-world manipulation as they are in actor training.

XIII

PLAY THAT FUNKY MUSIC

The last hurdle to overcome with my performance was the Sunday matinee, during which I was to take over to role of Balthazar. I had been understudying Phoebe Bell for weeks, but my nerves were still electric as I drove to campus that afternoon.

Balthazar is a minstrel in service of the Prince. His false humility is comical as he begs the Prince not to force him to sing “Sigh No More” in front of Leonato and Claudio. In the script, he appears in two scenes, but Professor Tompkins had transferred his responsibilities during the dance to the Messenger, so I was only adding four lines to my workload. However, in our production, Balthazar accompanied himself on the guitar twice while singing, and that terrified me.

My father is an excellent guitarist, and though I have been around guitars and guitar pickers my entire life, I am by no means proficient. Growing up, I would occasionally ask my father to teach me a chord here or there, but I never exhibited much interest in playing until I was in my twenties. I bought a beaten up second hand Woods model from a pawn shop just to have something with which to fill my free time. My skill has grown, but I am still very much a beginner.

I have always believed those who cannot play well should not play in public, and I do not play well. Typically, I can beat out a tune on its own, but as soon as I try to sing along my playing falls spectacularly to pieces. I had practiced “Sigh No More” daily since I received the understudy position, even changing the chord progression to one I found easier to play in the hopes Professor Tompkins would find my version just as acceptable. In the end, he wanted the matinee audience to have as close to the same show as possible to the nighttime audiences.

If accompanying myself with the guitar was a challenge, doing so with a glob of scar wax on my face was even tougher. The prosthetic nose I wore at each performance inhibited my field

of vision so that I was unable to see the fret board while I played. Watching my fingers form the chords, two of which I was still struggling to play correctly despite my practicing, was a crutch I would have to do without.

I arrived at the theatre half an hour early. My vocal chords were coated with phlegm thanks to allergy issues, which made me sound scratchy as I practiced the song a few times in the empty space. I tried desperately to remember the vocal warm-up I had learned during rehearsal for the one and only musical in which I was ever cast, *Oklahoma!*, but could not, so I made due with Kristin Linklater's resonating ladder. I sounded clearer when I had finished, though I was still going sharp in the high notes of the song.

There was no way around it. I was going to accompany my own singing in front of an audience for the first time in my life. Each moment I was not onstage, I hummed quietly to myself to keep my vocal chords warm. I had a horrible vision of opening my mouth to sing and a screech owl falling out. I fingered the chords without strumming over and over again as I waited to take the stage with my cast mates. The nerves were not going to disappear, so I decided to make them a part of the character, just as Barbara Wesner had once instructed me to do when I was anxious about taking stage in a role I had learned only thirty six hours prior.

The moment came. Balthazar's line, "O good my lord, 'tis not so bad a voice / To slander music any more than once," (2.3.44-45) betrayed to the audience all my trepidation, but the line justified the fear. I took center stage, played the vamp, and belted Shakespeare's words. I poured into that song everything I was feeling at the moment and expelled those emotions at the top of my lungs.

The song is only about two minutes long, but when I finally left the stage I felt as though I had been in front of the audience for five years. It had gone well enough. I hit a few sour chords, but I sang loudly enough I doubted anyone heard the guitar properly anyway. Professor Tompkins commended my performance as I passed his spot in the vomitorium, but I barely heard him. I was so thankful it was over. When Phoebe returned for the evening show, I hugged her hard enough to knock the breath from her body.

XIV

CLOSING

Art is subjective, and the assertions that follow are not intended to be interpreted as some kind of universal truth. They are only my truth, but sharing these beliefs helps me explain why, ultimately, I was dissatisfied with our production of *Much Ado about Nothing*.

I believe all art is useful to society for purposes other than escapism, and the difference in art and entertainment comes from its originator's embrace or dismissal of the responsibility involved with creating something useful. I do not mean to imply that entertainment and escapism are in any way bad; in the Information Age particularly, when so many people rush around under a constant bombardment of messages, it can be a great relief to turn off the mind by turning on the television, seeing a play, fishing, or playing baseball. Entertainment is any enjoyable activity that does not require a great deal of complex thought. The questions raised by entertainment have simple solutions that can be found quickly.

Art can certainly be enjoyable, yet art has a different goal than entertainment. An entertainer's job is to distract her audience from real life for a time; an artist's job is to bring complex issues to an audience's attention. That does not make art inherently better than entertainment, just different. Much like Finley Peter Dunne's famous statement on the role of a newspaper, entertainment serves to "comfort the afflicted," but art's job is to "afflict the comfortable."

A play can be either art or entertainment; the distinction lies with the practitioners. If a practitioner's goal is simply to help the audience have a good time, she is an entertainer. If her goal is to spark a dialogue about a certain topic, or in some way create change, she is an artist. When an entertainer is successful, an audience forgets its troubles for the duration of the work. When an artist is successful, an audience leaves the work still mulling over the material with

which they were presented; in the best cases, an audience member leaves the work engaged in debate with another audience member, and the material stays on their minds for a long time afterward.

Much Ado about Nothing presents the classic virgin/whore dichotomy, a paradigm from which many people want America to move away, myself included. We had the opportunity to challenge that long-standing dichotomy; instead, we reinforced it. It was not our intention to have the audience question the issues in the script (aside from gender politics, Shakespeare also addresses the destructive nature of gossip.) We simply wanted them to enjoy themselves. Our production was not art, but entertainment, which in and of itself is not a bad thing; however, with this particular script, by allowing the audience to sit back and be entertained we contributed to something very dark indeed.

Much Ado about Nothing sets Margaret and Hero in opposition. Hero, the virgin, is wealthy, meek, pleasant, and helpful. Margaret, the slut (in spite of all our efforts to move the audience away from that notion, this word was still used by my students during an in-class discussion of the show) is lower class, vulgar, disrespectful, and her loyalty to her lady is called into question. (It took me weeks to prove Margaret's innocence; I seriously doubt our audience picked up in only one viewing that one shred of redemptive evidence that finally convinced me.) Additionally, in our production, the virgin was beautiful and the whore was ugly.

Shakespeare even echoes the Biblical idea that unchaste women are an evil that must be purged and unchaste men are simply a nuisance through Leonato's treatment of Hero and Borachio. When Hero is charged with promiscuity, Leonato becomes violently angry. He wishes for her death over and over and threatens her life with his line, "If they speak but truth of her / These hands shall tear her." (4.1.190-191) In our production, he actually attempted to slash her throat with a knife but was stopped by Benedick. This conforms to a law set forth in Deuteronomy:

If the charge is true, and no proof of the young woman's virginity may be found... the men of the town shall stone her to death. She has done an outrageous thing in Israel by being promiscuous while still in her father's house. You must purge the evil from among you.¹³

¹³Deuteronomy 22:20-22. *Holy Bible*. Print.

Yet, when Leonato encounters Borachio, the man who deceived and, in our case, took sexual advantage of his maidservant and caused the humiliation of his daughter, his temper remains in check. There are no monologues bemoaning Borachio's "foul, tainted flesh." (4.1.143) There is no righteous anger; Leonato does not even sentence Borachio. In our production, Don John, Borachio, and Conrade were bound and forced to take part in the practical joke on Claudio by wearing veils, but that is the worst punishment seen to befall them. Here again, unchecked male sexuality is given a good scolding when caught, but otherwise left to its own devices.

This double standard is unquestioned in the script. I was the only person in the company to talk about it, which tells me most of my cast mates did not even notice it. If they did, it did not bother them enough to prompt a statement. The double standard regarding male and female sexuality is so ingrained in our society that is accepted as correct, or else considered unchangeable. Yet, we had the power to address the double standard and the virgin/whore dichotomy. We had an opportunity to make our audience take a second look at this unjust mode of thought and consider these widely accepted stereotypes from a different perspective.

Instead, we presented our audience with a world in which a woman thought not to be a virgin is met with public outrage and threats of violence; where only women who choose to have sex outside the confines of marriage are ugly, vulgar, and stupid while those who retain their maiden modesty are beautiful, wealthy, and intelligent. These ideas are elements that form the basis for slut shaming and, left unchallenged, were reinforced as correct.

Slut shaming is the practice of mentally or verbally putting down a woman based on her perceived level of sexual experience. Just as in Hero's case, the woman in question may have no sexual experience whatsoever; however, once accused of sexual activity, slut shaming serves to tarnish her reputation far beyond the bedroom. "Sluts" do not make good friends or employees, and certainly do not make good leaders, at least according to common wisdom. A person who trusts a slut is unwise. Sluts are seen as stupid, selfish, and disease-riddled.¹⁴ In reality, the type or frequency of sexual activity in which a person engages has little, and often no, bearing on that

¹⁴ Goodman, Nathan. "How Slut Shaming Undermines Liberty." *Center for a Stateless Society RSS*. N.p., 6 Jan. 2013. Web. 25 Mar. 2013. <<http://c4ss.org/content/16069>>.

person's conduct in other areas of his or her life. Such treatment is certainly unjust; however, this kind of thinking is only part of a bigger problem.

The American Dream, or the idea that a person can achieve anything if he only works hard enough, has established this country as a meritocracy. Alain de Botton, in a speech given at a TED convention in 2009, describes the perks and pitfalls of meritocracies.

A meritocratic society is one in which if you've got talent and energy and skill, you will get to the top. Nothing should hold you back. It's a beautiful idea. The problem is, if you really believe in a society where those who merit to get to the top, get to the top, you'll also, by implication, and in a far more nasty way, you'll also believe in a society where those who deserve to get to the bottom also get to the bottom and stay there. In other words, your position in life comes to seem not accidental, but merited and deserved.¹⁵

Meritocracy encourages Americans to neglect the "haphazard," as de Botton describes unforeseeable circumstances, which can propel or depress a person regardless of distinction. A positive occurrence may be the result of pure luck, yet the person to whom that good thing happens will be perceived as having done something to earn it. Conversely, when misfortune befalls someone, society will put that person at fault.

In a meritocracy, a slut would deserve to have something bad happen to her. In America's skewed view of meritocracy, when a woman is raped, it is because she must have done something to deserve it. Slut shaming and victim blaming go hand in hand, and together support an America in which women are still second-class citizens. A woman has to be afraid in ways a man does not, and those fears make her more inclined to stay in the place defined for her by complementarian theology. With limited sovereignty over her own life, a woman is not a threat to male power. This may be a part of the reason America teaches women not to get raped, but fails to teach men not to rape.¹⁶

One show will not change the world. I cannot solve rape culture in America by playing Margaret as smart and confident rather than ugly and stupid. However, had we challenged the

¹⁵ De Botton, Alain. "A Kinder, Gentler Philosophy of Success." Lecture. *TED: Ideas worth Spreading*. TED, July 2009. Web. 25 Mar. 2013. <http://www.ted.com/talks/alain_de_botton_a_kinder_gentler_philosophy_of_success.html>.

¹⁶ Friedman, Jaclyn, and Jessica Valenti. "Offensive Feminism: Conservative Gender Norms That Perpetuate Rape Culture. and How Feminists Can Fight Back." *Yes Means Yes!: Visions of Female Sexual Power & a World without Rape*. Berkeley, CA: Seal, 2008. 13-28.

repressive ideas in this play, we might have been able to spark a conversation about the justice of those ideas in our audience. Art cannot fix society's problems all at once; what it can do is get people thinking about ways to solve them. Thoughts lead to words, and words lead to actions. We had a chance to create art; instead, we settled for entertainment, and allowed the damaging virgin/whore dichotomy to stand as legitimate. We allowed the men in our audience to see justification for the kind of thinking that leads to an entitled attitude toward the female body; that is, the belief that a woman in a certain condition or with a certain sexual history is "only good for one thing," which can result in an otherwise good man forcing himself on a woman who has not given her full consent (as is often the case in instances of date rape.) We allowed the women in the audience to see justification for the kind of thinking that leads them to believe the violence against them is their own fault.

I want women to see their own sexuality as something positive. I want men to see women as partners, not as competition, and definitely not as property or objects of conquest. I want to create art that encourages this kind of thinking. As a victim of sexual assault, I feel this missed opportunity to be a voice in that conversation keenly and am saddened by it.

The show itself got better every night. Cues were picked up faster, technique was sharpened, and the actors regained the sense of playfulness we had lost during the last few weeks of rehearsal. By the time we closed, we were all ready to put the show to bed. Margaret, in all her unforeseen complexity, taught me to watch out for all the messages a performer can potentially send an audience. She taught me that I must carefully craft my own scripts, my future performances, and my directing endeavours so that I am only telling the story I mean to tell. I am thankful for that.

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APPENDIX

A CHARACTER BIOGRAPHY

My name is Margaret Anita Toniolo. I was born on the south side of Washington, D.C. on April 16, 1987. I'm a Aries, which means I'm supposed to be fiery, energetic, charismatic and impulsive, if you believe in that kind of crap. Which, yeah, I'll admit, I kinda do. My dad, Roberto Toniolo, is a fisherman on a rig called the Frances and John, which he hates. Not the rig, or the job, just the name. He's got a problem with the Irish. My moms, Vita, worked a couple a different retail jobs before she died. We never had more than just enough money, but she always looked like a million bucks because of all the employee discounts she got. She kept me pretty well dressed for a poor kid growing up in the wrong part of D.C., too. I'm a only child, but I have a lot of cousins, so I wasn't like a spoiled kid or nothing. After Sunday mass at St. Cyprian, my family used to go over to my Nonni's for Sunday dinner, and my dad's brothers and their families would all be there. My cousins Rosa and Carlos were both older than me because my dad was Nonni's youngest kid, but still they were really nice to me. Most of the time, anyway. You know how kids are. Carlos was really smart, too. He was always reading books to me and Rosie. I guess he and my moms are the reason I spend so much time reading. She loved to read, and she was constantly after me to study hard in school. I was a pretty good student, too, for the most part. I was one of those kids who, you know, things just came easy to me, so I didn't have to try real hard, and I was mostly just bored by school and started getting into a little bit of trouble pretty early. Not bad, like drugs or nothing, but I got in trouble for cutting class a lot. My best friend, this black kid named Keisha, and me used to walk up to the Potomac and watch the barges go by. We'd talk about everything, like kids do, mostly boys. Her dad got a job in Richmond just before we started our sophomore year of high school, and they moved away. We swore in blood we were gonna keep in touch, but you know how kids are. She did remember my birthday that year, though, and sent me a book, *Coyote Blue* by Christopher Moore. He's my favourite. His stuff is

hilarious. I actually love to read. After I dropped out, I pretty much always had a book nearby, and so I've got a pretty decent vocabulary for a high-school dropout from the wrong part of D.C. I woulda stuck with it, I guess, if it hadn't been for my moms getting sick. The doctors told us she had pancreatic cancer just after I turned fifteen, and it was all Dad could do to take care of her toward the end. So, I just stayed home from school to take care of her. She wasn't happy about that, you can bet your life on it, but I wasn't learning anything anyway spending all day hoping she wasn't by herself and in pain and not able to do anything about it, which she usually was since dad couldn't afford to take time off and we couldn't afford a home nurse. My aunts would come over sometimes, but they all had jobs, too, and Nonni could barely walk anymore, so it wasn't like she was much use looking after Moms. So I just stayed home with her.

I was there with my moms when she passed, may she rest in peace, and I know this maybe sounds kinda sick or morbid or whatever, but I'm glad I was there.

She had been having a rough morning. Her breathing was all raggedy and her eyes were open, but you could just tell she wasn't actually seeing anything out of them. I was reading to her, like I usually do, and it's a pretty funny book by Christopher Moore called *Lamb: The Gospel According to Biff, Christ's Childhood Pal*. She thinks it's funny even though it is a little blasphemous. Okay, a lot blasphemous. Sue me. I read her the part where Mary Magdalene pretends to be possessed by a demon, and suddenly she's laughing. I look over and she's smiling at me, and her eyes are clear. "Help me sit up," she tells me, and I do, and we're talking like we haven't been able to talk in weeks. She tells me she loves me, she scolds me for cutting class, she makes me promise her I'll get my grades up so I can go to a good college, and I do. She asks for my dad, and I say he'll be home from work in an hour or so. Then she starts asking for her brother, Moms, who are you talking about? Joey. Joey is Dad's brother, Moms. NO, she's starting to get upset, my Joey, my little brother. I'm gonna call Nonni and maybe she knows how to get in touch with him, Moms, I'll be right back. Maggie, I want to rest, please. Okay, Moms, here, lay back on your pillows, I'll be right back.

I could hear her talking to someone as I walked out of the room. She was laughing quietly with someone. She had been talking to people who weren't there for a while now. The doctors

told us it was a side effect of the morphine. She passed while I was on the phone with my Nonni. Turns out, Joey was her little brother who had died in a freak accident in Sicily when they were teenagers. I had never heard her talk about him before, but she died thinking she was laughing with her little brother, and I thank the Blessed Mother for letting me be there to know she wasn't scared when she went. I couldn'ta took that.

I didn't go back to school that year. I had missed too much to pass any of my classes, and I didn't want to repeat a grade, so I dropped out and got my GED. I always planned on going to college, but I needed to make some money first. I might wait until I'm older to go back. It's easier to get scholarship when you're older if you're a dropout. All the money for kids my age goes to the really smart kids, and half the time it goes to kids whose parents could afford college for them anyway. It's not fair, but nobody's asking me, right?

My dad made me get a job, so I got one working in the housekeeping department at a Motel 6. The work wasn't really that hard, just really boring and repetitive, and way too often I got accosted by the scraggly clientele who assumed because I was young and pretty working a housekeeping job at a cheap motel that I had a little side business going, if you know what I mean, which was totally and completely NOT true. I stuck it out for a year, and then I applied for a job on the personal housekeeping staff for Senator Leonato. I was thrilled when I got it, because not only was I working somewhere a lot safer, not to mention respectable, but the pay was out of this world! I was making more keeping house for the senator than my moms ever had working retail.

The senator has a daughter who's a trip. Her name is Hero, and she's a few years younger than me. I sort of figured, when I first met her, that a snotty private-schooled senator's daughter wouldn't want anything to do with the help, especially the first generation Italian-American help who dropped out of high school to become a housekeeper, but actually she turned out to be pretty cool. We talk a lot while I'm working if she's not in school, and we've gotten pretty close over the past couple a years. She calls me her best friend. I don't know if that's true. I don't know if two people who are so different can really ever be best friends, but it's nice to know she

thinks of me that way. Plus, since we're close to the same size, she gives me all of her fabulous hand-me-downs. I'm definitely not complaining about that!

I have other friends, though. A lot of military men. I've always liked hanging out with guys better than girls. They're just so much more easy-going and fun. That gives you a certain kind of reputation, if you get my drift, but I don't care. Let people talk. I know how to handle the ones who are only after one thing. Hit the road, Jack. Living in D.C., you're going to meet a LOT of military guys. Some of them are actually stationed in Virginia or Maryland, like my friend Borachio. God, you know, sometimes he makes me so mad. Talk about perpetuating your own freakin' stereotype - he is the picture of a swarthy, drunk Italian. Sometimes I can hardly stand to be around him when he's been drinking. He gets absolutely disgusting, and beligerent to boot. The guys he hangs around are bad news, you know. One of them, the ringleader of their little posse or whatever, he ought to know better. He's related to the President, for crying out loud. He's half brothers with the President's son. That was a scandal during the election, you can bet. But I guess every family has a black sheep. I don't like to be around Borachio when he's been hanging with that bunch. They get him drunk, and he likes to come on to me when he's drunk. Shame, really, because if I'm gonna be completely honest, I like him a lot - when he's SOBER. I've talked to his commanding officer about what to do about it before. Captain Benedick is a pretty cool dude, even though Borachio never does anything but talk trash about him. He knows what it's like to come from nothing. He grew up in a mining family in eastern Kentucky. I thought being a fisherman's daughter in D.C. was rough until I met him. Of course, the good captain doesn't give the greatest love advice, but it's fun to listen to him talk. Keeps me grounded when I've got my head in the clouds. I've been his shoulder to cry on about Hero's cousin Beatrice a couple a times... although, by "shoulder to cry on," I mean I've taken him to my cousin's ring and let him take it out on a punching bag. It's pretty obvious he's so in love with her he can't see straight, but it's no use trying to tell him that. I don't know what he sees in her, really. Hero's great, but Beatrice is a bitch.

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