A charge we bear i'th'war,
And as the president of my kingdom will
Appear there for a man. (Antony and Cleopatra, 3.7. 16-18)

The aim of this chapter is to examine powerful women who pose a threat to the patriarchal order and often succeed in manipulating it to their advantage. This chapter is different in thrust and focus from the earlier chapters in that here we see women who wield enormous power not only in the textual space but also in the social space. Some of these characters are Cleopatra, Joan, Goneril, Regan, the Duchess of Gloucester, Portia, to name a few.

In Antony and Cleopatra, Cleopatra enjoys a political dominion. She is seen to command the play and invert the natural hierarchy. But this inversion is readily transformed into female sexual predatoriness. Cleopatra is presented as a woman who is bold and cunning. She is Ptolemy's widow who rules over Egypt. As a young girl she had offered herself to Julius Caesar when he conquered Egypt. Subsequently she accompanies him back to Rome and by giving birth to Caesar's son she undermines Roman succession. This is revealed in a comment made by Agrippa. When the play opens she is firmly ensconced in the throne of Egypt and there is only that single reference to her association with Caesar. Historical records show that Cleopatra had fled from Rome along with her son Caesarion after the assassination of Julius Caesar. But in the Rome of the play, she is perceived as an active threat and therefore demonised.
It can be said that *Antony and Cleopatra* has a tragic hero paralleled by a heroine. Cleopatra is the monarch of Egypt and we are constantly reminded of her personal and political power. Cleopatra embodies all that Rome lacks – beauty, art, leisure. Her political power is a threat to Roman patriarchy, therefore Rome demonises her by defining her world as private, female and barbaric. The Romans cannot negotiate with her or with Egypt on equal terms. This is evident in Rome’s assessment of Egypt and Cleopatra. In contrast to the Martian characteristics upheld by Rome, Egypt embodies the feminine principle of fluidity and fertility. Her fabulous wealth combined with the opulence of Egyptian culture makes her an ominous adversary of the strictly masculine Roman world of statecraft and politics where women figure marginally. Therefore in sharp contrast to Octavia’s compliant passivity, a politically active, rich and powerful woman like Cleopatra defies Roman imagination. They can think only in terms of occlusion. The Romans led by Octavius Caesar, would like to control, even sublimate Cleopatra. Her wealth and beauty notwithstanding, her race and gender make her politically unacceptable to them. She is clearly the ‘Other’ to them – of a darker race and a woman. Further, her political status problematizes her femininity. Her emancipation, her refusal to be completely subjugated by a patriarchal order, poses a serious challenge to the Roman values and even threatens to undermine them.

The feminization of Egypt, that is, the according of gender identity to a geographical space, was, in fact, part of the strategy of colonization. This points
to the issue of gender to the play and makes it amenable to feminist criticism. The cause of the tragedy in the play can be seen as rooted in the essential and irreducible difference between male and female. As pointed out by French, the masculine principle is usually associated with acquisition of power, whereas the feminine principle is concerned with personal satisfaction. In challenging the principle of female chastity, the play challenges the kind of "female subordination" to the male which guarantees male legitimacy. In presenting a challenge to these institutions, particularly that of marriage, Cleopatra becomes the force for liberation in the play challenging the civilizing principles of Rome.

Though Cleopatra is unique among the independent women in Renaissance drama, as a ruler of Egypt she always feels threatened by the designs of the Roman Empire. Her insecurity and fear of invasion, not only as a ruler but also as a woman who is threatened by her lover is evident in her reluctance to move from her territory. Though she threatens the boundaries between male and female, political and private world, she remains geographically stationary and resents any Roman intrusion. Her gender renders her politically unacceptable and her political status problematizes her feminity.

Antony’s excessive feeling for Cleopatra and susceptibility to her charms draws accusations of effeminacy on him. In Egypt Antony is believed to have become a “strumpets fool” (1.1.13), who is in danger of fast losing his masculinity. In Roman eyes Antony’s dalliance with Cleopatra is not only alarming but also unmanly. Cleopatra is seen as a threat to Rome and Antony.
Enobarbus and other Roman friends of Antony comment darkly on his present weakness, contrasting it, from the first moments of the play, with the valour and good sense he possessed in the past. The play begins with Philo's remark as he shares his unease over Antony's strange behaviour as he neglects his political duties:

His captain’s heart,
Which in the scuffles of great fights hath burst
The buckles on his breast, reneges all temper
And is become the bellows and the fan
To cool a gypsy’s lust. (1.1.6-10)

‘Gypsy,’ it may be mentioned here, was a contemptuous term for a promiscuous woman and a ‘strumpet.’ Even before Cleopatra appears these soldiers paint a stereotyped picture of her which is later supported by Octavius Caesar when he echoes similar thoughts about Antony to Lepidus: He says that Antony:

Fishes drinks and wastes
The lamps of night in revel; is not more manlike
Than Cleopatra, nor the Queen of Ptolemy
More womanlike than he; (1.4.4-7).

The public masculine world of Rome is shown to demonstrate a patriarchal control over the apparently private female world of Egypt and in the process it produces a particular form of demonized subjectivity for Cleopatra. Egypt/Cleopatra exemplifies a subversive threat to Roman authority, so that Egypt
cannot be regarded as “merely a lover’s retreat”. Antony oscillates between different political positions in relation to Rome and Egypt; while Cleopatra's sexuality is an extension of her political power. Insofar as it disrupts a political order that is primarily patriarchal, the play relates political disorder to sexual disorder. To the extent that such disorder has its point of reference in Cleopatra's Egypt, it is seen more in terms of its blackness than of its political impact. The Roman world represents her sexuality feeding on her politics, which, in turn, is seen as dangerous in the sense that it feeds off successive Roman generals.

The play dramatises Rome's fear of Cleopatra, linking the fear to the failure of Roman patriarchy to contain her. This is a manifestation of Cleopatra's difference transforming itself into excess. Ironically, the fear of excess generates excessive differences both in terms of eroticism and paranoia. Cleopatra is increasingly seen as excess that breeds further excess, linking her to the fertility of the land. Her efforts to relate to Antony on human terms, however, get deflected by the erotic investments. The lavish banquets and feasting are construed as further evidence of her status as a succubus figure. A woman's attempt to woo a man in a way that is expressive of her culture transforms her into a dangerous sign.

While Cleopatra's resemblance to the goddess Isis is culturally produced, it produces a network of positive associations in Egyptian society. As Cleopatra fashions herself after the goddess, the accent is on the power of plenty, both in terms of the quantity of food and the number of children. This is the image of a
woman considered socially valuable. Naturally, her sexuality is seen as socially useful and is divorced from the eroticism that the Romans represent as a transgressive force. Plentifulness, an attribute that invites serious cultural investments in one culture, gets disfigured in another and is transmuted into excess, a liability and a deformity. The play brings out this dichotomy between Rome and Egypt to the extent that they can perceive each other only in terms of occlusion.

The text supports the masculine Roman view and true to their words, we first see Cleopatra in the court, provocative and teasing to Antony, already testing him to see where his loyalties and affections lie:

You must not stay here longer; your discharge
Is come from Caesar; therefore hear it Antony.

Wher’s Fulvia process? Caesar’s I would say? both?

Call in the messengers! As I am Egypt’s Queen,
Thou blushest, Antony, and that blood of thine
Is Caesar’s homager. (1.1.26-31)

Antony reassures her in terms of hyperbole:

Let Rome in Tiber melt, and the wide arch
Of the ranged empire fall! Here is my space.

Kingdoms are clay! (1.1.34-36)

Thus Cleopatra’s appearance on stage is seen to be associated with undermining of men. She not only teases Antony but also the eunuch Mardian into admitting
the sexual fantasies he cannot consummate, and also strikes the messenger who brings unwelcome news from Rome. Most importantly she is shown as directly responsible for Antony’s failing judgement and misguided action. Antony himself is aware of it and makes conscious, though unsuccessful, attempts to break free from her charms: “These strong Egyptian fetters I must break. / or loose myself in dotage” (1.2.123-24). Clearly, unable to break free he loses himself at the end.

Like the Other Romans Antony also sees Promiscuity, as Cleopatra’s true nature. He is powerless to resist Cleopatra’s influence. His love for Egypt’s Queen leads him to take a wrong decision and agree to fight Caesar by sea at Actium. The soldiers who see women as luxury of peace and impediment of war complain: “Our leader’s led,/ And we are women’s men” (3.6.68-69). While personally Cleopatra loyal to Antony, Politically she is always ambivalent. This is evident from her desertion of Antony’s forces in the sea fight near Actium. She is also ambivalent in her handling of Caesar’s messenger Thidias. This arouses Antony’s suspicion and anger and he even threatens to kill her. When she betrays Antony by deserting him at the battle of Actium, she says:

Cleopatra: O my lord, my lord,

Forgive my fearful sails! I little thought

You have followed.

Antony: Egypt thou Knewst too well

My heart was to thy rudder tied by strings,

And thou shouldst tow me after. (3.11. 54-59)
Even in Egypt Antony is unable to figure out Cleopatra’s intentions. He oscillates between Rome’s construction of Egypt and what Egypt holds out as truth. Thus, Cleopatra becomes an agent, an evil instrument of Antony’s downfall. Embittered Antony calls her a ‘boggler’ and says he found her “as a morsel, cold upon/ Dead Caesar’s trencher” (3.13. 121-22). When Antony’s men forsake him and yield to Caesar he accuses Cleopatra of political as well as sexual rapaciousness:

All is lost!
This foul Egyptian hath betrayed me. (4.12.9-12),
.
.
Triple-turned whore!’ Tis thou
hast sold me to this novice, and my heart

His subsequent defeat plunges him into humiliation, rage and despair. He falls for Cleopatra’s trick, believing that she has killed herself out of remorse; but his own attempt at suicide fails. His death comes as the culmination of a series of wrong decisions stemming from his decreasing inability to give sound judgement for which, the text and the other Characters, hold Cleopatra responsible.

Cleopatra is the Queen of Egypt, but she has nothing to do in Antony’s absence. She is only seen longing and pining for him. Her sole interest is only in Antony. But while Antony is away he never mentions her by name. Cleopatra’s
need to test Antony’s love by her foolish prank of pretending to be dead is just another way of revealing her inherent weakness and her dependence on him:

Mardian, go tell him I have slain myself.

Say that the last I spoke was “Antony”

And word it, prithee, piteously. Hence, Mardian

And bring me how he takes my death (4.12.7-9)

The fluctuations in Cleopatra’s temperament can be seen as an enduring feature of her femininity, it also deprives her of emotional and political space in the play. As a foul Egyptian she always stands outside the Roman society; Antony never fully trusts her and to ensure his stability in the Roman society marries a safe and obedient women, Octavia.

It is not surprising therefore that the last act resolves the tensions of the play, a tension created by the conflict between masculine Rome and feminine Egypt. The tension is resolved by the death of both Antony and Cleopatra. Cleopatra’s death is a carefully calculated triumph over Caesar. But, before she achieves this, Shakespeare ensures that the ‘wanton gypsy’ is tamed. Cleopatra becomes Antony’s wife; the queen is stripped to an essential femininity that attaches to all women irrespective of class. When Charmian addresses her as ‘Madam’ Cleopatra replies:

No more but e’en a woman, and commanded

By such poor passions as the maid that milks

And does the meanest chores (4.15.73-75)
The variable woman is now ‘marble constant’; the witch gives way to the penitent goddess as Egypt tries to do ‘what’s brave,/what’s noble...after the high Roman fashion’ (4.15.66-7). Cleopatra now comfortably calls Antony her husband: “Husband, I come!/Now to that name my courage prove my title!” (5.2.285). Octavius confesses her triumph in death – “She levelled at our purpose” –. He is affected by her death but even in death, it is Cleopatra’s beauty as an enchantress that moves him and his usually cold and rational language gains a poetic dimension; “but she looks like sleep/As she would catch another Antony/in her strong toil of grace” (5.2.345-47).

In *King Lear* there appears to be a connection between sexual insubordination and anarchy. The treatment of Goneril and Regan represents the patriarchal misogyny of the play. The text defines the sisters resistance to their father in terms of their gender, sexuality and position within the family. The treatment of their father by Goneril and Regan is seen not simply as cruel and selfish but as a fundamental violation of human nature. Unlike Cordelia, Goneril and Regan give theatrical speeches claiming their love for their father in the public drama that Lear stages in the beginning of the play. Goneril and Regan do not initially rebel against patriarchal authority, but once they get power they wield their power not only over the kingdom but also over Lear, the symbol of patriarchy. Their quest for power and the desire to exercise it render them malicious, evil, corrupt and whorish. That is how things appear from one point of view, that is, Lear’s point of view. Corruption is seen in gendered terms. Goneril and Regan are evil women and unnatural daughters.
While there is no denying the cruelty shown by both these women, some of their decisions, though unworthy are not wholly unjustified. Lear is old and irascible and as Regan observes after his public banishment of Cordelia, “he hath ever but slenderly known himself” (1.1. 292-3). Moreover, Lear abdicates power because he wishes to have a good time as a retired king---retaining his authority without responsibility. However once power changes hands, Goneril and Regan have to be responsible for their decisions and accountable for everything. As such, they are within their rights to think of cutting down unnecessary expenditure. It is foolish on Lear’s part to expect his daughters to support his large entourage of hundred odd men, bent on revelry. That they finally leave Lear with nothing is quite something else.

Lear’s daughters are not unaware of the fact that during their father’s rule absolute authority had given way to irresponsible exercise of power. The god-like authority of Lear had inspired false love and flattery. A sentence once uttered was never retracted. But once out of power Lear expects to command the same awe which was attached to his position. He confuses the person with the office till he painfully realises that even a dog is obeyed in office. Goneril and Regan obey him like dutiful daughters till Lear’s retinue becomes a nuisance and then start objecting.

Regan and Goneril, then, share a goal of reshaping their country in a more humane, democratic fashion, one that threatens the male-controlled status quo. This, however, positions Goneril and Regan as “other” in Lear’s masculine
culture. Although shared rule breaks down in the course of the action, its daring attempt fashions a journey far more devastating for the women in the long run. In pursuit of this ideal, they lose their spouses, their dream of communal government, and eventually their lives. The turning point for both Goneril and Regan is when they realize that their administrative structure cannot survive the hostility of Lear and his men, at which point they make the fatal mistake of reverting to his political model. The later, more militaristic, reactions of Goneril and Regan to their father are a form of learned behavior, informed by Lear’s presumably lifelong behavior toward his subjects. This learned behavior is also reflected in the fact that Cordelia leads an army against her native land. Lear, as a result of his abdication, loses power throughout the action, but he continues to be obsessed with it. And even the minor male characters proceed politically. Kent and Gloucester, both staunch supporters of Lear’s old kingship, become spies. Albany finds himself, like the Fool, at odds with women’s rule, nostalgic for life as it was under Lear’s leadership.

Lear, on the other hand, threatens to recover the throne: “Thou shalt find/That I’ll resume the shape which thou dost think/ I have cast off forever” (1.4.306-8). It is the threat of Lear that alters the complexion of the play. Goneril sees in this threat the confirmation of a plot by Lear to remove them and sets about disbanding her father’s followers.

Thus, Goneril is the first to “unfold” her true feelings for Lear, talking to her steward Oswald she says:
If he distate it, let him to my sister,
Whose mind and mine, I know in that are one,
Not to be over-rulled. Idle old man,
That still would manage those authorities
That he hath given away!- Now, by my life,
Old fools are babes again; and must be used

With checks as flatteries, when they are seen abused. (1.3.15-21)

Goneril here makes it clear that she would not tolerate anybody who tries to undermine her authority and that she and Regan will no longer be ruled by their father because now they are in power, not Lear. The real clash between Lear and his daughters takes place. When Goneril attacks Lear’s soldiers for behaving badly and accuses him of promoting his soldiers’ quarrelsome behaviour (1.4). Lear’s Fool reports of Lear’s ill-treatment by his daughters as:

The hedge-sparrow fed the cuckoo so long,
That it had its head bit off by its young. (1.4.214-215)

Lear is so puzzled by the events taking place that he asks Gonerill: “Are you our daughter?”. Lear has always expected his daughters to consider him as a lord. The apparently deviant behaviour on the part of his two daughters is an assault on his status in the family.

Whereas Lear gets confused the Fool goes on with his talk:

May not an ass know when the cart draws the
Horse? - Whoop, Jug! I love thee. (1.4.222-223)
The fool’s remarks also justify the misogyny of the text. It suggests that women should always be kept within limits. Too much power and freedom corrupts them and destabilises the order of society. Lear’s extreme degree of puzzlement get to a kind of amnesiac state in which he asks who he really is. Lear who has always demanded unquestioned obedience from his daughters, loses his identity when his daughters start questioning him. Lear still hopes to exercise his authority through Goneril and Regan, but their resistance is unacceptable to him. He thus asks:

Doth any here know me?- Why, this is not Lear:

Doth Lear walk thus? Speak thus? Where are his eyes?(225-226).

At the end of the argument Lear, enraged, astonished and depressed, announces that he is going to Regan.

Degenerate bastard! I’ll not trouble thee:

Yet have I left a daughter. (254-253)

Regan, as we see, is prepared by Goneril, who before Lear’s arrival at Regan’s castle, sends her a letter telling her all. In fact, Regan wants Lear to return to Goneril and ask her forgiveness.

O, Sir, you are old;

Nature in you stands on the very verge
Of her confine: you should be ruled, and bed
By some discretion that discerns your State
Better than yourself. Therefore, I pray you,
That to our sister you do make return;
Say you have wrong’d her, sir. (2.4. 143-49)
Lear sees the behaviour of Goneril and Regan as unwomanly, therefore when Regan does not act as he had expected, he tries to soften her by flattering her, putting her in a higher scale than Goneril, and trying to appeal to her feminine qualities:

Thy tender-hefted nature shall not give
Thee o’er to harshness: her eyes are fierce, but thine
Do comfort and not burn... (2.4.169-71)

In the middle of the argument, Goneril enters. Lear begins to accuse her of mistreating him. However, while he gets enraged and passionate, the sisters remain calm and without any sign of passion in them.

Both sisters dispossess Lear of all his soldiers. Having lost his power over his kingdom and also over his daughters, Lear becomes a servant of his daughters, a man without a will. He is unable to accept that he has lost his “male authority” over them. Lear gets mad and goes away to the woods. Albany, Gonerill’s husband, blames Goneril and Regan for Lear’s madness:

Tigers, not daughters, what have you perform’d?
A father, and a gracious aged man,
Whose reverence the head-lugg’d bear would lick,
Most barbarous, most degenerate! have you madded. (4.2.40-43)

They are held responsible for the chaos and disruption of the state. Women in power can only bring disgrace. The text seems to suggest that Goneril emerges as a strong woman in power. She does her best to consolidate her position in
authority by eliminating possible rivals. She gets Gloucester blinded to handicap Cordelia and Lear. The politics of *King Lear* shares with English history the ruthless opportunism and the survival of the fittest. Soon, however, power appears to undo both Goneril and Regan. They are manipulated by Edmund who tries to consolidate his own uncertain position in the court.

Others in the play also condemn the behaviour of Goneril and Regan as monstrous. While one of the servants refers to them as monsters, the Duke of Albany, Goneril’s husband looks upon her conduct as a violation of nature: “Tigers, not daughters, what have you perform’d”(4.2.40). Their monstrosity is further qualified by their act of plucking out Gloucester’s eyes (3.4). Albany foretells that something will stop the chaos going on, and if that does not happen somebody should stop it by destroying the monsters, Regan and Goneril:

“If that the heavens do not their visible spirits
Send quickly down to tame these vile offences,
It will come,
Humanity must perforce prey on itself,
Like monsters of the deep.”(4.2.46-50)

Thus, according to Shakespeare’s text, Goneril and Regan are clearly represented as demons, monsters, anything but human. They are shown to be the enemies of mankind and have to be destroyed. This destruction comes from their lust for Edmund. Power in women is always associated with lust. Goneril openly declares her lusty passion for Edmund:
O, the difference of man and man! To thee
A woman’s services are due: my fool
Usurps my body. (4.2.26-28)

And in Scene 5, the action centres on Regan. She asks Goneril’s steward why
Goneril writes a letter to Edmund. She makes clear her relation to Edmund:

My Lord is dead; Edmund and I have talkt;
And more convenient is he for my hand
Than for your lady’s... (4.5.30-32)

The sisters are pitted against each other and in their fight for Edmund, Goneril
poisons Regan and stabs herself. The double standard practised in the area of
sexual relations is also evident here. Goneril and Regan, as overtly desiring
sexual subjects, are condemned as monstrous and lustful, whereas for Edmund,
his involvement is perceived as yet another sign of his adroitness.

Kathleen McCluskie sees the text’s patriarchal assumptions within a
theatrical rather than exclusively textual context. According to McCluskie, it is
difficult, for feminist criticism to find a point of entry into King Lear. The
narrative constructs an identification for the reader or spectator with Lear, which
increases as the play progresses. This means, that the reader is made to see and
judge the events of the play from Lear’s perspective and condone his
demonization of Goneril and Regan as unnatural and monstrous. With the drama
so heavily weighted in favour of Lear and his view of “filial ingratitude”, arguing
a case for Goneril and Regan thus threatens to overturn the dramatic balance of the play. As McCluskie points out:

A feminist reading of the text cannot simply assert the countervailing rights of Goneril and Regan, for to do so would simply reverse the emotional structures of the play and equate feminist ideology with atavistic selfishness and the monstrous assertion of individual wills. Feminism cannot simply take “the woman’s part” when that part has been so morally loaded and theatrically circumscribed. (102)

Moreover, the condemnation of the two sisters is universalised to women in general, who are made responsible for the chaos of Lear’s kingdom in a series of increasingly hostile remarks. Lear’s characterisation of his madness as “the mother” (2.2.246) which must be controlled and his dismissal of tears as “woman’s weapons” (2.2.465) are early indications of this. It reaches a climax in his speech on the hypocrisy of the “simp’ring dame”, who publicly abhors adultery, but privately indulges to excess so that “the fitchew, nor the soiled horse, goes to’t with a more riotous appetite”. From this example of a specific “type” of woman, Lear moves to chastise all women:

Down from the waist they are Centaurs,

Though women all above:

But to the girdle do the gods inherit,

Beneath is all the fiend’s: there’s hell, there’s darkness,

There is the sulphurous pit. (4.4. 120-127)
The contempt and disgust for women expressed in this statement is heightened by
the fact that such an antipathy grows in tandem with his increasing understanding
of what it means to be human. This linkage of the human exclusively with the
male is something no-one in the all-male society surrounding him challenges.
Indeed, Albany’s angry confrontation with Goneril (4.2) and Edgar’s moralistic
comments on women’s lust (4.4. 266) further build the case against women in
general through the demonization of the two sisters. Any act of disobedience on
the part of women, however small, is construed as indicative of chaos. At the end
of the play the death of these women restores the patriarchal power of the state
which is the only way to hold chaos at bay.

The case of Portia in The Merchant of Venice is quite different. She is
neither demonised nor described in terms of sexual excess. She is a rich and
powerful heiress. But unlike the other powerful women discussed in this chapter
she does not pose a threat to the patriarchal world. This is because her wealth and
power are always in the hands of the two men in her life: her father, who
controls her even from the grave and Bassanio, to whom her wealth is transferred
after marriage. Portia is allowed to control the movements of the play but she is
only a medium through which wealth is circulated and redistributed to Venice’s
Christian males. Thus Portia’s wealth goes to Bassanio, Antonio’s is magically
restored through her agency, and Shylock’s is given over to the state through a
law unearthed by Portia/ Balthazar. Portia is thus the bearer of fortune for
Bassanio, Antonio and Lorenzo. Lorenzo says she drops manna upon the males
of Venice: “Fair ladies you drop manna in the way of starved people” (5.1.294-95). And Bassanio sees her as a lady “richly left” (1.1.160).
Portia is powerful but she is her father's property: even from the grave he has the legal and moral right to decide the most intimate concerns of her life. Furthermore, when married, she is expected to transfer control of her life and living from her father's hands to the man who marries her. Portia's father has tried to ensure that his daughter and his rich estate will continue to prosper after his death. Portia's father takes the care of his estate totally out of his daughter's hands, completely disregarding her intelligence and common sense. Portia cannot even veto her father's choice of a husband, a right increasingly accepted in Elizabethan times. Certainly with both her parents dead, and apparently competent of age and capable of managing the estate well, Portia could expect to have some influence over her marriage.

Portia first appears in act 1, scene 2. In this scene we see her struggling to balance her needs as an individual against the demands of the patriarchal society in which she lives. This struggle makes her “weary of this great world” (1.2.1). She knows she should conform to her father's will, but she also desperately wants to control her choice of a husband. Nerissa sees Portia’s miseries in the same ‘abundance’ as her good fortune. The conflict in Portia’s mind is very clear when she says to Nerissa:

O me, the word 'choose'! I may neither choose who I would nor refuse who I dislike, so is the will of a living daughter curbed by the will of a dead father. Is it not hard, Nerissa, that I cannot choose one nor refuse none? (1.3.19-20)
In spite of Portia's scruples and her determination to live by the rules, her discussion with Nerissa in act 1 admits the possibility of rebellion against her father's authority. But Nerissa has full faith in Portia’s virtuous father because “holy men at their death have good inspirations”.

Thus, though Portia chafes against this patriarchal control she eventually accepts it, partly out of trust and duty, and partly because she finds that it ultimately works to her advantage. When Nerissa announces that at least some undesirable suitors have been driven away by Portia's father’s demands, the will, seems to have worked for her. It is this success that makes her more willing to accept the demands of the patriarchal authority and to submit both her possessions and her person to her husband. She resolves “If I live to be as old as Sibylla, I will die as chaste as Diana, unless I be obtained by the manner of my, father's will” (1.2.104-6).

The casket scene in act 3, when Bassanio comes as a suitor to try his luck, sensitively reveals Portia's conflict between independence and submission. Portia is caught between her desire to give Bassanio clues about how to choose and her reluctance to betray her father's will: “I could teach you How to choose right, but then I am forsworn” (3.2.10-12). She is also torn between her desire for Bassanio and her anxiety about submitting herself to him.

One half of me is yours, the other half yours -  
Mine own, I would say: but if mine then yours,  
And so all yours. (3.2.16-18)
When Bassanio, fortunately for him and Portia, chooses the right casket, Portia then declares her submission to him thus:

She is not bred so dull but she can learn;
Happiest of all, is that her gentle spirit
Commits itself to yours to be directed
As from her lord, her governor, her king.
Myself, and what is mine, to you and yours
Is now converted. But now I was the lord
Of this fair mansion, master of my servants,
Queen o'er myself; and even now, but now,
This house, these servants, and this same myself
Are yours, my lord. (3.2.161-172)

The ring that she gives Bassanio is a symbol of her trust in him and in the institution of marriage in the patriarchal world. It is also a representation of Portia's acceptance of the Elizabethan marriage codes which were characterized by women's subjugation, loss of legal rights, and their status as goods or chattel. Portia conforms to the demands of her society and places her entire life and living not only into her husband's hands but also to Antonio. She tells Lorenzo “this Antonio, Being the bosom lover of my lord, Must needs be like my lord.” Even her ambitions are defined within the ambit of male desire and must be as per acceptable social conventions. She herself outlines the contours of excellence, but seasons them with patriarchal qualifications. A man could not have put it better if
he was writing a wish list on behalf of his wife. In fact Portia’s self-fashioning as an ideal Venetian girl is as much remarkable for its wit as for its safe boundaries:

You see me, Lord Bassanio, where I stand,
Such as I am: though for myself alone
I would not be ambitious in my wish,
To wish myself much better; yet for you
I would be trebled twenty times myself;
A thousand times more fair, ten thousand times
More rich;
That only to stand high in your account
I might in virtue, beauties, livings, friends,
Exceed account. (3.2.151-57)

This is a classic portrayal of a dream woman, beautiful, intelligent, and submissive at the same time. To ensure that a woman does not look better than her husband, “the full sum of [woman]/ Is sum of something, which, to term in gross,/ Is an unlesson’d girl, unschool’d, unpractised” (3.2.160-61). The play is on the sexual experience of the girl, as yet uninitiated, but the accent is on “she is not yet so old, ... she may learn.” It is necessary to look at these lines by Portia as a pointed navigation of early modern society through male sexual fantasies regarding future brides. The ideal bride must be innocent and yet interested, docile in the public place, and yet sufficiently interested in serving her husband in any manner he wishes. Once Portia confirms her submission to her husband she is allowed to exercise her independence.
Interestingly, in the trial scene at the Venetian court, Portia confronts a man over a matter which was thought to be outside a women’s sphere: the juridical system. She not only fights a case for Antonio, but also wins it. Portia is able to break the constraints of gender and exercise her verbal acumen and also show her abilities as a lawyer through her cross-dressing. Disguised as a man, she is accepted and admired for her perceptive logic and presence of mind. It must be noted, however, that this same woman was not even permitted to exercise her mind in choosing a husband. Moreover she has already shown her faith in the institution of marriage. Her transgressive act is validated by the play’s resolution where she becomes a pliable wife. Moreover, the cross-dressing at court is still within the woman’s part as it is meant to serve the husband insofar as his financial and homosocial needs are concerned.

In the trial scene, Portia emerges as a strong personality as with the force of her rhetorical skills, she manages to turn the tables on Shylock who was intent on exposing the loopholes in the Venetian law. But interestingly, she does this by violating the very spirit of the law. Portia’s insistence on the letter of the law and its implementation to the last letter, completely undermines the spirit of the law. Any instrument of law can be understood, if necessary, by going beyond its letter to the material contexts in which it is expected to operate, and the generally accepted meanings which inform and surround it. The law actually lives in the application which involves the creative interpretation of those doctrines. A good judgement is that which is realistic and commonsensical, not narrowly technical.
and pedantic. The paradox lies in the fact that to preserve the structure of the law one must infringe upon what it actually says. Portia’s ruthless accuracy is freakish because it is too faithful. She is pitted against Shylock who is aware of the hypocrisy of the Christians and uses the opportunity presented through Antonio’s failure to repay his loan to embarrass the Venetians. When Shylock insists on his bond it is uncertain whether he expects his pound of flesh. He just wants to hit back at the Venetians for the pain and suffering they had heaped on him.

While the law required Antonio to honour his bond, the Venetians introduce a further complication to their advantage, by appealing to a higher principle than the law, and translating the issue from the relatively simple legal one into a contest of Justice and Mercy. While Shylock would like to rely on the law, he realises that it is not there to give justice to him, but for the protection of the Christians only. Portia’s interpretation of the bond is a mere quibbling on words. Her quibbling over blood shows her willingness to violate the spirit of the law by insisting on technicalities. She definitely goes out of her way to save Antonio’s life, and in doing so makes a mockery of justice. She has to distort and twist the law to defeat Shylock. He fails because the law remains an ideological expression of the imperatives of the elite.

From Portia’s perspective and that of the Venetians, she manages to hold sway over Shylock, the despised “Other.” Portia therefore sides with the Venetian male Christian world in her interpretation of the law. It is a political necessity,
and she has to play her part to retain whatever control she can have over her property as well as husband. In other words, she is allowed to fight a battle in the public place as long as she unequivocally expresses her loyalty to her owners. To the extent that she is willing to publicize her loyalty to the homosocial ideology of the Venetian Christian male, she is safe and free to do as she pleases. Her wit and wisdom are already circumscribed by institutional and ideological apparatuses. The fact that all her expertise as a lawyer goes into taming a state enemy, the Jew shylock, who is already a threat to its basics as well as business, makes her a collaborator with the patriarchal Venetian power grid. Her politics is bound within the institutional desires of the Venetian male, and therefore admissible. The failure to submit to state ideology, irrespective of social or political consequences, will be ruinous to the woman, a theme developed in the histories. Again, the spectre of a woman’s freedom and mobility in a world dominated by ambitious men, however conditional, will give rise to doubts in the minds of her mentors, for freedom may lead to dark desires. A woman among men will therefore be a subject of critical scrutiny, available in Troilus and Cressida.

In the histories, as suggested above, women are expected to play their part, and any deviation is not only viewed with grave concerns but also dealt with accordingly. 1Henry VI focuses on the ongoing battle between the forces of the English Talbot and French Joan La Pucelle. Throughout the play Joan uses her cunning and military prowess to secure victories for the otherwise feeble French, while entertaining the audience with her quick and often bawdy wit. Shakespeare
does not allow Joan to appear mentally incapable or inferior as she successfully leads the French into battle multiple times. According to Theodra Jankowski:

The historical Jeanne d’Arc was a military genius whose successful campaigns allowed Charles VII to reclaim large portions of his land from the English and their Burgandian allies and to be crowned King of France. Without her help Charles certainly would not have been as successful in battle and he might not have achieved sufficient power to repulse the Anglo Burgandian Alliance. (79)

The character of Joan shows that women are capable of having intelligence and of wielding it effectively for their own aims. Joan creates unease in the patriarchal system because she is powerful and capable of exercising the same.

When Talbot first encounters Joan at the beginning of Act I scene v, he immediately remarks: “Where is my strength, my valour, my force?/ Our English troops retire; I cannot stay them/ A woman clad in armor chaseth them” (1.5.1-3). Soon after he cries that Joan “drives back our troops and conquers as she lists” (1.5.22) and moans that “Pucelle is entered into Orleans/ Inspite of us or aught that we could do “(1.5.36-7). That the French hating English hero, ascribes the victory to Joan la Pucelle’s leadership is a mark of Joan’s genuine ability. When Charles the Dauphin announces “’tis Joan, not we, by whom the day is won” (1.6.7), he reflects the general acknowledgement of Joan’s military prowess.

Shakespeare’s audience would have associated Joan’s virago image with that of Elizabeth I at Tilbury in 1588. In her speeches to the troops the English
queen dressed in armor, claimed to have the heart and stomach of a king, despite being a woman. Throughout her reign, Elizabeth I walked the fine line between “masculine kingship and feminine submission only using words, the women’s weapon”. Joan takes Elizabeth’s appearance on the battlefield a step further by participating and leading in the masculine prerogative of war mongering, but she follows the Queen’s linguistic model by shrouding her power in masculine terms. As she seeks to prove herself to the Dauphin, she says: “My courage try by combat, if thou dar’st, / And thou shall find that I exceed my sex” (1.2.89-90).

Her ability to “bewitch … with her words” (3.2.58), alternately cast her influence in a distinctly female light. Joan may act in a traditionally male role but she expresses her agency through the patriarchal lenses of gender transgression and adherence rather than gender neutral action, attempting as the Queen did to demonstrate a certain level of awareness and respect for social norms.

Like Elizabeth, Joan claims the Virgin Mary as the source of her strength. Joan’s abilities in prophesying and developing military strategy are not readily ascribed to a woman, but are attributed to divine intervention. Joan must prove that she exceeds her ‘sex’; the Dauphin, expecting female weakness “fears no woman” (1.2.20). Joan’s claim to aid from Virgin Mary ties her into a divine source of strength while appropriately containing her powers within feminine values defined by patriarchy. Mary is a model of traditional feminity. It seems therefore that Joan’s assertion is more an extreme appropriation of the favor of the woman’s patron saint than a declaration of female power. Like Elizabeth I,
Joan’s association with the Divine Virgin lends her credibility in a patriarchal society inclined to neglect her skills while assuaging fears of female power, working around assumptions about the nature of women for her advantage.

However the image of the virgin is fraught with difficulties. It both casts Joan as pure and innocent and as powerful and independent. Jankowski argues:

The character of Joan la Pucelle is a threatening figure as much because of her declared virginity – her refusal to be controlled by a man – as because of her manlike virago image. That Joan is often read as an icon of Elizabeth I reinforce the threatening nature of this virginity. (89)

Elizabeth’s I’s virginity was powerful, but her use of it was beneficial to England. She used her sexual status to bargain with nations by forming alliance under the pretence of marriage arrangements. Joan uses her (supposed) virginity for her country as well. The reason she “must not yield to any rites of love” is because her “profession’s sacred from above” (1.2.113-14), since the holy mother “in a vision, full of majesty,/ Will’d to leave base vocation / And free country from calamity” (1.2.79-81). The play’s focus on Joan’s sexuality, from her assertion of virginity to her denunciation as a whore (5), likens her to the Queen. Perhaps even the suggestion of illegitimate children links her to the Queen; Since Joan may or may not be pregnant by the end of the play. The chief difference between these two characters appears to be their nationality. Had Joan not been French, the gender transgression would be acceptable to the English. Perhaps Shakespeare transferred characteristic of the Queen to a French woman to express safely male anxiety about authoritative women. As Holderness explains:
... a woman who crosses the prescribed gender and sexual boundaries at any one point is automatically declared guilty of transgression on possible grounds: It follows from Joan’s assumption of masculine rather than feminine activities that she must needs be sexually dissolute rather than chaste, corrupt rather than morally respectable, unruly and ‘railing’ rather than obedient and submissive; even ugly rather than beautiful. (118)

The English deny her beauty. York calls her the “ugly witch” (5.3.34), when he finally captures her. Upon hearing of Joan for the first time, Talbot makes a tasteless pun, “puzzle, pucelle” (1.4.106), showing his doubt of the French virgin by juxatposing it with English term for slut. At their first encounter he calls her “devil or devil’s dam’, “witch,” and “high minded strumpet” (1.5.5, 6, 12). The response to Joan is an example of demonizing women by subjecting them to patriarchal assumptions. Joan is not looked at as a patriot, but as a sexual transgressor. Thus, power in a woman is seen in terms of sexuality or witchcraft, again a sign of excess. Joan’s degradation in the play is critical to the maintenance of patriarchy. Subjected to military defeat by Joan, Talbot is still able to preserve the dignity of his code by circumstantial explanations. He justifies his defeat by defaming his opponent and robbing her of her agency: a woman should not in any event be “clad in armour” (1.5.3). A woman who has as much physical strength as a man, in this kind of representation, must necessarily be shown to derive it from unnatural sources such as witchcraft or diabolical power.

We see in these representations how women are compelled by circumstances to come out of their “walled homes,” and are occasionally
projected onto the public space by husbands, brothers, lovers, and partners. There are also occasions when they assume a public role due to vacancies created by incompetent men around them. The key to the roles played by these women lies in their utility as allies to men in the public space. But then, some of these women enjoy the public space and work hand in hand with men, and shine in their jobs. What invites their fall is their perseverance and ability to outshine their male collaborators or enemies. Whether it is Cleopatra or Portia, their ability to outmanoeuvre male rivals or outshine mentors is remarkable for a simple logic at work: normally women are useful and competent only insofar as they serve patriarchy directly and without any questions. Once they have the illusion of authority or autonomy, they are brought down to earth. Cleopatra dies, it is shown, because she refuses to toe the Roman line, which, incidentally, is male and imperial in design. Had she been compliant, she would have lived. In fact, the elimination of a competent woman is justified and rationalized by demonizing her. Her powers are demonized and sexualized. Once identified as unnatural, it is easy to dispose her off. Joan is the typical case of a woman who overruns the measure, and must therefore be punished by friends and enemies both. Once pushed or challenged by a powerful woman, hegemonic patriarchal structures, that may be otherwise fighting against one another, collaborate to finish her first. There is in these representations a quest for what has been called homosocial utopias where men enjoy the freedom and free time to pursue private pleasures and public positions.