“Men learn at last to know their good estate”: Dorothea’s Triumph in James IV

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In Robert Greene’s drama James IV, Dorothea is in grave danger moments after becoming a wife. Her husband, the title character, has decided he is in love with a country maiden, Ida; he is persuaded by his sycophantic aide, Ateukin, to kill Dorothea so he can marry Ida. Dorothea is warned about his plan and leaves the court disguised as a squire, but throughout her adventures she never abdicates her rôle of wife. Instead she forgives her husband, defends his behavior and, by exhibiting such remarkable compassion, brings about the happy ending of the play. After she has saved Scotland from war with her father, the King of England, and has convinced James both to apologize and restore her as his wife—all the while showing him through her personal comportment how to become a more judicious ruler—Dorothea remarks, “Men learn at last to know their good estate” (5.6.238), which is also the last line spoken by a character in the play proper. ¹

As Dorothea’s quip indicates, James has learned how good he has it, and his change in attitude belatedly acknowledges that his success and popularity are due, unexpectedly, entirely to his spouse.

Yet in discussions of this play, many scholars relegate Dorothea—when they bother to mention her at all—to the confining and powerless Patient Griselda tradition.² This paper will challenge the ease with which this assumption of victimization is made with reference not only to Dorothea but to Griselda, as well. I suggest that Dorothea does not act like a mere emblazoned sufferer. Instead, through her harrowing exile and triumphant return to court she displays an inherent strength that eventually succeeds in restoring the health and state

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of her marriage, which in turn acts as a microcosmic representation of the restored order to the larger commonwealth. Further, I will analyze the complicated term “estate” that appears throughout James IV and discuss how this slippery notion ties into Victor Turner’s theories on liminality, a temporary form of existence the female protagonist must experience in order to return to court, agency intact, at the play’s end.

James IV (c. 1590) begins just as the wedding ceremony between Dorothea and James is ending. As daughter to the English King, Dorothea is an important and politically well-connected woman whose marriage to James of Scotland creates an amicable alliance both countries look forward to maintaining. This tone of cordiality and courtesy, however, quickly changes when James reveals in an aside that he is in love with someone else. Referring to himself as a “wretched king” whose “nuptial knot is death” (1.1.75), James admits that he may have married “England’s choicest pride” (line 80), but that his heart has been stolen by the “Scottish Ida’s beauty” (line 84). James and Dorothea’s marriage may be arranged, which means love is not expected nor even required between the spouses, but this does not mean that James may treat his wife any way he chooses. Political marriages create political ties—in this case, between Scotland and England—so that by swiftly descending into thoughts of uxoricide, James is dishonoring not only Dorothea herself but his arrangement with her father, as well. James, then, does not extend Dorothea the courtesy that her royal standing and political alliances demand. Ironically, it will be courtesy for which James will find himself so grateful and dependent upon Dorothea at the end of the play.

Apart from his desire for Ida, James is also led by Ateukin into personally dangerous and publicly unpopular self-indulgences. In clearing the young king’s troubled conscience, Ateukin incorrectly argues that, as sovereign ruler of his own country, James has an inalienable right to behave in whatever mode he chooses because “Your will is law” (line 249). In his edition of the play, Norman Sanders notes that Ateukin’s “belief is in direct opposition to Elizabethan theory of monarchy” (25). Citing Bishop Hooker’s Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity, Sanders suggests that Ateukin’s urging of James to behave as if he were