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Source: *Studies in Philology*, Vol. 87, No. 2 (Spring, 1990), pp. 221-245

Published by: University of North Carolina Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4174360>

Accessed: 07/10/2009 20:54

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Defining/Confining the Duchess:  
Negotiating the Female Body in  
John Webster's  
*The Duchess of Malfi*

by Theodora A. Jankowski

THE relatively rapid appearance in mid-sixteenth-century Britain of three reigning female monarchs severely taxed existing early modern political theory. The rich discourse that explored the various ramifications of the nature of authority and male rulership had been remarkably silent about both the potential for and the nature of possible female rule. Thus, the presence of Mary Tudor and Mary Stuart on British thrones served to point out—to political theorists especially—that no language existed for describing the nature of female rule. That a large discourse did exist for describing married women—one that showed them to be subservient to their husbands—did not make the task of creating a political discourse for women any easier. In fact, the existence of such a powerful mode of describing married women as subject to their husbands prompted John Knox to argue in 1558 that the nature of female rule was “unnatural.”<sup>1</sup> Whether this pronouncement was universally accepted or not is not important. What is important is that various “disastrous” events in the reigns of the two Marys served to cast severe doubt upon the nature of female rule itself, especially given the fact that monarchs *had* to marry to produce heirs. So strong was the traditional belief in women as subservient beings that John Aylmer had

<sup>1</sup> [John Knox], *The First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstruous regiment of women* ([Geneva], 1558; rptd., Amsterdam: Theatrum Orbis Terrarum and New York: Da Capo, 1972) (S.T.C. No. 15070).

some difficulty in supporting the concept of a female monarch. His not very convincing argument was that a woman ruler could be "subject to" her husband as he was her husband and yet "rule over" him as she was his magistrate. While Aylmer's solution was, at best, "tricky," his basic aversion to female rule on principle did not help his argument carry the day.<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth I clearly did not find his solution helpful, since she avoided the problem altogether by remaining "virgin." But despite Elizabeth's avoidance of matrimony, the vexed question of a female sovereign's marriage does surface in a number of early modern plays, notably John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* where it becomes a central issue.

*The Duchess of Malfi* is an unusual play not only because it explores questions of rulership as they relate to a female sovereign, but also because it explores these questions as regards the sovereign's marriage. The play thus participates in the discursive construction of women in the early modern period and helps to reveal the contradictions in the notion of a female ruler. These contradictions are explored in the ways in which the Duchess is represented as using her body natural and her body politic.<sup>3</sup> Webster's *Duchess of Malfi* establishes a system of rule in which she fails to consider her body's potential, either as a means to power or as a means by which she can lose power. This widow attempts to secure herself politically by divorcing her natural body from her political one by creating a private second marriage that exists simultaneously with—but hidden from—her public life as a ruler. In this double position of wife and ruler, then, the Duchess becomes an uneasy and threatening figure. I will argue, therefore, that, despite the character's failure to create a successful means by which she can rule as a woman sovereign, she challenges Jacobean society's views regarding the representation of the female body and woman's sexuality.

<sup>2</sup> [John Aylmer], *An Harborovve for Faithfull and Trewe Subiectes, agaynst the late blowne Blaste, concerninge the Gouernment of VVemen* (Strasborowe, 1559; rptd., Amsterdam: Theatrum Orbis Terrarum and New York: Da Capo, 1972) (S.T.C. No. 1005).

<sup>3</sup> Marie Axton (*The Queen's Two Bodies: Drama and the Elizabethan Succession* [London: Royal Historical Society, 1977]) explains that by 1561 Queen Elizabeth I had been legally endowed with a body natural and a body politic. Axton discusses the legal implications of this "fiction" of the two bodies and bases her work on Edmund Plowden's 1561 reference to the monarch's two bodies as reported by F. W. Maitland in "The Crown as Corporation" in *Collected Papers*, ed. H. A. L. Fisher (Cambridge, 1911). Her work is also influenced by that of Ernst Kantorowicz (*The King's Two Bodies* [Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1957]) which, she feels, "did not explore the Elizabethan setting in any depth" (15).

Critics have rarely considered the Duchess of Malfi as a political character despite the fact that she rules Malfi as Regent for her son, the minor heir to the Duke of Malfi, her dead husband. Given her role as sovereign ruler, the Duchess needs also to be viewed as a political figure. Yet Kathleen McLuskie observes that the critical history of *The Duchess of Malfi* reflects an "unease with a woman character who so impertinently pursues self-determination."<sup>4</sup> This "unease" has led to a criticism that focuses primarily on the Duchess's private roles of wife, mother, unruly widow, or victimized woman and slights consideration of her public role as ruler.<sup>5</sup> The only sustained political reading of the play is presented by Joyce E. Peterson who argues that the Duchess improperly sets the private claims of her body natural above the public claims of her body politic.<sup>6</sup> As a result of her "anarchic will," Webster's character places her private desire to marry Antonio above her public responsibility as a ruler, an action that identifies her with her corrupt brothers. Peterson also suggests that the "generic expectations . . . insist inexorably on her culpability as a ruler, on her responsibility for her own fate, and, worse, for the disruption of her duchy" (p. 78).

While I agree that much of the tension of *The Duchess of Malfi* derives from the conflicting claims of the Duchess's bodies natural and politic, I do feel that Peterson's judgment of the Duchess as a "bad" ruler fails to take account of how Renaissance gender ideologies are made. Her harsh reading of the Duchess may be based upon what

<sup>4</sup> Kathleen McLuskie, "Drama and Sexual Politics: The Case of Webster's Duchess," in *Drama, Sex, and Politics*, ed. James Redmond (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1985), 88.

<sup>5</sup> While a great number of works can be mentioned in this context, I call particular attention to the following, which have been most influential in overall criticism of this play: Travis Bogard, *The Tragic Satire of John Webster* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1955); Clifford Leech, *Webster: The Duchess of Malfi* (London: Edward Arnold, 1963; rptd. 1968); Robert Ornstein, *The Moral Vision of Jacobean Tragedy* (Madison and Milwaukee: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1965); Muriel Bradbrook, *John Webster: Citizen and Dramatist* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1980); Jacqueline Pearson, *Tragedy and Tragicomedie in the Plays of John Webster* (Totowa, NJ: Barnes and Noble, 1980); and Charles R. Forker, *Skull Beneath the Skin: The Achievement of John Webster* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1986).

<sup>6</sup> Joyce E. Peterson, *Curs'd Example: The Duchess of Malfi and Commonweal Tragedy* (Columbia and London: Univ. of Missouri Press, 1978). The following critics are not primarily concerned with a "political" reading of the play or the Duchess's character, though they do comment negatively upon several of her "political" actions: Eloise K. Goreau, *Integrity of Life: Allegorical Imagery in the Plays of John Webster* (Salzburg: Institut für Englische Sprache und Literatur, 1974); Anthony E. Courtade, *The Structure of John*

she rightly perceives to be an action directly subversive of prevailing ideologies, but which she does not examine as such. It seems to me, then, that Peterson's failure to consider the overall implications of early modern sexual, social, and political attitudes toward women leads to her reading of this play as a simple lesson in bad rulership. By not discussing why the Duchess's marriage is so threatening and by reproducing oppressive gender ideologies in an unqualified way, Peterson blunts her argument and simplifies the very complex nature of the representation of "woman"—especially "woman as ruler"—displayed in this play.

*The Duchess of Malfi* is a play that is clearly concerned with questions of gender ideology, but its employment of various, often contradictory, literary and social discourses regarding gender relations makes it difficult to analyze. However, the contradictions between these conventions serve both to foreground the tensions implicit within socially-constructed ideas of "woman," or the female protagonist, and present interpretive problems for deciding which is the privileged discourse. This ideological juxtaposition can be observed as early as I.1, where three major questions are introduced: first, the political context of the play as a whole, specifically the first presentation of the Duchess as a reigning sovereign and public figure; second, the presentation of the brothers and their political and familial relationship to the Duchess; and third, the presentation of the Duchess as a private figure and the character's development of her unusual "new world and custom" in her secret marriage to Antonio. The display of contesting ideologies characteristic of this scene may make the play difficult to analyze, but simplification of the work through unified readings deprives it of its ideological complexity.

In order to understand the ways in which the Duchess is figured as a political character, it is necessary to examine the political context in which this character is presented. Antonio's description of the ideal French court and its "judicious king" does just this.<sup>7</sup> The de-

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*Webster's Plays* (Salzburg: Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik, 1980); Lee Bliss, *The World's Perspective: John Webster and the Jacobean Drama* (New Brunswick: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1983); Lisa Jardine, *Still Harping on Daughters: Women and Drama in the Age of Shakespeare* (Brighton and Sussex: Harvester and Totowa, NJ: Barnes and Noble, 1983); Robert P. Griffin, *John Webster: Politics and Tragedy* (Salzburg: Institut für Englische Sprache und Literatur, 1972); and Robert Ornstein.

<sup>7</sup> John Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi*, ed. John Russell Brown. The Revels Plays (Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press and Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1981), 8–9. (I.1.5–22). All further references to this play will be to this edition.

scription acts as a touchstone for the accepted Renaissance ideal of court life that is contrasted to Malfi and Rome,<sup>8</sup> places the play within a political framework, and indicates that the entire first act is an examination of the political natures of the four "princes"—three actual and one "spiritual"—who appear in this play: the Duchess herself; Ferdinand, the "perverse" Duke of Calabria; the corrupt Cardinal; and the "spirit" of the King of France, the emblem of the "judicious king."

It is against this dual background of corruption and idealism that Webster places the political persona of the Duchess of Malfi. Her presentation as a sovereign in a courtly setting both reinforces Antonio's description of her as an ideal ruler who differs in some essential way from her brothers (I.1.187–205) and insists upon the necessity of her occupying a political space. The fact that his speech can, on one level, be seen as the idealized portrait of a "woman," does not alter the fact that the opening line—"the right noble duchess" (187)—serves to indicate that the speech must be seen as relating to the idealized public figure that Antonio feels the Duchess, in contrast to her Machiavellian brothers, is.

That the major discussion between the Duchess and her brothers concerns their exercise of familial authority to forbid her to remarry makes this scene seem more private than public. Citing traditional early modern objections to a second marriage for widows—"they are most luxurious / Will wed twice" (297–298)<sup>9</sup>—the brothers appear to forbid her remarriage because she is their sister, not because of her political position as Duchess. Yet such overtly political references to the court as "a rank pasture" (306) whose deadly "honey-dew" (307)

<sup>8</sup> The juxtaposition of the "ideal" or "moral" French court and the Machiavellian Italian view of politics is noted by: Richard Bodtke, *Tragedy and the Jacobean Temper: The Major Plays of John Webster* (Salzburg, Institute für Englische Sprache und Literatur, 1972); Arthur C. Kirsch, *Jacobean Dramatic Perspectives* (Charlottesville: Univ. Press of Virginia, 1972); Sanford Sternlicht, *John Webster's Imagery and the Webster Canon* (Salzburg: Institut für Englische Sprache und Literatur, 1972); William Mahaney, *Deception in the John Webster Plays: An Analytical Study* (Salzburg: Institut für Englische Sprache und Literatur, 1973); and Eloise K. Goreau and Robert P. Griffin.

<sup>9</sup> Inga-Stina Ekeblad, "The 'Impure Art' of John Webster," in *Twentieth-Century Interpretations of The Duchess of Malfi*, ed. Norman Rabkin (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1968), Ian Scott-Kilvert, *John Webster* (London: Longmans Green, 1964; rev. and rptd. 1970), and Joseph Henry Stodder, *Moral Perspective in Webster's Major Tragedies* (Salzburg: Institut für Englische Sprache und Literatur, 1974) feel that there was a strong Renaissance attitude against the second marriage of widows. But there were, in fact, no legal or ecclesiastical prohibitions against such remarriage. Frank W. Wadsworth ("Webster's *Duchess of Malfi* in the Light of Some Contemporary Ideas on Marriage and

might tempt the Duchess to act against her brothers' interests reinforce the political sense of the scene. However, this is not to deny that the reference to the Duchess as a "sister" seems to involve consideration of her natural rather than her political body. Thus, in less than 100 lines we appear to move from contemplation of the body politic of the Duchess—as exemplar of Antonio's ideal of courtly virtue—to a picture of her widow's body natural at the mercy of her brothers' fears of her remarriage and early modern notions of the hypersexuality of widows.

And yet this encounter can be seen as being as political as the description of the French court and involving exclusively the Duchess's body politic. Catherine Belsey and Susan Wells<sup>10</sup> speak of the problems involved in trying to separate public from private space in the early modern period, especially as these spaces relate to the family. Belsey indicates that

in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries these two meanings of the family—as dynasty and as private realm of warmth and virtue—are both in play and indeed in contrast. In 1527 and for many years to come it was the dynastic meaning which was dominant. (p. 169)<sup>11</sup>

But although the sense of "family" as "dynasty" was the paramount "reading" of the concept, Belsey points out that an "alternative" notion of the family as "a little world of retreat" from the public space "where the wife enters into partnership with the husband" was also

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Remarriage," *PQ* 35 [1956]: 394–407) has compiled a long list of works that reflected positively upon the question. Paradoxically, though, the strong opinion against a widow's remarrying was coupled with the desire to marry her as soon as possible so that she was again under a man's control. As Lisa Jardine indicates, "widows of wealthy men were married off again with quite undignified haste where those responsible for them considered it financially advantageous to the line to do so" (83).

<sup>10</sup> Catherine Belsey, "Disrupting Sexual Difference: Meaning and Gender in the Comedies," in *Alternative Shakespeares*, ed. John Drakakis (London and New York: Methuen, 1985) and Susan Wells, *The Dialectics of Representation* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1985). The following critics also discuss the juxtaposition of the Duchess's public and private selves, though not as they relate to the political implications of gender roles or relations: Jane Marie Luecke, "The Duchess of Malfi: Comic and Satiric Confusion in Tragedy," *SEL* 4(1964):275–290; Susan H. McLeod, *Dramatic Imagery in the Plays of John Webster* (Salzburg: Institut für Englische Sprache und Literatur, 1977); Ralph Berry, *The Art of John Webster* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972); and Muriel Bradbrook, Anthony Courtade, Robert P. Griffin, and William Mahaney.

<sup>11</sup> Susan Wells feels that during the Jacobean period, the family was not only beginning to have a history, but was establishing its own identity as an entity distinct from church and state (69).

beginning to emerge (p. 173). We are tempted, I feel, with our twentieth-century eyes to view things like early modern family relationships as though they were more like our own than less. Thus, the temptation throughout this play is to feel that Ferdinand and the Cardinal take an inordinate amount of interest in the potential marital (e.g., private) affairs of their sister. This is perhaps an appropriate twentieth-century reading, but not necessarily an appropriate early modern one. While I do not wish to minimize the "private" complexity of the Aragon family's relationships, I do think it is important to acknowledge the "political" or dynastic nature of the early modern aristocratic marriage.

The Duchess is a sovereign ruler, a fact her brothers never forget. Silvio announces the entrance of Ferdinand's family to him as "your brother, the Lord Cardinal, and sister Duchess" (I.1.148) and the Cardinal recalls the "high blood" (297)—noble birth—that the Duchess possesses. The choral urgings of the two brothers to prevent the sister's marriage seem somewhat odd, especially when Ferdinand calls upon his "father's poniard" (331) to help with the argument, unless the objections of the brothers are viewed on dynastic grounds. Once we read the family as a Renaissance dynastic unit, it becomes easier to understand the brothers'—and their father's spirit's—earnest arguments. It also becomes easier to understand Ferdinand's obsession with the Duchess's blood and her reference to "all [her] royal kindred" (341) who might lie in the path of her proposed marriage to a steward of lower rank, which would pollute this blood.<sup>12</sup> Thus, the argument over the marriage can be seen as a dynastic argument concerned with the Duchess's body politic. This highly political scene, then, initially focusing on the ideal court of the French king, also serves to present the Duchess as a political figure both in her own right and as a member of a political dynasty—whether of Malfi or Aragon. The focus on the Duchess, until her brothers' departure, is completely on her body politic.

However, viewing the early modern family as a dynastic unit does not fully account for the explicit sexual tension in this encounter of the Aragonian siblings. The brothers may be justified in taking an interest in their sister's marital affairs, but it is rather difficult to see

<sup>12</sup> Leonard Tennenhouse (*Power on Display: The Politics of Shakespeare's Genres* [New York and London: Methuen, 1986]) discusses the mutilation of the female body in Jacobean drama especially in terms of the "metaphysics of blood" (Chapter 3, esp. 118–122).



how they can be justified in their inordinate interest in her sexual being as well. The nature of Renaissance dynastic marriage served almost totally to objectify the woman. She became an object of commerce who—passed from father to husband—sealed a bargain of greater or lesser economic significance.<sup>13</sup> As her body was seen as an object of trade to be owned by either father or husband, the products of her body—her children—were also seen as objects of commerce to be used to solidify further trade agreements between her (husband's) and other families. Thus, the woman's biological life—her ability or inability to produce viable offspring—becomes as much a possession of her male owners as her physical body itself. Thus, as Ferdinand and the Cardinal feel justified in controlling their sister's "use" as a wife, they also feel justified in controlling the biological uses of her body—its ability to produce offspring. In this sense, their inquiry into the chastity of their sister's body is understandable, though grotesque, for her production of children the patriarchy considers illegitimate would decrease her value as a trade article for her family.

And yet the brothers'—especially Ferdinand's—questions regarding her own use of her body go beyond questioning her chastity to expressing both fear of and desire for her sexual being. The very nature of woman's objectification within dynastic marriage leads to Ferdinand's obsessive sexual questioning. That a wife's body became, in essence, a vessel for reproducing her husband's or her father's bloodlines made it necessary for that vessel to remain unpolluted by sexual contact with unapproved males. This situation necessitated confining a woman and preserving her chastity at all costs. Yet the mere fact that the woman existed within the world and was a living being capable of disposing of her own body, of polluting her dynastic vessel through unauthorized sexual contact, led to extreme anxiety on the part of her male owners.

Ferdinand's obsessive desire to confine his sister and preserve her chastity—coupled with his equally obsessive fear that she will dispose of her body as she chooses—leads directly to his fearful imaginings of her as an excessively sexual creature. Thus she becomes, for him, one of those diseased women whose "livers are more spotted / Than Laban's sheep" (298–299), or a whore, or witch who "give[s] the devil suck" (311).<sup>14</sup> The reference to their father's poniard—in

<sup>13</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1985), 38.

<sup>14</sup> In fact, as Lisa Jardine indicates, "active sexuality codes for female breach of decorum" in the play (76–77).

addition to recalling his patriarchal spirit—is, of course, phallic, as is the reference to the lamprey. While the references to whores and witches may be viewed as traditional early modern labels for a widow's sexual excesses,<sup>15</sup> Ferdinand's reference to the poniard (and his implicit threat to use it) and to the lamprey/tongue/(penis) imply the demand (and desire) for more intimate sexual knowledge. These references also serve to point out Ferdinand's technique of asserting his power over his sister by symbolically dismembering her body, a technique discussed by Nancy J. Vickers and Francis Barker.<sup>16</sup> Ferdinand's implication that all a woman can enjoy of a man is his tongue/penis suggests that all *she* is is a mouth/vagina, a container for these objects. Confusion results, however, in trying to discover whether the brothers try to control their sister's behavior as "private" widow or as "public" Duchess. In fact, once they have left, it is difficult to say whether Webster is presenting the Duchess as either political or private woman, as embodiment of either body politic or body natural. The boundaries of the Duchess's two bodies are indistinct and perpetually slipping. In the speech denying her "royal kindred" power to stop her marriage (I. 1. 341–349), she is represented as acting like a sovereign, willing to make her family into "low footsteps" if they try to control her. But her assertion that she will choose a "husband"—rather than a consort—seems to indicate that she is

<sup>15</sup> The traditional stereotype of the oversexed widow is also discussed in: Simon Shepherd, *Amazons and Warrior Women: Varieties of Feminism in Seventeenth-Century Drama* (New York: St. Martins, 1981); Katherine Usher Henderson and Barbara F. McManus, *Half Humankind: Contexts and Texts of the Controversy about Women in England, 1540–1640* (Urbana and Chicago: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1985); and Lisa Jardine. This attitude led, in the drama, as Barbara J. Todd ("The Remarrying Widow: A Stereotype Reconsidered," in *Women in English Society 1500–1800*, ed. Mary Prior [London and New York: Methuen, 1985]) explains, to the creation of "an enduring stereotype of the early modern widow as a woman who anxiously sought a husband at any cost" (55).

Todd has also indicated that the widow's legal identity—an identity denied single and married women—has further led to her being considered an anomalous—and, therefore, fearful—creature. This identity gave her a "voice" and often allowed her to "speak out," a situation also denied single and married women. The threatening nature of the verbal, or "shrewish" woman, and her identification with whores and harlots, has been documented by Catherine Belsey (*The Subject of Tragedy* [London and New York: Methuen, 1985]), Peter Stallybrass ("Patriarchal Territories: The Body Enclosed" in *Rewriting the Renaissance: The Discourses of Sexual Difference in Early Modern Europe*, eds. Margaret W. Ferguson, Maureen Quilligan, and Nancy J. Vickers [Chicago and London: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1986], 123–142), and Lisa Jardine.

<sup>16</sup> Nancy J. Vickers ("Diana Described: Scattered Woman and Scattered Rhyme," *Critical Inquiry* 8[1981]: 265–79) and Francis Barker ("Into the Vault," in Barker, *The Tremulous Private Body: Essays on Subjection* [London and New York: Methuen, 1984]) discuss the prevailing Renaissance image of the female body as silent, dismembered and, therefore, powerless.

acting as a private woman. However, once Antonio appears, she again is represented in her political persona. Antonio is shown to respond to her as his Duchess, and she is shown to be in total control of both the scene and her secretary. It is as sovereign ruler that she shows Antonio what she "make[s him] lord of" (430) and it is as ruler that she laments "the misery" of being born great, "forc'd to woo, because none dare woo us" (442). But later in the same speech, she is represented as shifting into a private mode:

I do here put off all vain ceremony,  
And only do appear to you a young widow  
That claims you for her husband, and like a widow,  
I use but half a blush in't.

(I.1.456-459)

And she appears to continue in this mode for the remainder of the scene.

Even though the Duchess may not have acted precisely in her body politic at the end of the scene, she has acted in a political way. With the power of her body politic, the power of a sovereign prince, she has violated existing patriarchal conventions of marriage to create her own concept of the state. To do so, this character has drawn upon an ideology of marriage quite different from the dynastic union her brothers speak of. The Protestant notion of the "companionate marriage" began, as John C. Bean indicates, as a rationalist humanist reaction to the emotionalism of courtly love and consisted, as John Halkett explains, of "a relatively modern concept of marriage as a partnership of love and mutual helpfulness."<sup>17</sup> Thus the Duchess chooses a man below her in estate to be, not her consort, but her husband: not a man to support her as a ruler, but a man to support her as a woman. She has eliminated the problems of the consort

<sup>17</sup> John C. Bean, "Passion Versus Friendship in the Tudor Matrimonial Handbooks and Some Shakespearean Implications," *Wascana Review*, 9(1974): 231-240 and John Halkett, *Milton and the Idea of Matrimony* (New Haven and London: Yale Univ. Press, 1970), 16. The following critics also agree that the Protestant focus on "friendship" as a basis for marriage and the view of marriage as equal to celibacy led to a more positive attitude toward women and more autonomy for them within marriage: Carroll Camden, *The Elizabethan Woman: A Panorama of English Womanhood, 1540 to 1640* (London: Cleaver-Hume and New York and Houston: Elsevier, 1952), 56; Juliet Dusinberre, *Shakespeare and the Nature of Women* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1975), 53, 83; Catherine M. Dunn, "The Changing Image of Women in Renaissance Society and Literature," in *What Manner of Woman: Essays in English and American Life and Literature*, ed. Marlene Springer (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1977), 22; Velma Bourgeois Richmond, "Shakespeare's Women," *Midwest Quarterly* 19(1977-78): 330-342, p. 333; Betty

trying to wrest power from the woman ruler—who was thought to be subject to her male husband—by not naming Antonio as her consort.

The Duchess's marriage has occasioned much critical concern because it is to a person below her in degree and because she enters into it "irregularly" or without her brothers' consent. Antonio is clearly represented as a worthy person whose "nobility of character" validates the Duchess's free choice of him as a husband. Yet the nature of Antonio's character is a direct result of Webster's juxtaposition of contrasting discourses in the play. In direct contrast to the custom that placed women under the control of their male family members is a long humanist tradition that both recognized the great importance of nobility of character in a man and validated a woman's right to the free choice of a husband, a tradition reinforced in Henry Medwall's *Fulgens and Lucreces* (c. 1497).<sup>18</sup> In this play, a wealthy man from an ancient family and a poor man of personal integrity court Fulgens' daughter. Yet Fulgens refuses to choose Lucreces's husband, stressing not only that the choice must be hers, but that she must also accept the obligation such freedom of choice entails.<sup>19</sup> This tradition of a woman's free choice even appears in Painter's story of the Duchess of Malfi, the source of Webster's play.<sup>20</sup> Fifteenth- and sixteenth-century women may have been coerced into propertied, political, or dynastic marriages, but they, theoretically, should have entered into them purely as a result of free choice. Thus, the Duchess's actively choos-

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Travitsky, ed., *The Paradise of Women* (Westport, CT and London: Greenwood Press, 1981), 7. While the notion of marriage Webster's Duchess conceives of with Antonio is closer to the philosophical concept of the Protestant "companionate marriage" than to the "dynastic marriage" her brothers have in mind, it is important to remember that neither marriage concept granted the woman a right to choose her own husband.

<sup>18</sup> Henry Medwall, *Fulgens and Lucrece*, in *Five Pre-Shakespearean Comedies*, ed. Frederick S. Boas (London, Oxford, New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1934; rptd., 1970), ix. This play is a retelling of Buonaccorso da Montemagno, "Controuersia de Nobilitate," trans. John Tiptoft as "The Declamation of Noblesse" in R. J. Mitchell, *John Tiptoft* (London, New York, Toronto: Longmans, Green and Co., 1938).

<sup>19</sup> Catherine Belsey indicates that, while Lucreces asks her father's advice, she clearly makes the unconstrained choice her freedom allows her in favor of virtue (*Tragedy*, 194–200). "The play thus affirms marriage as the location of liberal and affective values rather than as a guarantee of dynastic continuity" (194). Belsey also indicates that *The Duchess of Malfi* "claims for its heroine the right to choose a husband" (200).

<sup>20</sup> William Painter, "The Palace of Pleasure, Vol. II, xxiii Novel" (1567) in *The Palace of Pleasure*, Vol. III, ed. Joseph Jacobs (1580; rptd., London: David Nutt: 1890). Spelling modernized as regards long "s."

let men say what they list, I will doe none otherwyse than my heade and mynd haue already framed. Semblably I neede not make accompt to any persone for my fact, my body, and reputation beyng in full libertie and freedome (13).

ing Antonio can be seen as an action that recalls Lucre's acceptance of duty in choosing a husband.<sup>21</sup> Various men may be proposed to Lucre, but it is her moral duty to exercise her freedom of choice and choose the one who is best for her, whom she feels to be most honorable.

By having the Duchess choose a husband beneath her in rank, but virtuous, Webster calls on a tradition that is in direct contrast to the one he earlier presented as influencing the Aragonian brothers. The reflection of these two discourses within the play—one that validates male family members' rights over the bodies of their female "property" and one that mandates a woman's free choice as a moral necessity—is an example of the ideologically contradictory nature of *The Duchess of Malfi*. The extreme difference of these two conflicting discourses as regards the position of women serves to foreground the character of the Duchess and her dilemma as woman and sovereign ruler. While the brothers are shown to support that tradition which validates the power of the patriarchal family over women, the Duchess can be seen as challenging that discourse either by creating a new one or by consciously harking back to a tradition which, at least philosophically, granted women a certain measure of autonomy. It is not surprising that the character should be aligned to this humanistic tradition since the power it grants a woman provides a space whereby the Duchess can use her political autonomy to create a marriage situation in which she, as ruler, is not subsumed by the power the dynastic marriage paradigm would grant to any husband over any wife.

The Duchess is further represented as manifesting her political authority by engaging in an "irregular" marriage—one that is not sanctified by any representative of the church. The Duchess's exchange of vows with Antonio constitutes a *sponsalia per verba de praesenti*. Such a marriage, as Margaret Loftus Ranald indicates, "created the status of virtual matrimony at that moment, without future action on the part of the persons concerned. It could even be upheld in courts against a

<sup>21</sup> Richard Bodtke points out that the Duchess is "true to earlier Renaissance humanistic values of true nobility" in seeing "the man not his rank" (171). While Catherine Belsey indicates that in wooing Antonio the Duchess opts for personal virtue over nobility of birth (*Tragedy*, 197–198), Frank Whigham ("Sexual and Social Mobility in *The Duchess of Malfi*," *PMLA* 100 [1985]: 167–186) argues that the Duchess violates her class rank by choosing a "base lover" (170) who could potentially contaminate the ruling elite (168).

later, consummated contract."<sup>22</sup> Thus, when the Duchess and Antonio exchange their *de praesenti* vows in I.1, they are, in fact, legally marrying themselves, although in an unusual way. However, their promises are followed by a physical consummation which was not allowed partners in a *de praesenti* spousal. Such a union that resulted in physical consummation was still valid, though irregular, and the action was deplored. Ecclesiastical penalties were generally imposed which usually involved public penance and, in rare cases, excommunication. The latter sentence could be circumvented by payment of a fine. The couple was then required to ratify their marriage by recelebrating it in church.

It is clear, then, that although the Duchess's marriage to Antonio *itself* is legal, the *consummation* of it is irregular and would open the couple to ecclesiastical penalties. However, it also seems clear that the Duchess is aware of the Church's traditional role in a *sponsalia per verba de praesenti* for, after she and Antonio pledge their love, she questions:

What can the church force more? . . .  
   How can the church bind faster?  
 We now are man and wife, and 'tis the church  
 That must but echo this.

(I.1.488; 491-493)

Although the Duchess recognizes the church's traditional role in legitimizing a marriage contract, she is also depicted as scorning the church's ability to have power over her as a secular ruler. Her employing a marriage *per verba de praesenti* rather than a fully ecclesiastical wedding accomplishes more, it seems to me, than simply secrecy. In marrying Antonio the Duchess is shown to challenge her brothers first, by exercising her woman's "freedom of choice"—as Lucrece did—and second, by recognizing and validating Antonio's personal worth over his social position. She is also shown to challenge them by exercising her power as a ruler both by denying the church its rights in the legitimizing of her marriage as well as in courting a husband, rather than a consort.

In her marriage and its ramifications, the Duchess can be viewed as a subversive character. Marriage was the major means of controlling female sexuality and legitimizing the means of inheritance be-

<sup>22</sup> Margaret Loftus Ranald, " 'As Marriage Binds, and Blood Breaks': English Marriage and Shakespeare," *SQ* 30(1979): 68-81.

tween patriarchal families and governments. In challenging marriage in any way, therefore, the Duchess challenges the very essence of gender relations within patriarchal early modern society. I see the character's reaction to marriage as subversive on two levels: first, in her decision to keep her marriage "private" and separate from her "public" identity as ruler; second, in her unconventional concept of what a marriage between a man and a woman might be like. This marriage—both the choosing of a virtuous husband and the ceremony itself—represents the major conflict between the Duchess's natural and political bodies in the play. In actively choosing her own husband and in marrying him in a way that scorns accepted legal practices, the Duchess reinforces her sense of self as a political person. She is represented as demonstrating her own right to choose a husband and her right to determine how she—as ruler of Malfi—will legitimize her choice. However, despite her attempt to take political control over the marriage ceremony, the Duchess does not make the marriage part of her strategy for rule. That she is presented as opting to keep her marriage secret indicates that she has not determined an effective way to integrate marriage into her public life as ruler.

In I.1, the Duchess moves back and forth between acting as a prince and as a woman. Her political self exerts itself as she, being "born great," proposes to Antonio despite her brothers' prohibitions against remarriage (468). Yet her refusal to make Antonio her consort argues that her union is to be considered a "private" marriage. Her political self also asserts its power to legitimize the marriage through a *sponsalia per verba de praesenti*. But it is the character's private self that urges her husband to lead her to their marriage bed. The confusion in this scene as to whether the woman or the prince prevails is part of the major problem of just how to read the Duchess throughout the play. We are invited to see her marriage to Antonio as a marriage for love between two attractive people, one of whom is a woman ruler. The problem with this view is that we are asked to accept the fact that this reigning woman—the living exemplar of a respected theory of rule—would make not only a non-political marriage, but a politically disastrous one as well. And yet this same woman has directed her talents to creating a new discourse of rule, one which does not simply replicate the patriarchal conventions determined by her society and its male rulers, but which attempts to fuse a traditional female role—wife and mother—with a non-traditional one—ruler. The ultimate effect of I.1., therefore, is to present

us with a very political character. The Duchess may opt to keep her marriage "private," but her doing so must be acknowledged a political decision. Keeping her natural and political bodies separate may not be the most effective political strategy. However, there is no doubt that this strategy must be recognized as a political one made by a sovereign who is conscious of the political implications of all activities she engages in.

Although the Duchess may have made an unfortunate political choice regarding separating her natural and political bodies, she makes a rather unique decision concerning the fundamental nature of her marriage with Antonio. Webster has represented the implications of such a marriage over time in III.2, which depicts the first private view we have had of Antonio and the Duchess since I.1. This scene presents the Duchess as wife in the new "private" family life she has created, and it reads as an inversion of the traditional Renaissance marriage where the husband has total control over the wife.<sup>23</sup> Yet it is also clear that while the Duchess may be shown to take the "lead" in the bantering in the scene, Antonio is not exactly "subject" to his wife in the same way that Renaissance women were expected to be subject to their husbands. His joking reference to his "rule" being "only in the night" (III.2.8) indicates both that the marriage is sexually fulfilling and that Antonio is meant to accept the parameters of the marriage the Duchess has created and not to envy her position as ruler.

The Duchess is represented as being radically different from the traditional picture of the Renaissance wife in this scene. Not only is she a woman who is capable of commanding her husband specifically as regards his sexual desires (III.2.4-6), and refusing him—"you get no lodging here tonight, my lord" (2). But she is also a woman who thoroughly enjoys her sexuality<sup>24</sup>—"Alas, what pleasure can two lovers find in sleep?" (10)—and the products of it, her chil-

<sup>23</sup> Muriel C. Bradbrook sees the marriage as a reversal of order, and condemns the Duchess for acting contrary to accepted Renaissance patterns of behavior for women (146, 150). But as critics like Kathleen McLuskie indicate, the point of the play is that it is *about* "the possibility of so unconventional a marriage" (86). In fact, by separating her private life from her public life, the Duchess is shown to adhere to a notion of family and marriage that is more similar to the "private" notion of marriage outlined by Catherine Belsey than to the "public" notion of dynastic marriage her brothers have been discussing.

<sup>24</sup> In analyzing *Arden of Feversham*, Catherine Belsey states that in making a sexual choice of Mosby over Arden, Alice Arden "may be committing herself to a form of power more deadly still, and less visible" (*Tragedy*, 144). To me, it is clear that the



dren (66–68). Antonio's behavior is similarly radical for he is represented as not challenging his wife regarding his "rights" to her body or bed, and chafes her with the observation that

Labouring men  
Count the clock oft'nest . . . [and]  
Are glad when their task's ended,  
(III.2.18–20)

which forces her to "stop" his mouth with a kiss (20). The bantering continues with Antonio's begging another kiss and his sneaking off with Cariola so that the Duchess will be left speaking to herself. Antonio is depicted as teasing his wife in this way because he loves "to see her angry" (57).

Webster's extraordinary picture of marriage contrasts sharply with the prevailing early modern notion that women were marginalized or objectified creatures that required domination by men. Yet however much we may applaud this idealistic, egalitarian, and companionate marriage, we still must realize that it exists in almost direct conflict with the Duchess's position as sovereign ruler of Malfi. By keeping her body natural divorced from her body politic and secreting her husband, the Duchess opens herself to accusation as a whore and a witch—women who do not follow accepted patterns of behavior. Her pregnancies convince her brothers and her subjects that she is sexually involved with a man—a situation that allows her to be viewed as an oversexed widow and play directly into Ferdinand's hands. That she has, in fact, married, but married in secret to a man some feel is inferior presents her as violating still more accepted patriarchal codes of female behavior. By not actively challenging the Renaissance discourse of "woman," the Duchess, effectually, allows herself to be read as "whore."

One way to contain women who acted in ways contrary to accepted patterns of female behavior was to label them "whores" or "witches." This technique of containment through stereotypic "naming" has been used several times on the Duchess, as I have indicated above. Another way to contain women characters is to control representations of their bodies. As labeling marginalizes women by giving them the "names" of those who live on the margins of acceptable

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Duchess of Malfi, in her choice of Antonio as lover and husband commits herself to power in just the same way that Belsey sees Alice Arden as doing.

society—whores or witches—the focus on only certain parts of a woman's body "dismembers" her by negatively contrasting her amputated/lacking condition to the completeness of the socially-acceptable male body. Ferdinand's depiction of his sister as a mouth/vagina (I.1) is just such an example of dismemberment. But the female body does not need to be "dismembered" to be marginalized. Sometimes the mere focus on a woman's biology or her use of cosmetics serves negatively to contrast her body to the fixed image of maleness all men, by definition, possess. Bosola's discovery of the Duchess's pregnancy in II.1 continues consideration of how the female body is represented in the play. Bosola is depicted, in this scene, as first condemning the Old Lady for her face-painting, or "face-physic" (23). In a series of particularly loathsome images, Bosola is shown to accuse the Old Lady—and, by association, all women—of engaging in thoroughly disgusting practices in order to present to the world a facial image that differs from reality. He tells of the French woman who flayed the skin off her face to make it more level (27–28), a process which made her resemble "an abortive hedgehog" (29). He then lists the cosmetic contents of a woman's closet and indicates that they are more suitable "for a shop of witchcraft" (35). The ultimate effect of this listing of disgusting objects and disagreeable practices is to stress Bosola's anti-feminism, which causes the character to aver that he "would sooner eat a dead pigeon, taken from the soles of the feet of one sick of the plague, than kiss one of you [e.g., women] fasting" (II.1.38–40). From this woman-hating stance, the character proceeds to describe the Duchess in her pregnancy:

I observe our duchess  
 Is sick o' days, she pukes, her stomach seethes,  
 The fins of her eyelids look most teeming blue,  
 She wanes i'th' cheek, and waxes fat i'th' flank;  
 And (contrary to our Italian fashion)  
 Wears a loose-body'd gown—there's somewhat in't!  
 (II.1.63–68)

Although there is clearly as much revulsion in Bosola's description of the pregnant woman as in his earlier descriptions of cosmetics, revulsion regarding female nature is not the only thing these two descriptions have in common. Make-up and face-painting, no matter what the cosmetics contain, serve the purpose of "disguising" a woman and hiding some part of her from the male gaze. The essen-

tial fear of men as regards cosmetics is that they will create a mask of beauty and gull a man into accepting a "naturally" ugly woman as "artificially" beautiful. In the same way, a loose-bodied gown—or "bawd farthingales" (148)—disguises a swelling body and "the young springal cutting a caper in [the Duchess's] belly" (151). Thus, from what we are shown to be the point of view of the intelligencer, women are adept as deceivers of men because they use cosmetics and costume to disguise/hide the defects of their bodies to present themselves as something they are not—beautiful or chaste.

But the image of the pregnant Duchess can be seen as something more than simply an emblem of disguise or trickery. The body of a pregnant woman is very different from the body of a non-pregnant woman, as Bosola's description of II.1.63–68 attests. However, to go one step farther, a woman's body is radically different from a man's body because it *can* become pregnant. Thus, while for a man constancy of bodily image may be desirable, constancy of bodily image for a woman may not necessarily be desirable. Given the female body's ability to become pregnant, the necessity of that pregnancy for the production of heirs to the patriarchal line, and the lack of reliable birth control methods in the early modern period, the pregnant body must be seen as an alternative image of the female body with as much power as the traditional non-pregnant image. And since, despite the innate fallaciousness of the phrases, a woman may be "slightly pregnant" or "very pregnant," there cannot be *one* acceptable image of the "pregnant" woman. Women in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries—if they were not virgins—drifted into and out of pregnancy with alarming regularity. Thus, the female body—in direct contrast to the male body—is a body in a state of constant flux. And, as such, it is capable of producing a certain uneasiness. The nature of woman's biology necessitates a flexible image of her body which is in direct contrast to the fixed image of the male body. This fact accounts for both the Duchess's refusal to be concerned about the inevitability of the greying of her hair (III.2.58–60), and Bosola's uneasiness at his inability to find the constant within the Duchess's vastly (and continuously) changing bodily shape. Women's bodies are threatening because they are ever-changing and cannot be confined to a single shape.<sup>25</sup> Bosola's wish to confine/ de-

<sup>25</sup> Susan Wells contrasts the Duchess's "static, remote, dedicated to matrimony" royal body—which she sees imaged in the alabaster tomb figure—to her "eroticized, individual body." She feels that the play most often places us in "a world of fragile and

fine the Duchess's body by her clothes, to remove it from the loose-bodied gowns that hide it, is played out in II.2 when the Duchess is both literally and figuratively "confined" during the birth of her child.

The Duchess's figurative confinement results from her failure to consider the implications her changing shape will have upon her subjects. In separating her body natural from her body politic, the Duchess has not provided a means for dealing with the fact that her married body natural is expected to become pregnant while her "widowed" body politic is expected to remain "unpregnant," constant of shape. When her pregnancy impinges upon her political body and its shape changes, she does nothing beyond wearing a loose gown to disguise it. Far from being successful at concealing her pregnancy, this stratagem simply serves to call attention to both her stereotyped changing female shape and her stereotyped sexuality. In allowing these stereotypes room for consideration, the Duchess forces consideration of herself as *woman* rather than *ruler* and foregrounds her body natural at the expense of her body politic.

Bosola is not the only male character to espouse negative attitudes towards women. We can contrast this character's views on cosmetics, pregnancy, and old age with Ferdinand's views on the sexual nature of women's bodies, especially his sister's. I have already mentioned the lamprey/tongue/(penis) pun in I.1.336–38 and the implication that the Duchess's interest in men is purely sexual, her body nothing more than a mouth/vagina to contain the tongue/penis of a man. In II.5, Ferdinand tells the Cardinal that the Duchess is "loose i'th' hilts" (3), another sexual reference, since the blade of a sword or dagger was inserted into its hilt. Finally, Ferdinand's anger and fury at his sister is represented as carrying him out of the realm of metaphor and into that of specific images where he "sees" her

in the shameful act of sin. . . .  
 Happily with some strong thigh'd bargeman;  
 Or one o'th' wood-yard, that can quoit the sledge,  
 Or toss the bar, or else some lovely squire  
 That carries coals up to her privy lodgings.

(II.5.41–5)

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fertile bodies" in which the social distinctions—class, status, etc.—that normally determine our experience of the body are subverted (66). The fixed, alabaster royal body of the Duchess can also be seen as more like the fixed male body that Bosola finds easier to accept than the changeable pregnant body he is confronted with.

Thus his fury is directly the result of the Duchess's desire to keep her marriage secret. While Ferdinand does not learn of the marriage, he does learn of the children. The sexual activity necessary to engender them prompts his misogynistic outburst and is the direct result of the Duchess's failure to control the effects of her private life on her public one. Instead of defusing the threats to her political persona caused by her first pregnancy, she fuels them by having subsequent pregnancies. That this last image of his sister is less objectified than some of Ferdinand's earlier images does not discount the fact that it still represents the Duchess as an exclusively sexual creature who will couple with any man who is available.

Although in many respects Ferdinand's preoccupations with the Duchess's sexuality can be seen as simply obsessive or paranoid, on another level his fears are well-grounded, for Webster has represented the Duchess as being very different in regard to her sexuality from accepted images of early modern women. She is neither chaste virgin nor unregenerate whore (except, perhaps, in what Webster has depicted of Ferdinand's mind), yet she is something that normally does not appear in the early modern drama—a loving wife who is also a sexually mature and active woman. The Duchess is presented as marrying in order to fulfill her physical love for Antonio as well as her emotional attachment to him. Further, and as the play progresses, the Duchess and Antonio are shown to be loving parents to the children who are the products of their marriage. Thus, we can view the Duchess as a figure who values and takes control of her own sexuality by marrying against custom and her family. Further, by not making Antonio her consort, by not granting him a place in her political life, the Duchess is depicted as not granting her children by Antonio a place in her political life as well. Removed from the political realm, these children are never thought of as the heirs or commodities in a dynastic marriage, but as offspring who need a mother's care:

I pray thee, look thou giv'st my little boy  
Some syrup for his cold, and let the girl  
Say her prayers, ere she sleep.

(IV.2.202–204)

Since the Duchess's children are kept so secret, their existence so shadowy, they become completely invisible as regards the court of Malfi. But by removing the children from the public gaze, the Duch-

ess is represented as controlling her biology through the products of it as completely as she is represented as controlling her sexuality.

Ultimately, the Duchess's marriage and sexual politics are represented as so revolutionary that she must be punished for her actions. After Ferdinand appears in her chamber in III.2, the Duchess tries to avoid discovery by concocting a plot whereby Antonio and her children leave Malfi for a place of safety. Although the Duchess is represented as not having tried to integrate her private life into her public life, her decisive actions in her public persona are used to try to preserve her husband and allow the couple to live, eventually, as private individuals. But her plot does not work and she is punished, first by having her duchy taken from her and second by imprisonment in her own palace.

Since the Duchess has been stripped of her political power in III.4, it is essentially as a private woman that she is punished in Act IV. As Bosola was shown to have chafed at the fact that it was impossible sufficiently to confine women or their bodies, in this act the Duchess is represented as finally being completely confined and the victim of various tortures. Her body is still depicted as being a subject both Ferdinand and Bosola focus on. And Ferdinand, perhaps for the first time, is depicted as viewing his sister's body as complete (IV.1.121-123), rather than as simply a vagina. This change of focus is interesting and perhaps refers to the fact that, for the first time, Ferdinand can be absolutely sure of his sister's chastity. Totally confined physically, the Duchess is denied the possibility of any and all sexual activity. She is now, finally, a vessel that may be trusted with the Aragon family's pure dynastic blood. Yet, despite this, Ferdinand is shown to see his sister as mad, for women who act in a way contrary to accepted social norms are often considered mad. Bosola's focus on the Duchess's body has also changed. Where earlier he was represented as seeing the Duchess's female body as swollen with pregnancy or concealed by clothing or disgusting cosmetics, he now describes it as being no more than "a box of worm-seed" (124) or a preserve of earthworms. Although the images are not positive, they are not particularly sexist either. They are emblems of mortality, images common to both men and women, rather than socially-sanctioned images of anti-feminism.

Finally, the scenes of the Duchess's imprisonment give a mixed message regarding the Duchess herself. She is shown to indicate her position as victim both by the reference to her body as food—"Go tell

my brothers, when I am laid out, / They then may feed in quiet" (IV.2.1.236–37)—and when she says "I am chain'd to endure all your tyranny" (IV.2.60). The character is also shown to be a martyr<sup>26</sup> and is represented as comparing herself to Portia "the rare and almost dead example / Of a loving wife" (IV.1.73–74). In addition to these images of martyrs, Webster reminds us that the woman in prison had a political identity which she still claims: "I am Duchess of Malfi still" (IV.2.142). Yet despite her claims to a political self, the Duchess is totally powerless in prison and totally without her sovereign power. But in a very real way we are made to witness the punishment of the Duchess of Malfi as well as the wife of Antonio. The Duchess's line identifying herself as still Duchess of Malfi recalls her political identity and the nobility of her death reinforces it (IV.2.230–234). There is a certain cosmic sense about the Duchess's death as though she both realizes her position in the universe and accepts responsibility for both her life and her death. That she is shown not to cry out or beg for mercy places her at a moral advantage over Cariola, who is represented as begging for mercy, and Ferdinand, who is represented as denying the murder he is implicated in. Her death manages, for a moment, to cause Ferdinand to reconsider his part in it—"I bade thee, when I was distracted of my wits, / Go kill my dearest friend, and thou hast done't" (IV.2.279–280)—and Bosola to view her as a saint—"Return, fair soul, from darkness, and lead mine / Out of this sensible hell" (IV.2.342–43). In fact, Bosola's conviction that the Duchess has the power to lead his soul out of hell recalls Antonio's earlier boast to Delio that the Duchess's looks "were able to raise one to a galliard / That lay in a dead palsy" (I.1.196–97). Yet there is something profoundly ironic in this scene.

This final representation of the Duchess as martyr, as woman idealized through suffering comes actually from a much more traditional discourse of womanhood than previous representations of the Duchess as ruler. This "martyred" view of woman comes both from the patient Griselda stories, which validate the wife who is faithful, forgiving, silent, and patient, and the images of the Virgin Mary and

<sup>26</sup> T. F. Wharton, "'Fame's Best Friend': Survival in *The Duchess of Malfi*," in *Jacobean Miscellany I*, ed. James Hogg (Salzburg: Institut für Englische Sprache und Literatur, 1980), 21. Wharton feels that it is "little short of astounding that Webster should be able to make a religious martyr so natural an ending for his Duchess," given her various anti-religious remarks throughout the play. Further, he states that "she assumes her own salvation with such massive assurances that she makes death seem, not a defect, but an award" (22).

Hecuba as mothers prostrate with grief.<sup>27</sup> In a society that limits women's options to those of wife or mother, creatures whose identities can easily be subsumed by their husbands or children, a talent for suffering nobly (and quietly) becomes the only means by which a woman can be viewed as "heroic." Thus the final representation of Webster's protagonist is not as ruler, but as idealized suffering wife/mother/woman. Her cry, "I am Duchess of Malfi still," becomes ironic, for this seeming validation of her political self occurs within a context that more completely validates her private self as wife and mother.

The "mixed messages" present in this scene are characteristic of the "mixed messages" regarding the Duchess's character that are presented throughout the play and are what contribute to the play's ideologically contradictory nature. In Act IV, our final view of the Duchess is of a character punished primarily for her violation of social custom as a woman, yet also for her violation of political custom as a sovereign. Thus *The Duchess of Malfi* can be viewed as a subversive play because it challenges the basic concept of the early modern marriage, a marriage in which the woman was completely objectified, used only to serve the business or physical needs of her father, her husband, or their joint families. The Duchess is represented as reacting against this social construct of marriage by creating an entirely new concept of the estate, one in which men and women are companions, equal partners, friends, and lovers. She is shown to control her own sexuality, not simply by refusing her body to her husband, but by demanding a relationship with him in which her sexuality is acknowledged, validated, and fulfilled. Further, in spite of dynastic practices, she removes her children from consideration as heirs, seeing them as belonging to herself, rather than her family, thus allowing her effectively to control her biology as well as her sexuality. Even though her refusal to unite her body natural and her body politic—or to consider an alternative way to integrate her private married life into her life as a ruler—leads to her unsuccessful reign as a sovereign, the very nature of her marriage is so revolutionary and challenges social custom to such a degree that the Duch-

<sup>27</sup> Belsey, *Tragedy*, 164–71. Lisa Jardine, 181–195 and "The Duchess of Malfi: A Case Study of the Literary Representation of Women," in *Teaching the Text*, eds. Susanne Kappeler and Norman Bryson (London and Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983), 207–208. Marilyn L. Williamson, *The Patriarchy of Shakespeare's Comedies* (Detroit: Wayne State Univ. Press, 1986), 64–74.



ess must be punished for her audacity in creating it. Despite this attempt to contain the subversive nature of the Duchess, the overall impetus of Acts I–IV remains subversive, especially since allowing the Duchess to die as a tragic figure in Act IV presents her as taking over even the powers of a male tragic protagonist, foregrounds her further, and invests her character and its subversive ideology with great power.

But if Act IV leaves us with a fairly strong picture of the Duchess as a character who would subvert her society's political and social ideologies by re-creating patriarchal discourses regarding marriage, what are we to make of Act V? This curious act appears to be an afterthought that abruptly changes the focus and mood of the play. By foregrounding the male characters, it attempts to contain all of the subversive aspects of the Duchess's rule and restore patriarchal order. And yet the containment is far from complete because the restored order is so dubious. Civil authority is represented by a lycanthropic Duke who robs graveyards and ecclesiastical authority by a Machiavellian Cardinal who murders his mistress. The naively innocent Antonio accepts the brothers at face value and is killed, accidentally, as Bosola murders them to avenge their sister. The Duchess's reign may have been threatening to accepted patriarchal notions of rule, but the final picture of Ferdinand, Antonio, Bosola, and the Cardinal hardly reassures an audience of any of the male characters' abilities to control the state or their moral right to do so. Even the honorable Delio's final entrance casts doubt upon this picture of restored patriarchal order. Antonio's friend appears with the child who will inherit "in his mother's right" (V.5.113). To reinforce the patriarchal order this act ostensibly supports, this child should be the son of the Duchess's first marriage, the son of the dead Duke of Malfi. And he *should* inherit "in his father's right." But this son is curiously the child of the Duchess and Antonio, the son of the Duke of Malfi having somehow disappeared during the course of the play. Thus the inheritance pattern that should reflect primogeniture and support patriarchal order does neither. True it restores a male ruler to the duchy, but one who has no legal right to the title which he acquires through a matriarchal rather than a patriarchal inheritance pattern.

Act V, then, is a curious construct. In an attempt to erase or contain the power revealed by the Duchess in Acts I–IV, it focuses on "traditionally" male questions of government and inheritance. Yet

the rulers it presents—Ferdinand, the Cardinal, and the Duchess's son—are either totally reprehensible morally or come to the title illegally through the female line. Thus, while ostensibly attempting to reinforce the patriarchy and erase the subversive elements of Acts I–IV, Act V, in fact, questions the nature of the social constructs it reinforces and the men who represent them. While not actually arguing in favor of the marital/political paradigm the Duchess has created, this Act's insistence upon establishment of the son of the Duchess's irregular marriage in "her" right does seem to reinforce her political power while simultaneously attempting to deny it. Finally, the discontinuous nature of Act V makes it as difficult to "read" as earlier acts. While it must be acknowledged that an attempt is made to "cover over" the subversive elements of Acts I–IV, the fabric of that covering certainly is dubious at best. It contains holes through which a newly-created, though contradictory, ruling practice can be viewed. Thus while presenting the "official" patriarchal picture of rule, Act V allows simultaneous consideration of the Duchess's subversive attempts at rulership as a corrective to an existing system that is imaged as morally corrupt.

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