

**CHALLENGING CULTURAL STEREOTYPES:  
WOMEN TRAGIC PROTAGONISTS IN JACOBAN DRAMA**

by

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## ABSTRACT

Written against a background of intellectual and social ferment over woman's nature and role, the eight plays discussed implicitly criticize Renaissance society's refusal to recognize woman's full humanity by presenting strong, intelligent heroines seeking personal fulfilment in a hostile culture. For Shakespeare's Desdemona and Cleopatra, sexuality is an integral part of the love they offer Othello and Antony who, however, stereotypically see women's sexuality as wantonness and temptation. Iago easily persuades Othello that Desdemona's independent spirit is a sign of lust. For Antony, Cleopatra's love is a temptation to political and military indolence. Because her brothers see her remarriage as a taint on family honour, Webster's *Duchess of Malfi* must act clandestinely to obtain a sexually and personally fulfilling marriage for which, on its discovery, the brothers take a horrible revenge. Socially ambitious, Vittoria Corombona too seeks sexual fulfilment and resorts to murder to escape an unfulfilling marriage and gain status. For both women, the resort to deception or to evil seems necessary in an evil, corrupt and hostile world which takes its revenge on both. Beaumont's *Evadne* uses her sexual power to become the King's mistress, hoping thereby to escape the social forces that victimize women. She finds herself, however, caught between conflicting codes of honour whose adherents all reject her as a kind of social pariah. Middleton's *Bianca Capello*, *Isabella* and *Beatrice-Joanna* attempt to escape the tyranny of enforced marriage by elopement, adultery, or murder in a corrupt society, which paying lip service to, but not itself observing conventional morality, passes harsh judgement on them for their breaches of convention. Acceptance of, rather than rebellion against, enforced marriage leads Ford's *Penthea* to a pathological brooding which results in her own death and the deaths of the chief characters. Though the five playwrights offer no solutions to their society's tyranny over women, they strongly imply the need to adopt a more natural and comprehensive paradigm of woman.

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To the Memory of  
Barbara Ruth St. John,  
1942-1994

## CHAPTER ONE: HISTORICAL, SOCIAL AND CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

The highest development of the English Renaissance drama, it is generally agreed, occurred during the last decade of the sixteenth century and the first two of the seventeenth, the age of Shakespeare and his younger contemporaries and immediate successors. This high point was itself contemporary with the most intense period in a controversy over the nature of woman and of her role in society. This controversy, arising out of social change, was accompanied and fueled by the humanist affirmation of the dignity of man which, in some circles at least, raised the question whether *man* was to be taken as a sexual word meaning only *male* or as a generic word including in its meaning *female*. Although strong willed, strong minded women of the privileged classes had probably always been able to carve out for themselves places of power and influence, the lives of women in general in Western European society had been severely circumscribed. By the end of the Renaissance that circumscription appears to have become even stricter and narrower, but during the intervening period, for a number of reasons, women were, in the words of Bridenthall and Koonz, "becoming visible"; notice was being taken of them, and a lively debate developed about them. Women themselves were, in fact, beginning to assert their own claim to at least a sort of equality. Some men, accustomed by centuries of tradition to a dominant role, expressed outrage at the new prominence women seemed to be achieving, while women found defenders and new champions in the more liberal minded of the humanists.

At the same time women characters receive a new prominence on the stage. Although the Jacobean dramatists who make women major tragic figures in their plays probably should not be considered protofeminists, they were, nevertheless, keen observers of the world around them, men who recognized that the traditional

stereotyping of women as either chaste virgin goddesses or as intemperately lustful whores did not accord with or account for the complexity and variety that they observed. Whether by intent or not, by portraying women on stage in a more realistic manner, as neither angels nor devils, but as human beings, they challenged the traditional attitudes and views.

Those traditional views and attitudes were often expressed by characters on stage, but they are frequently undercut by the portrayal of the women characters themselves. They are not always portrayed as good, but their wickedness is not attributed exclusively, if at all, to their sexuality and lust, though some of them, certainly, do use their sexuality to gain their ends or to achieve their ambitions. Following Roland de Sousa, Noel Carroll, in his article “The Image of Women in Film: A Defense of a Paradigm”, calls these stereotypes, or images of women “paradigm scenarios”. Because the modern motion picture plays a very similar role in our culture to that of the drama in Elizabethan-Jacobean culture as popular entertainment, da Sousa’s and Carroll’s views are of relevance to the present study. Carroll quotes da Sousa’s explanation of paradigm scenarios:

We are made familiar with the vocabulary of emotion by association with *paradigm scenarios*. These are drawn first from our daily life as small children and later reinforced by the stories, art and culture to which we are exposed. Later still, in literate cultures, they are supplemented and refined by literature. Paradigm scenarios involve two aspects: first a situation type providing the characteristic *objects* of the specific emotional type, and second, a set of characteristic or “normal” *responses* to the situation, where normality is first a biological matter and then very quickly becomes a cultural one. (*The Rationality of Emotions*, 182, quoted by Carroll, 356. Original emphasis.)

Carroll himself states, “Given a situation, an encultured individual attempts, generally intuitively, to fit a paradigm scenario from her repertoire to it” (356). He states a little later that “Male emotional responses to women...will be shaped by the paradigm scenarios that they bring to those situations.” (356-357) Carroll does not see these



paradigms as necessarily defective representations, but he does note that a “pattern of emotional attention, if made operational in specific cases, can be oppressive to women...” (357). This chapter will examine that *cultural* response and its development, the development of “paradigm scenarios”, up to the time of Shakespeare and his fellow playwrights. The basic thesis of the succeeding chapters will be that the dramatists of the late Elizabethan and the Jacobean eras knew the paradigm scenarios by which their society tended to judge women, and though they portrayed many characters, particularly men, who held those paradigms and judged women by them, they portrayed women themselves in such a manner as to undercut and call into question the adequacy of those paradigms and to challenge their “normality”.<sup>1</sup>

Those traditional attitudes were the product of a long history reaching back into antiquity. At early stages of the Middle Ages, high born women, at least, enjoyed a degree of freedom, autonomy, and power. As McNamara and Wemple note, early medieval women “were capable of carrying responsibilities equal to those of men”, and were frequent participants “in Merovingian times in spreading Christianity and building a new society”. Such activities “led to the legal recognition of their economic and marital rights in the Carolingian period” so that “the women of tenth and eleventh centuries had an unprecedented opportunity to use their talents.” Women’s total subordination to men, according to McNamara and Wemple, did not occur until the feudal system was fully in place some time after 1100 C.E. (Bridenthal and Koonz 92). Over time, medieval society developed the attitudes inherited from the collapsed Roman world in keeping with its own ethos. The transition from relative freedom to greater subservience occurred “with the growth of a more structured society, where church and state aimed at centralized control,” so that in the high and late Middle Ages (ca. 1100-1500) women “found their rights and roles increasingly curtailed and their ambitions frustrated”, women holding “the most influential positions” being “the first

to suffer..." (Bridenthall and Koonz 116). The situation in England at the same period was similar to that on the continent. Stenton states that Anglo-Saxon women enjoyed a "rough equality" with men, but after the Norman Conquest of 1066 with the introduction of the "essentially...masculine world" of "feudalism...organized for war in which women were expected to take no part" and until the reign of Charles II "noble English ladies lived in a world governed by feudal law" (29).

Women's subordination was a product of a Catholic Christianity profoundly influenced by the thought and customs of the Graeco-Roman world and adapted to the needs of the new feudal aristocracy. That aristocracy's primary wish and goal was the perpetuation of family line through a male heir to whom the family patrimony would be transmitted, and that in a form preferably augmented by profitable marriages (Stone, *Crisis* 172, *Family* 70-72). Thus, woman's chief role became that of wife and mother. Though the feudal system often gave her as the chatelaine considerable authority within the noble household, her life beyond the castle tended to be fairly strictly circumscribed (Duby 99-106). Patristic theologians, particularly the influential Augustine of Hippo, by asserting that women as the daughters of Eve, the original sinner and temptress of Adam, so they argued, were inherently even more evil than men, gave religious sanction to women's subordination. The subordination of daughters to their fathers before marriage and of wives to their husbands in marriage was necessary, it was argued, to restrain their natural tendency to lasciviousness. Duby states, however, that, despite the favorable position feudalism granted them over their wives in practical matters, aristocratic husbands were haunted by the "secret dread" that their wives "might take some insidious revenge by way of adultery or murder" (106). Though Duby writes of the situation in France, similar fears are found in English medieval poetry and are still being expressed in England as late as the sixteenth century. Grosynhill, for example, in

his sixteenth-century anti-feminist pamphlet *The Scholehouse of Women*, shows that the fear was still alive and felt as an offence to male honor and dignity:

No pain so fervent, hot or cold,  
 As is a man to be called Cuckold.  
 And be he never so fearful to fray,  
 So stark a coward, yet will he rage  
 And draw his knife, even straightway,  
 Be he never so far in age,  
 Call him once Cuckold and his courage  
 Forthwith will kindle and force him strike  
 Worse than ye named him heretic.

(Henderson and McManus 147)

Such fears are often expressed by or implied in the conduct of many of the male characters in the drama of the English Renaissance, and they go very far in explaining, for example, the ease with which Iago is able to convince Othello that Desdemona has betrayed him by having an affair with Cassio. Furthermore, a woman's sexual offence was widely considered to be only the prelude to other crimes. Hamlet's accusation in the Closet Scene of "almost as bad, good mother,/ As kill a king and marry with his brother" (*Ham.* 3.4.27-28) suggests that his mind entertained, even if only in passing, the possibility that because his mother has committed adultery with Claudius, she must also have been involved in the murder of her former husband. In the minds of some, it would seem, the "insidious revenge" might take the form of adultery *and* murder.

Woman, it was averred, is weak morally. At the same time, paradoxically and inconsistently, her beauty is a snare to entrap the supposedly morally stronger man and to lead him into evil. Thus woman was seen also as a potential temptress and seductress, a whore, as Cleopatra is judged by most of the Roman characters in Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*. The celibate clergy particularly were warned to be on their guard against woman's wiles, and many of the most scurrilous medieval attacks on women were written by them. The clergy were urged by their bishops to regard Mary, the immaculately conceived and perpetually virgin mother of Christ, as their

ideal of womanhood, and she became a virtual object of worship, particularly for the monastic clergy and their lay brothers. To her they devoted their manhood that they might not give it to one of the daughters of Eve whom they were taught to regard as abominations (Bullough 144-148). Women, on the other hand, were urged to model *themselves* on the Mother of God and handmaid of the Lord in order that they might better and more willingly play their assigned role in the medieval social hierarchy. Besides providing legitimate heirs to great and minor lords, woman's role was, by her marriage, to cement alliances between her father's family and some other great, or even greater, family into which she married. Her role was to augment her new family's patrimony by the dowry she brought to her husband (Duby 94-99, Stone *Family* 69-73). Thus, in effect—and in law—woman became a chattel, a piece of property; and a theology which encouraged her to be “chaste, silent and obedient” gave religious sanction to that diminished social position. The authority of fathers to bestow their daughters on husbands of their choice lies behind many of the conflicts between parents and children in the Elizabethan-Jacobean drama, both comic and tragic.

Yet despite its theoretical and in many ways real subordination of women to men, medieval society, as much recent scholarship has shown, was full of contradictions in its treatment of women (cf., eg., Bridenthal and Koonz). The noble lady frequently organized and ran the daily affairs of feudal households and received, virtually as though she were the lord, the homage of the household servants. In fact, in the lord her husband's absence, she was left in full charge of the domain and received the homage of the lord's vassals in his stead (Bullough 153, Bridenthal and Koonz 145).

As a vernacular literature developed, particularly out of the troubadour movement, the noble lady often became a patron of poets and other writers and artists (Bullough 153-154). That literature itself, in fact, conferred a kind of special status on

the noble lady. Courtly love, or *fine amour*, that most striking of all contradictions to the medieval norm, combined elements of feudal fealty and devotion to the Virgin Mary with a positive recognition and acceptance of the lady as a sexual being. The courtly lover offered his lady service and devotion in an extramarital—in C. S. Lewis's word, an adulterous—relationship. There has been much scholarly debate over whether or not courtly love was mere literary convention or actual practice, and if it were actual practice, how it was conducted. Yet even though the primary purpose of the adoration of the lady was the moral and spiritual elevation of the adoring male (Rogers 76), the cult, in the view of Vern Bullough and his associates, nevertheless made “an important contribution to giving women a sense of self, a sort of reification of women.” As the one who “gave man courage, skill, and honor...she had ennobling qualities” (155). This really meant, however, that woman's sense of identity was still strongly reliant on the male dominated world; yet, because of the attention and identity it gave to women, the courtly tradition may have helped lay the foundation for the reassessment of women during the Renaissance. Furthermore, because in part at least, courtly love developed as a kind of compensation for the lack of love which often existed in marriages that were largely financial transactions, it may have contributed to the conception which began to emerge in the Renaissance that marriage, as advocated in the New Testament, ought to be a relationship of mutual love.<sup>2</sup> Somewhat later, in Petrarch's development of the courtly literary tradition in his *Canzoniere* at the dawn of the Renaissance, the courtly lady becomes an unobtainable womanly ideal “who is both mistress and saint”.<sup>3</sup> This “Petrarchanism” accorded to woman a kind of status—the status of the pedestal—but again this was a status conferred by male regard for and attitudes toward her.

The Renaissance drama frequently reflects the conflicts and tensions between newer and older understandings of the relationship between men and women,

particularly in marriage. Though the heyday of the Petrarchan development of the courtly tradition was past by the Jacobean era, it still has many echoes both in the poetry and the drama of the period. In some of the tragedies, adulterous relationships are seen by the characters involved in terms of a kind of perverted Petrarchan courtliness. In *The Maid's Tragedy* of Beaumont and Fletcher, the perverse relationship between Evadne, the King and Amintor, in which the mistress takes a husband, rather than the wife taking a lover in order to become a courtly mistress, seems to turn the courtly relationship on its head.

Other factors in the medieval social environment also influenced attitudes toward women on the eve of the Renaissance. Duby, writing about northern France but very likely describing what was generally the case in northwestern Europe, says that from at least the ninth century, "The Christianization of marriage practices seems to have been effected easily enough in the lower strata of society" (48), but he notes that during the period about which he writes—the ninth to the twelfth centuries—"It is probable that the behavior and perhaps also the rites of ordinary town-and-country-dwellers were different from those of the gentry" (20). Both Keith Wrightson, in *English Society 1580-1680* (71-79) and Peter Laslett, in *The World We Have Lost* (154) have shown that in sixteenth century England life in the lower classes of society, contrary to Stone's assertions, did not always follow the pattern of the aristocracy. Among the peasant, artisan, and, initially, the business communities, women had both greater freedom of movement and, because there was not the same concern for lineage and preservation of the patrimony as among the nobility, young people had a greater freedom of choice of marriage partners. Such relationships were contracted—often without ecclesiastical sanction—on the basis of propinquity, friendship and neighborliness and other informal associations, and mutual attraction. There was also less tendency to make role distinctions based on sex among the peasantry, all of whom worked long and hard

simply to survive. After the Black Death of the fourteenth century, when many of those who escaped serfdom made their way to the towns to join the growing middle class, they took many of their attitudes with them.

In the sixteenth century, foreign visitors to England were amazed to see well dressed English middle class women freely walking the streets in pursuit of their various domestic needs (Hurstfield and Smith 34-35, Wrightson 93, Woodbridge 172-173). With the passage of time, however, among the mercantile classes, women's and men's roles became more distinct. As the middle class gained in influence and in prestige, attitudes among its members changed in emulation of the nobility. This emulation intensified as aristocratic parents, for financial reasons, became willing to marry their sons to daughters of the bourgeoisie who, in turn, were glad of the status thus conferred. Gilmore notes in *The World of Humanism* that "the men who were at different periods most active in creating new wealth gave their entire allegiance to the values of the older social order" (68). Thus the degree of independence initially enjoyed by middle class women was slowly eroded.

There was, however, a counter force to these developments. With the Protestant Reformation, a more positive attitude toward human sexuality began to emerge. Celibacy was no longer regarded as the ideal state, and marriage was exalted. The clergy themselves were urged to marry—Luther himself married a former nun—and the physical relationship between husband and wife was given a new sanctity. As Wright notes, "No longer, as in the medieval church, was virginity held to be the highest good, but a chastity of marriage was glorified by the Protestants" (203). In keeping with their new outlook, the Reformers urged that marriage ought to be based on mutual love and should be, therefore, a matter of the free choice of the partners<sup>4</sup>—though never in outright opposition to their parents. In England, over the course of the sixteenth and

seventeenth centuries, that attitude began to influence the attitudes and practice of the nobility among most of whom, as well as among the middle class, Protestantism had taken root (Stone, *Crisis* 274, 279; Wright 207-209). Protestantism also gave women responsibility for the moral education of the children of the family, and so urged that women be educated at the very least in the Scriptures, Christian doctrine and Christian moral teaching. Therefore, the Reformers, by and large, argued that woman's place was still in the home and any education they received must be geared to their natural and divinely decreed roles as wives and mothers. Thus women gained a new respect with the Reformation, but not social equality or the degree of freedom enjoyed by men. In the view of some of the Reformers, *only* education in Scripture was appropriate for women, for they still regarded women as potentially wanton, and any secular learning would only encourage that natural tendency. As Richmond notes,

the sexual situation in any society is never a simple circumstance, for against these obvious advances for women must be set persistent negative attitudes. Many protestant theologians accept woman *because she knows her place*; and this is well defined as a moral subject, for man's physical superiority is argued as clear evidence that men should also be superior in the household (333-334. Original emphasis).

Thus, in a sense, what women gained on the roundabouts, they tended to lose on the swings. Greater freedom in some areas resulted in greater subservience and restriction in others.

The cultural and intellectual movement called the Renaissance, roughly contemporary with many of the foregoing social developments, brought other developments. Humanists, advocates of the full development of the human mind and spirit, often advocated that women were as deserving as men of such development. The most ardent advocate of women's equality with men was Henricus Cornelius Agrippa, two of whose titles, in English translation, *Female Pre-eminence or The Dignity and Excellence of that Sex, above the Male*, and *A Treatise of the Nobility and excellency of*



*woman kynde*, suggest his more enlightened attitude. Woodbridge says that the “arguments Agrippa marshals in support of his amazing thesis [of the superiority of women over men in all respects “except equality of divine substance”] are ingenious if not outrageous” (39), but, she argues, his “hyperbolic praise of women is not an ironic vehicle for laying bare the sex’s unworthiness but a graphic demonstration of the absurdities one must resort to if one claims superiority for either sex” (42). His real concern is to proclaim equality. He dismisses physical differences as negligible and questions the existence of a natural order which made men superior and women naturally subordinate (Woodbridge 39, 43). Woman’s subordination was a product of cultural forces: “And thus by the laws, the women being subdued as it were by force of arms, are constrained to give place to men and to obey their subduers, not by no [sic] natural, no divine necessity or reason, but by custom, education fortune, and a certain tyrannical occasion” (*A Treatise* Sig. G verso, quoted Woodbridge 43. Spelling modernized). Melantius’s use of his sword to force his sister Evadne to his will in Beaumont’s *The Maid’s Tragedy* forcibly illustrates Agrippa’s point. Few, however, went so far as Agrippa in asserting the power of culture and convention to shape fundamental attitudes.

Nevertheless, with varying degrees of enthusiasm, humanists did begin to urge that women as well as men should learn to read and write; and many women, in fact, did so. There were, of course, as might be expected, detractors such as Vives—brought to England by Catherine of Aragon, Queen to Henry VIII, to be the tutor of their daughter Mary—who was only a guarded advocate. Mary, he argued, as a royal princess was entitled to a full humanist education, but other women should be given only such education as would assist them in the performance of their household duties. They should not be allowed to read romantic and other literature which might distract them from their appointed role.<sup>5</sup> The distinguished humanists Thomas More and Desiderius

Erasmus, however, advocated a full humanist education for all women. Erasmus regarded uneducated women as idle and frivolous, whereas education gave them rational control; and More, whose daughter Margaret Roper became a highly regarded scholar and translator, could not see why learning “may not equally agree with both Sexes: For by it reason is cultivated...with wholesome Precepts, which bring forth good Fruit” (Bullough 181-182). Stenton believes that the influence of Erasmus and More was “far reaching” and that “the example of the court was followed by aristocratic parents all over the country” so that “Young women of high birth” were “taught Greek, Latin, and even Hebrew, with their brothers” (123). Anne Boleyn, Katherine Parr, Lady Jane Grey, and of course, the young Princess Elizabeth, later Queen, were among the outstanding examples of learned English ladies of the early sixteenth century.

Though few denied outright women’s right to read, many of a more traditional cast of mind believed, like Vives, that reading was a dangerous pastime for them and should be severely restricted lest they read what would encourage in them lascivious thoughts, and even deeds, to which they were already prone by nature. Ruth Kelso notes that “the free, bright world into which we step when it is a question of education for boys vanishes on consideration of girls, and we move in an atmosphere of doubt, timidity, fear and niggardly concession” (58). Still, in 1578 a woman named Margaret Tyler was bold and learned enough to defend in print woman’s right to unlimited reading, and by her time a large amount of reading matter was being produced by male writers for a growing female clientele. The drama of the English Renaissance presents many intelligent and literate women, a sign that women, at least among the higher social classes, were achieving a degree of education.

In the matter of women’s reading we see just one aspect of the Renaissance dispute over women. The influence of the Reformation was equivocal. On the one

hand, it encouraged marriage based on mutual love, but on the other reaffirmed the husband's lordship—albeit benevolent—over his wife. It encouraged women to read, but chiefly so that they might read the Bible and teach its precepts to their children. It encouraged marriage over celibacy, but did not recognize the possibility of women's being anything other than wives and mothers. Furthermore, the old view that women were by their very natures wanton, shrewish, extravagant, vain, wilful and garrulous was still held by the majority, a number of whom expressed their views quite vehemently in print. They were answered by those who maintained that woman was *by nature* meek, gentle, quiet, dutiful, tenderhearted, uncomplaining and nurturing—in a word, subordinate as she was expected to be. Little effort was made to follow Agrippa in seeing other possible roles for her in society than that of wife (Woodbridge 38), except in several instances, as Henderson and McManus note, by women themselves.

The controversy over women came to a head with the publication, in 1616, of *The Arraignment of Lewd, Idle, Froward, and unconstant Women* by Joseph Swetnam which the nineteenth century clergyman A. B. Grosart called “a mendacious attack on women *qua* women” (Wright 486). Another attack, possibly inspired by the misogynist King James, was entitled *Hic Mulier; or the Man-Woman*, a denunciation of the supposed masculinity of much current female attire and the transvestism practised by some women as an assertion of their equality with men. Such women, the author urged, possessed the “impudence of harlots” (Woodbridge 180-181, 216-219). That pamphlet generated two responses, *Haec-Vir, or the Womanish-Man; Being an Answer to a Late Booke intituled Hic Mulier* (1620) and *Mulde Sacke; or The Apologie of Hic Mulier to the Late Declaration against Her* (1620). These diatribes called forth a number of other responses in print, three of which were very probably by women, an indication that at least some women were becoming “strong and assertive” in their own behalf (Henderson and McManus 20-24).

More significant, for this study, is a play which seems a refutation of views expressed in *Hic Mulier* and *The Arraignment*, the anonymous *Swetnam the Woman-hater Arraigned by Women*, where Swetnam is tried, condemned, and made to see the error of his views. Earlier, in 1611, Middleton's and Dekker's *The Roaring Girl*, based freely on the life of the historical Margery Frith, known as Moll Cutpurse, had treated with great sympathy the subject of female transvestism. Woodbridge states that we probably cannot know just how strong and assertive Renaissance women really were, but she affirms that "for a few years they were strong enough and assertive enough to influence the drama's image of womankind..." (266). In regard to altered attitudes, Rogers notes that although in this "dominant genre" of Renaissance England "misogyny remained a subject of lively interest, in drama it was no longer accepted as an acceptable attitude" (118).<sup>6</sup> Though characters on stage frequently express misogynist views, the plays themselves in their entirety undercut that misogyny by presenting women with a very considerable degree of sympathetic understanding.

There was, in the upshot, no real liberation of women in the Renaissance. The weight of tradition was too heavy, and women did not have adequate weapons, economic power in particular, to implement change. For that they had to wait a full three centuries. Women, as Joan Kelly-Gadol argues, did not really have a renaissance.<sup>7</sup> Even the humanists most favorable to women still saw their roles as those of wives and mothers, and their advocacy of a humanist education for women they envisaged as preparation for these roles.

Yet society was becoming aware of women in a new way and for a time, as Velma Bourgeois Richmond notes, "women enjoyed a life-giving respite, in the time before the full impact of Luther and Calvin, when there were an unusual number of women

achievers both in England and on the continent..." (*Midwest Quarterly* 19, 332). Also, as Stenton notes:

The mere existence of the highly educated ladies of the Elizabethan age and their highly intelligent successors of the seventeenth century forced men to reflect on the social and legal position of women. Such a woman as Mary Countess of Pembroke could no more be ignored than Queen Elizabeth herself (14).

Of the possible influence on Elizabethan ideas of the presence of a woman on the throne, Angela Pitt, in *Shakespeare's Women*, suggests that

As a figurehead, and because her policies in both Church and State tended to the 'middle way', thus setting a standard of judicious compromise and tolerance rather than confrontation, Elizabeth indirectly created a society in which women were more respected and hence more 'free' than they ever were before. It is this social ease between men and women that must underlie the comments on their 'liberty' by men like Thomas Platter and the Duke of Wurttemberg. Renaissance goddesses they are not, for the moral ideal was still firmly Christian, based on submission and obedience, in contrast to that set up for men, which owes a great deal to the classical figure of the lordly Greek. What they did have was sufficient sense of their importance in society to create unsuppressed vitality in their speech, their action and their relationships (29).

Even at that, we know that many in the court and government were uncomfortable with a woman on the throne, and so Elizabeth had to be imbued with the aura of a kind of Petrarchan courtly patroness. She herself appears to have accepted the need to maintain this image by remaining a virgin, an image that was an important part of her politics, whether or not it was based on personal preference. Nevertheless, it may be the "vitality" in "speech", "action" and "relationships" that Pitt mentions that lies behind Woodbridge's comment that Elizabethan men must have had difficulty reconciling "the theory that women were weak and the fact that they were strong, the theory that virtuous women never left the house and the fact that seemingly virtuous women they knew worked in shops and attended the Globe" (325).

Such contradiction, however, is the stuff of drama. The tensions among these contradictory and conflicting attitudes and practices regarding marriage and woman's

role are frequently reflected in the drama of the English Renaissance, and the English theatre seemed peculiarly free dramatically to examine and represent such tensions. As a theatre which had developed out of a long tradition of moral and religious didactic drama going back to about the tenth century, it was a theatre which interested itself in issues of vital concern to its audience—a concern which has existed in all times of the theatre’s greatest vitality. As time passed, and especially with the various developments after Henry VIII’s breach with Rome, those interests became more and more political and secular. This theatre was still in the early seventeenth century, despite the accelerating development of the so-called private, coterie theatres, very much a public theatre appealing to a broad spectrum of public interest. For a considerable time plays appear to have been written for both the public and the private theatres and there was probably a degree of cross-fertilization.<sup>8</sup> Somewhat simplistically perhaps, V. G. Kiernan says that Shakespeare’s theatre “allowed the dramatist a flexible frame of reference which was more complex and more vital to the experience of living and feeling within the social organism than the achievement of any other theatre before or since” (Kettle 37).<sup>9</sup> Shakespeare’s theatre, of course, was also Webster’s and Middleton’s theatre and, somewhat less so, Beaumont’s and Fletcher’s. Ford, on the other hand, seems to have written almost exclusively for the private theatres, but, as several recent critics have shown, that theatre was also capable of examining dramatically the issues of the day. The English renaissance theatre was then, both by its history and its nature, a theatre that was no longer didactic in the strict sense, and entertained by exploring the issues of the day. Andrew Gurr writes of this theatre that

London [in the “strange period” of the 1590s—and thereafter] had a new phenomenon to wonder at. For the first time there was a forum for airing important questions in public. Playhouses drew people in their thousands, and plays opened up a wealth of subjects for gossip and debate. Censorship made it necessary to be discreet, but since plays claimed to be fiction they mostly seemed incapable of giving direct offence (14).

Gurr further notes that “The plays served as the newspapers of the day” and “could promote public debates about questions which had never before had a forum” (14). In Hamlet’s words, the theatres were “the abstract and brief chronicles of the time” (*Ham.2.2.520*).<sup>10</sup>

Although in the works of playwrights such as Chapman and Jonson women were often presented in their traditional guises of shrew, spendthrift, termagant, and whore, women found in the works of many other authors a powerful platform on which many of the tensions and controversies surrounding them were aired and on which they themselves were presented in something like their true complexity. As the plays *Swetnam The Woman-hater Arraigned* and *The Roaring Girl* attest, playwrights gave the issues revolving around women an important public forum. Though no accurate assessment of their numbers is possible, a fairly significant part of the audience of this theatre “were women who moved and responded with a freedom unknown on the continent” (Richmond 332).<sup>11</sup> Especially significant and important is the fact that this theatre continued in the initial years, at least, of the reign of James I to explore the issues surrounding women, their nature and their role in society even when the official climate was unfavorable to such exploration.<sup>12</sup> This exploration continued despite what Mary Beth Rose says was James’s “considerable” misogyny, and the fact that he seems to have been troubled by “female pretention” (Bourgeois 335). Because of censorship and the known attitudes of the court, the dramatists of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries often set the action of their plays in remote times and places, but the issues, including issues involving women, they discussed under this guise were those of their own time and place.<sup>13</sup>

Given the complexity of the currents that shaped English Renaissance drama, it is not surprising that the question should arise as to whether or not and, if so to what

degree, the drama of the late English Renaissance can be considered subversive. Stephen Greenblatt in *Shakespearean Negotiations* has argued that the subversiveness of the theatre was contained by royal power (65). James Shapiro in an article on *The Spanish Tragedy*, however, suggests that “Perhaps the vicious cycle of ‘subversion contained’ is not quite as grim as Greenblatt would have us believe”, and argues that “Evidence suggests...that the Elizabethan theater’s relationship to political and judicial authority was more complex than either subverting or confirming state power; the theater’s boundaries as to judicial institution were especially problematic” (Kastan and Stallybrass 99).<sup>14</sup> According to Steven Mullaney, the very location of the theatres in the liberties beyond the London civic authorities and only somewhat uncertainly under royal authority gave them a considerable degree of flexibility (Kastan and Stallybrass 17-26). Shapiro notes that “its boundaries in relationship to competing sources of social and political authority in Elizabethan England remain uncharted” (99). Dollimore says that “the transgressive impulse” of the theatre involves the expedient of “the inscribing of subversive discourse within an orthodox one, a vindication of the letter of an orthodoxy while subverting its spirit” (Kastan and Stallybrass 131). Greenblatt himself has recognized that “the stage was not part of a single coherent, totalizing system” (19) but “served”, in the words of Kastan and Stallybrass, “as a fertile medium through which cultural meanings and values were shaped, transmitted, challenged and changed” (6).<sup>15</sup>

In the dramas to be examined herein, there is much that, if not finally subversive, nonetheless seems, in its impact, clearly to challenge or question accepted attitudes and traditionally held beliefs, and so the basic social ordering of society, even if in the end, something like the orthodox view appears to be reaffirmed. Particularly, the plays to be examined challenge the view prevailing that human sexuality in general, and female sexuality in particular, is to be seen as simply lust and so a negative and destructive force. A number of the plays suggest strongly that the evil lies far more in the restraint



of sexual desire than in its natural expression. In that respect, the plays could certainly be seen as subversive. On the other hand, of course, in every play the representative, whether evil or virtuous, of this alternate view of woman's sexuality "comes to a bad end" and makes some kind of submission to the traditional attitudes. In that way, the subversion may be said to be contained so that the ultra-orthodox, much as some modern critics do, might see the deaths even of such virtuous women as Desdemona and the Duchess of Malfi as receiving just retribution for their breaches of order and decorum. Yet the ironies, the ambiguities, the ambivalences and the often equivocal nature of the presentations of all these women seriously undercut the orthodox interpretations of their fates so that a significant challenge is offered to the accepted orthodoxies.

Not all the issues discussed in the foregoing paragraphs become the subject matter of the drama. Much, however, of the controversy over women echoes strongly in the drama, particularly of the latter part of the era, the Jacobean period. Mary Beth Rose speaks of

two dominant forms of sexual discourse in the English Renaissance. The first comprises a dualistic sensibility in which women and eros are perceived either as idealized beyond the realm of the physical...or as degraded and sinful (3-4).

Then, "during the sixteenth century...there is a gradual shift from the dualistic mentality to the Protestant idealization of marriage" (4), and "in Jacobean tragedy, the contradictions and paradoxes inscribed in the two dominant modes of Renaissance sexual discourse explode into destruction and protest" (6). Much of the dramatic effect of these plays arises from the conflict between the desire of major female characters to assert at least a degree of the independence that some humanist writers—and women writers influenced by humanism—believed they deserved and the unwillingness of their societies at large, and the male members in particular, to grant that independence. In

virtually every instance, the woman of independent mind and will is finally defeated, at least in part, by the persistence of old attitudes among those who hold power in their societies, but the presentation is such that the attitudes and the conduct of the society in general and of male characters in particular are at least as open to question as those of the women defeated by these forces. One school of critics argues that such defeats show that the playwrights affirm the accepted social and moral values of their society. The fate of Desdemona, for example, is seen as a judgment on her, despite her basic goodness, for having eloped, in violation of custom, with one whom her father would not have approved as a husband. The Duchess of Malfi receives similar adverse judgment because she marries below her rank and in violation of the wishes of her brothers. Women such as Vittoria Corombona, Bianca Capello, and Beatrice-Joanna are seen simply as immoral and their ultimate destruction as the punishment they deserve. However, by the complexity with which these women are portrayed, by the ambiguity given to their motivations, and by the representation of their frustration among hypocritical and selfishly motivated adversaries, the playwrights call into question the old paradigm of womanhood, showing it to be inadequate for a full understanding of woman's nature and destructive of her genuine need for human fulfilment.

In summary, the controversy over women in the later years of Elizabeth's reign and the early years of that of James I was a reaction to the attempt to understand woman's nature in a new way and to redefine her role in society. That controversy made it possible for the dramatists of the period to portray women in ways that defied and questioned the validity of the old stereotypes. Women themselves by their achievements, their demonstrations of competence, and the preservation of their virtue in situations where traditional thought said they were bound to fail, and sometimes by their rebelliousness, were demonstrating that they did not fit those stereotypes. The

dramatists made the same point by presenting women of singular abilities and strength in their plays. Not only do the playwrights thereby show the old, traditional paradigm of woman to be inadequate, they also show these new women to be subversive of the old standards and norms. Their male dominated, masculinely oriented societies, of course, also see these new women as subversive and, therefore, endeavor—successfully in all the plays to be examined—to destroy them. The dramatists, however, do not thereby defend, as has often been thought, the traditional morality, but, rather, show how that morality perverts and destroys women's best qualities. The dramatists present these women—whether immoral women like Vittoria Corombona in Webster's *The White Devil*, or Bianca Capello and Isabella in Middleton's *Women Beware Women*, or such moral, virtuous women as Desdemona and the Duchess of Malfi—as subversive in the name of what the women themselves see as a higher principle. One does not always have to assert that the playwrights approve of the specific actions of their women protagonists in their pursuit of that principle in order to see in their plays an affirmation of women's right to make free choices and to claim a happiness greater than that which their societies and culture traditionally granted them. Simplistic moral judgments, therefore, are both inadequate and irrelevant. Whatever moral judgment on the women's actions characters make within the plays, the playwrights themselves reveal the ways in which women come to tragic ends in the process of struggling for personal fulfilment in spite and in defiance of the norms and standards of their societies. Whatever moral judgments the playwrights or their audiences might have made, the prominence given to women as tragic protagonists itself undermines assumptions about their lesser significance.

## END NOTES TO CHAPTER ONE

1. An interesting parallel to Carroll's thesis may be found in Robert B. Heilman, "Manliness in the Tragedies: Dramatic Variations" (Edward A. Bloom, ed., *Shakespeare 1564-1964*, Providence, R. I.: Brown U P, 1964, 19-37) who says of Shakespeare's portrayal of male characterizations that he "never falls into a thin one dimensional theory of man" (21) and that "even in a single episode he can suggest different perspectives" (23). Shakespeare, he says, "places a common ideal in very ironic perspective. But at the same time he develops dramatically a counter-view of manly action, one that permits us to sense a dramatic struggle...between different values that find a sanction in the nature of man." (28) Heilman's thesis with regard to male characters is very similar to the position to be taken in this study regarding the manner in which Shakespeare and his fellow dramatists portray *women*.
2. Duby in *The Three Orders* (trans. Arthur Goldhammer, London and Chicago, U of Chicago P, 1980) notes that several writers of the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries indicate that among those whose counsel princes and noblemen should seek are "good ladies". He comments, "This ought not to surprise us: courtliness also signified making way for the fair sex—for womanhood" (279). (Duby, in making an important point, must be forgiven his use, in speaking of "the fair sex", of what would now be regarded as a sexist epithet.) Bullough and his associates caution, however, that courtly love gave birth to "the myth of the feminine mystique that raised woman to a pedestal" (155). They conclude that "Though few women probably enjoyed the pedestal that the concepts of romantic love put them on, most of them thought that at least temporarily it was better than the gutter, and the myths of the feminine mystique appealed to them. The difficulty of the pedestal, however, was that it was hard to remain there without falling" (165).
3. The quotation is from *Penguin Guide to English Literature*, ed. Marion Wynne-Davies (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1989), 796a.
4. Mary Beth Rose in *The Expense of Spirit* acknowledges the truth of the arguments of a number of scholars that many of the Protestant views were not new. The differences were more of emphasis than substance. What is "the importance," she affirms, "of English Protestant sexual discourse in the Renaissance lies not in its originality, but in its proliferation, elaboration, and wide accessibility to a variety of social groups, as well as in its attempt to construct marriage as a concretized relationship enacted in social life" (3).
5. In Middleton's *A Mad World, My Masters*, the foolish Harebrain tells the courtesan, ironically and at the same time appropriately named Frank Gullman, whom he regards as a "sweet virgin, the only companion [his] soul weishes for" his wife (1.2.36-37, Regents) that he has "conveyed away all [his wife's] wanton pamphlets, as *Hero and Leander*, *Venus and Adonis*" (1.2.43-44). The foolishness of such precautions is demonstrated by the fact that Harebrain is cuckolded nonetheless.
6. Frequently quoted is this passage from the Journal of Thomas Platter of Basel:

What is particularly curious is that the women as well as the men, in fact, more often than they, will frequent taverns or ale-houses for enjoyment. They count it a great honour to be taken there and given wine with sugar to drink; and if one woman only is invited, then she will bring three or

four other women along and they gaily toast each other. (Quoted Angela Pitt, *Shakespeare's Women*, 12)

John Dover Wilson quotes from Van Meteren's *Nederlandische Historie* that:

although the women there [England] are entirely in the power of their husbands, except for their lives [a very important exception, one would think], yet they are not shut up as they are in Spain or elsewhere. They go to market to buy what they like best to eat. They are well dressed, fond of taking it easy, and commonly leave the care of household matters to their servants...In all the banquets and feasts they are shown the greatest honour.... All the rest of their time they employ in walking and riding, in playing at cards or otherwise, in visiting their friends and keeping company...etc. (*Life in Shakespeare's England*, 1949 Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1944, 26-27. Orig. publ. Cambridge UP, 1911.)

Van Meteren notes the apparently common expression that "England is called the Paradise of married women," but he notes that "The girls who are not yet married are kept much more rigorously and strictly than in the Low Countries." (Dover Wilson 27) On the matter of women's freedom, Ruth Kelso in *Doctrine for the Lady* notes, however, that Frenchmen claimed that their women were freer than those of other countries. (267-268)

7. "Did Woman Have a Renaissance?" in Bridenthall and Koonz, 137-161.
8. The view of Ann Jennalee Cook in *The Privileged Playgoers of Shakespeare's London, 1576-1642* (Princeton: Princeton U P, 1981) "that only the privileged minority possessed the time, money, education, personal associations, geographical access, and inclination to attend the theatre regularly" (Cohen, *Drama of a Nation*, 168n92) has been disputed. Martin Butler in *Theatre in Crisis 1632-1642*, (Cambridge: Cambridge U P, 1984) devotes an Appendix of fourteen pages (293-306) to a rebuttal of Cook's position, noting, *inter alia*, that some of the evidence she herself cites undercuts her argument. Butler says that "while the evidence of privileged playgoing which Cook supplies illustrates and supplements the orthodox picture of socially mixed audiences, we do not have to assume (as Cook tends increasingly to suppose...) that it contradicts it" (298). In *Drama of a Nation* Cohen writes that "Although this controversy will most likely not be soon resolved, the hypothesis of primarily elite spectators represents no more than an abstract possibility, and one fraught with logical and empirical problems. On the other hand, an insistence on a heterogeneous audience...is compatible with the existing evidence and hence considerably more plausible" (168). Cohen also says in the note previously cited that Cook "cannot quite deny a popular majority at the Fortune and Red Bull in Jacobean times (p. 137), an implicit concession that fundamentally undermines her basic claim."
9. Ben Jonson and Chapman may be cited—as indeed Rogers herself does—as exceptions to this general rule. In Mary Beth Rose's words, "In all of Jacobean drama, no misogyny is so detailed and unmitigated, so utterly triumphant, as Ben Jonson's is in *Epicoene*" (57).
10. V. G. Kiernan expresses the moderate Marxist view that:  
  
Elizabethan drama grew in a no man's land between the two historical epochs that we call the feudal and the capitalist. All around it old habits and ways were crumbling, new ones beginning to take shape, in a medley

of fragmented relics and experiments. In the medieval society that was falling to pieces the individual had been enclosed, snugly though crampingly, inside a narrow framework of institutions and beliefs.... Now the snug crib which was also a prison was releasing or ejecting him into a strange environment where he must find his way about, among others groping likewise (Kettle 43).

The theatre of the Elizabethan and early Jacobean eras might be said to have dramatized that groping, in particular the gropings of women for a new place and a new status in a changing world.

11. Jean E. Howard in "Women as Spectators, Spectacles, and Paying Customers" writes that "From Andrew Gurr's important study, *Playgoing in Shakespeare's London* [Cambridge: Cambridge U P, 1987] we now know that women were in the public theater in significant numbers and that the women who attended the theater were neither simply courtesans nor aristocratic ladies; many seem to have been citizens' wives, part of that emergent group, 'the middling sort,' whom Gosson [in *The Schole of Abuse*] addresses" (Kastan and Stallybrass 70).
12. Angela Pitt says of James I that he "appears to have been alarmed by women and tried to suppress their 'arrogance' through the clergy [a fact noted in a number of the studies cited in the bibliography]. The light of tolerance and respect that had begun to burn in Elizabeth's reign was now firmly put out." (*Shakespeare's Women* 30) Pitt's statement is undoubtedly true of the ultimate effect of James's active and aggressive misogyny, but that effect was not instantaneous. Robert Weimann states:

When at the turn of the century and shortly after, division among the ruling classes gradually upset the much praised harmony of City, Court and Country, important sections of the theatre-going population were likely to remain unimpressed by either the case for puritanism or that of the prerogative of an increasingly conservative (not to say corrupt) court. For a few precious years, the 'public' (as distinct from the increasingly important 'private') playhouses not only defied the emerging social divisions but actually seemed to thrive on the richness of their contradictions. Consequently the popular dramatist continued to find in the theatre the support that allowed him a measure of independence of the rival ideologies. ("The Soul of an Age" 42, in Arnold Kettle (ed.), *Shakespeare in a Changing World* 17-42)

Velma Bourgeois Richmond writes:

Elizabeth dominated her age in countless ways, and there can be little doubt that the enhanced situation of woman owes much to her presence. One reason for the shift to a different kind of woman in Stuart tragedy may well be the hostility of her homosexual successor James I, who found female pretensions especially irritating and who was adept at finding witches, an evil type that is supposed to be predominantly feminine. However, since the Shakespearean audience was not exclusively aristocratic, there was a popular tradition that balanced courtly limitations. ("Shakespeare's Women" in *Midwest Quarterly* 19, 335)

13. Robert Ornstein says in *The Moral Vision of Jacobean Tragedy* that :

Particularly in the first Jacobean decade the drama was keenly sensitive to contemporary issues. On platform stages where fact and fantasy

intermingled, the spiritual and moral dramas of the age found oblique artistic expression. For a brief hour in the theater the demons that haunted the Jacobean artistic mind assumed a flesh and blood as well as poetic reality (24).

Elsewhere in the same work he writes:

It is striking that [dramatists] “discovered” the tragic heroine at the very time that serious interest was developing outside the drama in the place and role of women in society. When they dramatize the anguish of enforced or forbidden affections, Beaumont, Webster, Middleton, and Ford make clear the helplessness of women in a world ruled by men and masculine ideals. Their heroines long for freedom from the tyranny of family and convention; they are sacrificed at the altars of masculine “honor” and ambition. Of course the Jacobean playwrights are not social reformers. Just as Elizabethan patriotic fervor and anxiety gave impetus to the history play, so too, I think, Jacobean debate over the status of women suggested to the playwrights a fruitful subject for psychological investigation—the emotional drama of women restricted by the mores and conventions of society to a subservient and passive role, to a life of reaction rather than action...(172).

14. A comment by Cohen reflects the kind of ambiguity in the treatment of issues involving women that one finds in the drama. He says that:

Improvement in the actual conditions of women did not necessarily accompany these ideological shifts [discussed earlier in this chapter]. Nonetheless, the love marriage remained a contested ideal in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and accordingly a primary source of conflict in romantic comedy. On the one hand, married love could be a progressive step for women and men alike. On the other, the concluding matrimony of many a comedy reintegrates women into a family and society dominated by men, thereby alleviating male sexual, procreative, and emotional anxieties. In addition it constitutes a transference, diffusion, or suppression of conflict, designed to produce reconciliation (188).

What Cohen says here helps explain the dissatisfaction many modern readers and viewers feel at the ending of comedies such as *As You Like It*, *Twelfth Night* and certainly such dark comedies as *Measure For Measure* and *All's Well That Ends Well*, where superior women become the wives of men in varying ways and degrees less than they and even unworthy of them. What on earth, for example, was Sylvia, in *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, thinking when her lover Valentine offered her to Proteus who, moments before, had tried to rape her? Olivia in *Twelfth Night* of all Shakespeare's comic heroines finds perhaps in Sebastian the best partner, but ironically, she thinks she is marrying someone else. Some of the tragedies to be discussed herein reflect the difficulties, perhaps even the impossibilities, of such reconciliations as the comedies endeavor to establish. Just possibly, in the equivocal endings of his comedies Shakespeare himself was exposing the problems of marriage in his day.

15. Philip J. Finkelpearl in *Court and Country Politics in the Plays of Beaumont and Fletcher* goes so far as to question the effectiveness of Jacobean censorship saying that “It remains one of the greatest mysteries in Jacobean censorship that much more severe action was not taken against *The Maid's Tragedy*”, a play which in his

view is “as menacing to the institution of kingship as any in Jacobean drama” (199). Was the concluding couplet sufficient to pass it?



## **CHAPTER TWO. SHAKESPEARE: DESDEMONA AND CLEOPATRA**

In Desdemona and Cleopatra Shakespeare creates women of independent mind and will. Because they live in male dominated and frequently misogynist worlds, their independence has tragic consequences both for themselves and for the men with whom they are closely associated. Neither conforms to the culturally established stereotype or paradigm of woman, that is, to her culture's definition of womanhood or expectations of woman. Therefore, the men they love, Othello and Antony, cannot, until it is too late, appreciate or understand them. Furthermore, sensing these women as threats to their own masculine self-image, the men easily believe that the women betray them. Othello is easily persuaded that Desdemona's independence and self-confidence indicate a lustful nature which leads her to be unfaithful to him. Antony feels an often almost intolerable tension within himself between that part of him which is attracted to Cleopatra and that part of him that wants to play a major role in the world of Roman power politics. When he fails in that world, he blames Cleopatra and accuses her of betraying him. Both men, themselves somewhat exceptions to the norms of their cultures, were drawn initially, however, to these women by the independent spirit which made them exceptions to the cultural norm; but as inheritors of the cultural demand for women's subordination to masculine control, both men experience ambivalent feelings toward that self-reliance which initially attracted them.

The women, on the other hand, because of their autonomy and self-assurance, do not easily accommodate themselves to the traditionalist expectations of the men they love that they be totally subservient. Desdemona innocently and naively sees no conflict between her independent spirit and her role as wife; therefore she has no sense whatever that her support of Cassio's suit for the restoration of his lieutenantancy will cause Othello to become jealous. As queen and ruler in her own right, Cleopatra

experiences no tension between that role and her role as Antony's lover. Thus she is unsympathetic to the conflict Antony feels between being her lover and a Roman triumvir, a conflict which prevents his giving her the total dedication she desires of him. Much of the tragedy in *Othello*, *The Moor of Venice* and in *Antony and Cleopatra* arises from the tensions and conflicts between these self-confident women and the expectations of them generated by the male dominated society in the men in their lives. In their love relationships both Desdemona and Cleopatra expect their men to treat them as equals. The men, however, both Othello and Antony, tend to allow culturally conditioned attitudes to erode their initial respect for their chosen women's freedom from such conditioning. Not entirely conscious that they have been attracted to the exceptional qualities of these women, they show themselves less able than the women to escape the cultural stereotyping that would subordinate the women to them. Their sense of their masculinity being so firmly tied to cultural concepts, the two men find the women's independence of mind and spirit threatening. For Othello, Desdemona's self-assurance threatens his carefully and painfully built-up sense of his role as Venetian general to which his sense of self is so closely tied; for Antony, Cleopatra's autonomy and demand for commitment from him threatens the political and military career to which his sense of identity is also closely tied. In these two tragedies, Shakespeare explores both the tensions already beginning to be felt in his society between traditional attitudes toward women and the more liberal views of the humanists upon which some women were already beginning to act, and the discordant and tragic potential of that tension.

Some may argue that Desdemona is not a true tragic protagonist. However, *The Tragedy of Othello*, *The Moor of Venice* is so dominated by its antagonist that even the role of the eponymous protagonist Othello often seems secondary to Iago's.<sup>1</sup> The tragedy, nonetheless, is the Moor's, and his tragedy is intimately linked to his

relationship with Desdemona. The plot configuration emphasizes the destructive role of conventional attitudes as Desdemona figures importantly in the action, and her own decisions and acts help propel the action to its tragic outcome. She is not by her actions, however, as some have argued, morally responsible for that outcome. Desdemona's initial decision to elope with Othello contrary to the wishes of her father occasions Brabantio's rejection of her and, ironically, makes it easy for Iago to persuade Othello to see her as a whore. Iago's misogynist comment that "our General's wife is now our general" rings in our ears as Desdemona's decision to support Cassio in his bid to regain his lieutenantcy leads her to act in ways contrary to those traditionally expected of a dutiful and obedient wife. As she thus opens herself even further to the charge of promiscuity, she plays with tragic consequences to herself into Iago's scheme to arouse the Moor's jealousy. Nonetheless, because of the innocence of her motives and the good intentions behind all her actions, Desdemona retains the audience's sympathy, so that her death is at least as deeply moving as Othello's. Therefore, if not a true tragic protagonist, Desdemona is, nevertheless, a figure of tragic dimensions.

All the traditional and stereotypical images of woman cluster around Desdemona. To Cassio she is "the divine Desdemona" (2.1.73),<sup>2</sup> and the general picture of her created in the play is of a woman of surpassing beauty and impeccable virtue. Yet the first images applied to her are not Cassio's but Iago's, who draws on conventional views to equate her desire for and enjoyment of a sexual relationship with Othello with animal lust rather than human love. Thus, the textual imagery initially associates Desdemona with the traditional portrait of woman as profligate and wanton, an association that will ultimately condemn her to death. For Iago will use her own actions toward the Moor himself and toward Cassio as his "evidence" to persuade Othello that the widely held, culturally conditioned view of woman as debased applies to

Desdemona, making the “womanly virtues of love, sympathy, kind-heartedness and fidelity in friendship into the vice of insatiable lust” (Ranald 136).

From the outset, therefore, Desdemona unwittingly opens herself to attack on her fidelity and chastity, for in marrying Othello without her father’s permission, she has broken with social convention to follow instead the more liberal view of some humanists and reformers that children ought to have free choice of their marriage partners. Mary Beth Rose, in *The Expense of Spirit*, demonstrates, however, that the Reformers themselves became trapped in ambivalence in their vehemence against parentally enforced marriages and their inexplicable and contradictory view that children must not marry without parental consent (147). In a society dominated still by the older ideas and unwilling to commit itself fully to newer ones, such an action as Desdemona’s cannot escape conventional censure. To her father Brabantio, Desdemona is initially “jewel” (1.3.195) and “gentle mistress” (1.3.178), and has been, so he thinks, the typical “chaste, silent and obedient” daughter prized by her society:

A maiden never bold of spirit,  
So still and quiet, that her motion  
Blushed at her self...

(1.3.94-96. Q1 lineation.)

It is inconceivable to him that his daughter, or any well brought up young Venetian woman, should love and willingly “Run from her guardage to the sooty bosom/ Of such a thing as” Othello (1.2.70-71) or marry “what she feared to look on,” (1.3.98). For her to have done so, black Othello from darkest, pagan Africa, must have “practis’d on her with foul charms.” (1.2.73) When, however, he learns from her own mouth that she has married Othello of her own volition, he disowns her, saying he “had rather adopt a child than get it” (1.3.191), accepts the *fait accompli* and reluctantly and grudgingly relinquishes her to Othello’s care.<sup>3</sup> Now he seems almost to believe that the witchcraft was Desdemona’s, practised on him to deceive him, to beguile him, to hide from him her true nature and true intent: “Look to her, Moor, have a quick eye to see:/ She has

deceiv'd her father, and may do thee." (1.3.292-293).<sup>4</sup> Rose suggests that Othello initially at least has a partial commitment to what she calls the heroics of marriage, marriage seen as "a perilous quest" (139), a commitment expressed when he says in response to Brabantio, "My life upon her faith." However, Iago, who seems to intuit that older ideas are deeply ingrained in the Moor's subconscious mind, will use Brabantio's words to break down Othello's faith in Desdemona. It is an easy step from Brabantio's "Look to her, Moor," to Iago's insinuation that she is like other Venetian women who "let God see the pranks/ They dare not show their husbands" (3.3.206-207). Thus, by following her heart in marriage and breaking with convention to elope with Othello, Desdemona almost immediately invites the conventionally minded to see her action as a major breach of decorum, and a symptom of basic female wantonness.

Although Brabantio does not accuse Desdemona of lust, Iago, on Cyprus, will draw from his words the implication that Desdemona's deviation from the norm of behavior make her a whore, and that her marriage to Othello was motivated solely by the lust which he has now begun to insinuate draws her to Cassio. Iago, whom Othello regards as both honest and more knowledgeable than he of Venetian society, draws on cultural stereotypes to make his case to Othello that Desdemona will act according to the standard behavior of her class. As an alien to that culture and in many ways ignorant of its practices, who has nonetheless absorbed many of its stereotypical attitudes, Othello is open to receive such calumny. When Othello demands that Iago "prove [his] love a whore" (3.3.365), he reveals how difficult it is to maintain an unconventional view of women. Thus the two men, her father and her husband, who ought to know Desdemona best come to judge her in terms of cultural stereotypes.<sup>5</sup> Ironically, it is the cynical Iago who is most aware how falsely the stereotype represents Desdemona.

To Cassio, on the other hand, Desdemona's beauty, high social status, and accomplishments make her a near goddess. His vision of her as "divine" is, however, as false in its own way as that presented to Othello by Iago. The conversation about her between the Lieutenant and the Ancient just prior to Cassio's dismissal from his lieutenancy, sharply contrasts their views:

*Iago.* ...she is sport for Jove.  
*Cassio.* She is a most exquisite lady.  
*Iago.* And I'll warrant her full of game.  
*Cassio.* Indeed she is a most fresh and delicate creature.  
*Iago.* What an eye she has! methinks it sounds a parley to provocation.  
*Cassio.* An inviting eye, and yet methinks right modest.  
*Iago.* And when she speaks, 'tis an alarm to love.  
*Cassio.* It is indeed perfection.  
*Iago.* Well, happiness to their sheets!... (2.3.16-36)

Whereas Iago here represents Desdemona as a potential wanton, Cassio almost completely disassociates her from her sexuality, a sexuality which in his mistress Bianca he finds attractive but at the same time demeaning and disgusting. His is the long-held male view that if a woman sleeps with a man, even if the initiative is his, she must be a slut. Cassio's understanding of Desdemona is closer to the truth than Iago's, but it arises from a limited understanding of her, for he regards her almost as the idealized woman of Renaissance Neo-Platonism.

Cassio himself, however, if he is "almost damn'd in a fair wife," as Iago claims (1.1.21), in having a mistress on Cyprus practises the double standard. Even if Iago's comment is to be explained as one of those details that Shakespeare occasionally provides and then forgets, Cassio's speech proclaims his attitude. The superficiality of Cassio's view of women appears in the fact that the play presents Bianca in a sympathetic light. Although Bianca provides him with a bit of off-duty pleasure, she is in his eyes merely a "caitiff", a "rogue", a "monkey", a "bauble" and a "perfum'd" "fitchew" or polecat whom to marry would indicate an "unwholesome" "wit" on his part (4.2.107-144).

The play, in fact, provides two interesting man-woman relationships which function as foils to that of Othello and Desdemona. Both, like the central one, show the male partner in an unfavorable light. Iago constantly maligns Emilia who, in spite of his treatment, remains faithful to him. (It is likely that we are meant to see Iago's contention that she has had an affair with Othello as the mere concocting of another justification for his attack on Othello. She herself denies it, and nothing else in the play supports Iago's accusation.) Cassio continually belittles Bianca who, even though a courtesan, genuinely loves him and shows both courage and integrity of character. Shakespeare's humanizing of a prostitute is another indication that this is a play which challenges the culturally transmitted view of women, showing that even a "fallen" woman can demonstrate those qualities praised in women conspicuously virtuous. Both Emilia and Bianca demonstrate heroism, Emilia in defying both Othello and Iago to defend Desdemona's honor, and Bianca in going to Cassio's aid, after Iago has wounded him from behind in the dark, when Lodovico and Gratiano hang back. Neely says of the play's three women that they show "affection, good sense, and energy" but "fail to transform or be reconciled with the men", Othello, Iago and Cassio, who "persistently misconceive the women" (127), judging them, not according to what they are, but by cultural preconceptions which the women, in their own different ways, demonstrate to be totally inadequate.

In *The Stranger in Shakespeare*, Fiedler notes that Cassio and Iago "talk the same language" in speaking of Bianca, and disagree "only on the subject of a high lady" like Desdemona (156). Though, in a sense they represent the opposite poles of their society, they fundamentally agree on and accept the cultural stereotypes about the nature of women. Cassio's contrasting attitudes toward Desdemona and Bianca clearly show the era's bi-polarized understanding or vision of woman, the virgin goddess versus the whore, of which Desdemona becomes the victim. As Rose comments, Cassio's and

Iago's dialogue shows "how readily Cassio's idiom of sentimental exaltation can be translated into Iago's idiom of misogynistic contempt" (135). How easy, therefore, it is for Othello, who similarly idealizes Desdemona, to be led to the belief that his wife is a whore. Othello, like Cassio, places Desdemona on that pedestal from which it is so easy for a woman to be toppled.

Like many women of the Renaissance and like many of Shakespeare's heroines, Desdemona is a woman of very considerable accomplishment. Rosalind quotes Caesar's *Commentaries* and reads both Phebe's letter and Orlando's verses, and, though flattered by the latter, has the literary judgment to recognize that they are doggerel. Both Olivia and Maria, her lady-in-waiting, in *Twelfth Night* read and write, and Viola sings (though in fact we never hear her do so) and is able to respond in kind to Sir Toby's French. In *Hamlet* Laertes requests Ophelia to write him while he is in France. Maria, though a prankster, is not a really vicious person; all the others are models of virtue. Shakespeare appears, therefore, to reject the common notion that education will lead women "down the primrose path to dalliance".

Desdemona also demonstrates, in contradiction to the views of such conservative writers as Vives that much education was dangerous in a woman, that a woman may be accomplished and also be sexually pure and a faithful wife. Othello twice remarks on her achievements, saying that she is "free of speech, sings plays and dances well" (3.3.189), and that she is "delicate with her needle, an admirable musician" (4.1.183). These accomplishments suggest at least the possibility that she has received a solid, though not necessarily a humanist, education, and her general demeanor and manner suggest an educated woman. Othello appears initially to have admired Desdemona for these accomplishments and for her strength of mind and character, as well as for her compassion for his sufferings and for her chastity and purity, of which initially he has no



doubt. He had tried to see Desdemona's accomplishments positively, somewhat in the light of the views of Erasmus and More, regarding her accomplishments as enhancements to her virtues and her virtues as enhancements to her accomplishments:

'tis not to make me jealous  
To say my wife is fair, feeds well, loves company,  
Is free of speech, sings, plays, and dances well;  
Where virtue is, these are more virtuous: (3.3.187-190).

Yet in almost the same breath that he initially recognizes that Desdemona's accomplishments are not grounds for jealousy, he admits the possibility that he could be made to doubt her fidelity, and were that to happen, his love would evaporate:

I'll see before I doubt, when I doubt prove,  
And on the proof, there is no more but this:  
Away with love and jealousy. (3.3.194-196)

Later, her achievements are turned to her detriment. Traditional stereotypes enable Iago to turn Desdemona's strengths and virtues against her, to "turn her virtues into pitch" in Othello's mind. When in his imagination she has lost her virtue, her accomplishments intensify his vision of her wickedness. He has a lingering sense that those accomplishments are, or ought to be, more appropriate to virtue:

so delicate with her needle, an admirable musician, O she will  
sing the savageness out of a bear; of so high and plenteous wit and  
invention!  
*Iago.* She's the worse for all this.  
*Othello.* A thousand thousand times: and then of so gentle a  
condition!  
*Iago.* Ay, too gentle.  
*Othello.* Ay, that's certain, but yet the pity of it, Iago: O Iago, the pity  
of it. (4.1.183-192.)

The view that a woman can have a healthy sexual appetite and be accomplished and at the same time be pure, faithful and loving has failed to penetrate the consciousness of any significant male character in the play, certainly not Cassio's nor, in any meaningful way, Othello's. They are unable to understand the concept of chastity as the dedication of sexuality to married love espoused by Protestantism and celebrated

poetically by Spenser in “Epithalamion” and *The Faerie Queene*. Thus both Desdemona’s admirers and detractors judge this emancipated Renaissance woman on the basis of the older, narrow cultural stereotypes.

Like Iago and Cassio, Othello also holds the accepted attitude that marriage limits and constricts male freedom and power. Cassio refers to Desdemona as “our great captain’s captain”(2.3.74), and Iago counsels Cassio to regain his office and Othello’s favor by courting Desdemona’s assistance because “Our general’s wife is now the general” (2.3.305-306). These remarks imply that by marriage, Othello has given up control of his life and become a puppet manipulated by his wife. Othello himself, on the very night of his marriage, tells Iago:

But that I love the gentle Desdemona,  
I would not my unhoused free condition  
Put into circumscription and confine  
For the sea’s worth. (1.2.25-28)

Later on the same night, Othello defends Desdemona’s wish to accompany him to Cyprus by disavowing any possibility that her presence there will lead him into “disports” and neglect of duty:

And heaven defend your good souls that you think  
I will your serious and great business scant,  
For she is with me;...no, when light-winged toys,  
And feather’d Cupid, foils with wanton dullness  
My speculative and active instruments,  
That my disports corrupt and taint my business,  
Let housewives make skilletts of my helm,  
And all indign and base adversities  
Make head against my reputation. (1.3.266-274)

He expects that he can subordinate his role as husband to his public role as governor and military commander of the island and that his wife will behave in accordance with traditional patterns as his inferior and subordinate, allowing him to get on with being the general. The implication is that he will not let sexual pleasure interfere with duty. As Rose argues, although Othello has some inkling of and commitment to the heroics

of marriage—for that reason Desdemona is his “fair warrior” —he still clings to and is more deeply committed to the older heroism of what Rose calls the “disappearing past”, the heroics of public life which treats “women and eros either as potentially destructive or as subliminally idealized, but always as peripheral” to the action of the male hero (9-10). Othello, in his love for Desdemona, like Tamberlaine in his love for Zenocrate, “recognizes the dangerous potential for the defeat of his heroic military ambitions” (Rose 107). Unlike Tamberlaine, however, Othello is unable fully to subordinate his love to his ambition. “From the point of view of the heroism of action, his tragedy emerges from unsuccessful repression: desire proves more central to him, marriage more necessary, than such heroism will allow” (Rose 134). So when he believes his love is gone, he also believes his military career is gone:

O now for ever  
Farewell the tranquil mind, farewell content:  
Farewell the plumed troop, the big wars,  
That makes ambition virtue:...  
Farewell, Othello's occupation's gone! (3.3.353-356, 363, cf. Rose 132)

Yet, Othello seems initially to have been at least open to the vision of Desdemona's full sharing in his career. In supporting Cassio's suit for the restoration of his lieutenancy, Desdemona implies that prior to the marriage, Othello had treated her as an equal and that she felt free to criticize him. She says:

What? Michael Cassio  
That came a wooing with you, and so many a time  
When I have spoke of you dispraisingly,  
Hath ta'en your part, to have so much to do  
To bring him in? (3.3.71-75)

In their days of courtship not only did Desdemona feel free to criticize Othello, but he, too, vigorously protested her criticisms. These details suggest a relationship that was based on a kind of dialogue and exchange of views on the basis of a recognized equality. Having accepted Othello's seeming openness at face value, Desdemona expects that he

will allow her the same freedom when she is his wife. In fact his greeting her on Cyprus as his “fair warrior” suggests such an implicit equality.

Once his jealousy has been aroused, however, Othello falls back on ingrained stereotypical patterns. By the time Desdemona makes her appeal on Cassio’s behalf, the seeds of distrust have already been sown by Iago’s “I like not that” (3.3.35.) and “Indeed” (3.3.102.) Adopting the conventional view of wife as chattel, Othello refuses to reason or to argue with her over Cassio’s dismissal, but responds to her appeal on Cassio’s behalf in the manner of an indulgent father to a pampered favorite child: “I will deny thee nothing.” Dash claims that

In *Othello*, Shakespeare is dealing with two people who have known and loved each other for some time. Until they marry, the tragedy does not occur because until that time they do not have to conform to any set roles; they function as two individuals. With marriage, they receive a new set of rules, new patterns of behavior (109-110).

Left to themselves, the couple might conceivably have developed rules and patterns of their own, but, subjected to Iago’s machinations, Othello adheres rigidly to the conventional patterns of thought because the traditional stereotype of woman seems to have been confirmed for him by Desdemona’s supposed adultery with Cassio. In her ignorance of what is happening, Desdemona retains her former manner as she attempts to share and examine concerns which she feels touch them mutually. Recognizing Othello’s condescending tone, Desdemona retorts:

Why, this is not a boon,  
’Tis as I should entreat you wear your gloves;  
Or feed on nourishing dishes, or keep you warm,  
Or sue to you, to do a particular profit  
To your own person: nay when I have a suit  
Wherein I mean to touch your love indeed,  
It shall be full of poise and difficulty,  
And fearful to be granted.

(3.3.77-84)

Desdemona implies that Othello has been too severe with Cassio who acknowledges his fault and wishes to make amends. Arguing that his fault is not, to the common, as distinct from the military, mind, a serious one, especially now that “our wars are done” (cf. Dash 112), Desdemona says,

i'faith, he's penitent  
 And yet his trespass, in our common reason,  
 (Save that, they say, the wars must make examples  
 Out of our best) is not almost a fault  
 To incur a private check. (3.3.65-68)

She expects Othello to recognize that her reasoning is sound and not an undue attempt to influence his military judgment with irrelevant feminine concerns. What she urges, in other words, is good sense, and she invites him, in dealing with Cassio, to draw on the humanity which she feels is the essence of his nature. She makes a powerful and surprisingly modern case for the free exchange of ideas by equal partners.

On the other hand, if she had wanted a favor, she makes it clear that she knows how to get it. She is so confident in the strength of her relationship with Othello, she implies in her assurances to Cassio, that she feels she can wheedle and even play the shrew with her husband if need be:

If I do vow a friendship, I'll perform it  
 To the last article; my lord shall never rest,  
 I'll watch him tame, and talk him out of patience;  
 His bed shall seem a school, his board a shrift,  
 I'll intermingle everything he does  
 With Cassio's suit. (2.3.21-26)

Without Iago's interposition, she might have been safe in behaving in this manner. Once his jealousy is aroused, however, Othello can no longer accommodate the superior qualities that made her his “fair warrior” or admit the kind of equality and partnership the compliment implies. Prompted by his jealousy, Othello retreats into the patterns and paradigms which his adopted culture has taught him are normative. He now sees his wife as a wheedling, manipulative female seeking favors for her lover.

Desdemona, however, shows herself an extraordinary and exceptional woman in her transcendence of the issue of Othello's color.<sup>6</sup> Both she and Othello had recognized that despite his willingness to entertain Venice's great general as a house guest, Brabantio would not have approved of their marrying. Venice had not provided from among its own sons a fitting mate for a woman of Desdemona's unusual qualities. In comparison to Venice's "curl'd darlings"—imagery suggesting effeminacy—Othello, by his courage, his power to lead, and his dignity, appears to her a far more worthy man than any other whom she has met. Furthermore, his human vulnerability seems to cry out for her particular strengths.<sup>7</sup> Stanley Cavell argues that when she says she "saw Othello's visage in his mind" Desdemona says far more than that she is able to overlook Othello's color; rather she is saying, "I see Othello as he sees himself." She "understands his blackness as he understands it, as the expression of his mind" and "As the color of a romantic hero...the color of one with enchanted powers and magical protection, but above all it is the color of one of purity, of a perfect soul." (35) Cavell may overstate the case somewhat, but clearly Desdemona saw Othello as out of the ordinary. In a sense, it might almost be said that this daughter of the Venetian patriciate saw black Othello, not as a member of an inferior race, but as her equal. She therefore believed that in committing herself to him she would experience no loss of selfhood.

A comparison between Desdemona's disregard for convention, and Ophelia's too willing obedience and conformity in *Hamlet* is revealing. By conforming to convention and obeying her father's command to avoid Hamlet, Ophelia becomes a pawn in the chess game Polonius and the King play with the Prince to uncover his secret; thereby, in effect, she betrays the man she loves. Even worse, because she loves Hamlet, in obeying her father she betrays herself and compromises her own integrity. In contrast, Desdemona's integrity demands that she follow her heart rather than social convention.

However, because she does not know how deeply conventional Othello is, ultimately, despite her courage in following her own inclinations, she unwittingly places herself in thrall. Even her acceptance of Othello's blackness will be turned against her.

Desdemona, in fact, unconsciously betrays herself before the Venetian Signory when she says:

My noble father,  
I do perceive here a divided duty:  
To you I am bound for life and education,  
My life and education both do learn me  
How to respect you, you are lord of all my duty,  
I am hitherto your daughter: but here's my husband:  
And so much duty as my mother show'd  
To you, preferring you before her father,  
So much I challenge, that I may profess,  
Due to the Moor my lord. (1.3.180-189)

In acknowledging Othello as her lord, she partly recognizes the rules and patterns of wifely submission, and so is partly compliant with Othello in defining herself as submissive wife. So strong, however, is her confidence in Othello that she does not recognize that by so submitting herself she violates a central part of her nature. Desdemona's understanding of marriage seems to correspond to that of the more liberal reformers who expected wives in their public roles to submit to their husbands, but urged husbands in the home to treat their wives as their Christian equals. Because women possess rational souls equal in all respects to those of men, husbands are enjoined to take their wives' views into account and to treat them as partners . Cornelius Agrippa wrote, in *A Treatise of the Nobility of Women*, that "Woman hath that same mind man hath, that same reason and speech.... Between man and woman by substance of soul, one hath no higher preeminence of nobility above the other, but both of them have equal dignity and worthiness" (Sig. A ii verso. Spelling modernized). With a self-conception based on these ideas, Desdemona's trust in Othello leads her to believe that marriage to him would not compromise her independent nature. She

expects that Othello will recognize that she has both the ability and the right to reason with him as his equal.

The disparity between her expectation and Othello's understanding of the role of submissive wife leads Desdemona unknowingly to contribute to his already aroused suspicions. In the process she allows her own ambivalence to turn her into the opposite of the kind of woman whom we see at the beginning. In her final acts, as Ranald notes, she conforms to requirements set out in the conduct books and, becoming Patient Griselda, takes blame on herself (150). Though not without first protesting that she did not deserve to be struck by him, she humbly obeys Othello's peremptory dismissal, prompting Lodovico's approving exclamation, "Truly, an obedient lady" (Cf. 4.1.236, 242, 243)—in other words, a conventionally submissive wife. Alone in her chamber with Emilia, she wonders whether she has committed some "ignorant sin" (4.2.72) which has turned Othello against her; then thinking that perhaps she has been falsely accused, she cannot believe that there has been anything in her conduct on which to base even a false charge of infidelity:

'Tis meet I should be used so, very well;  
How have I been behav'd, that he might stick  
The smallest opinion on my greatest abuse. (4.2.109-111)

Ranald states that

The very transparency of her virtue blinds her to the possible implications of some of her previous actions as she discusses [with Emilia after the "Brothel" scene] the possibility of having offended Othello, trying too late to placate rather than cross him. She looks at her own conduct, vainly trying to find the "ignorant sin" which might have caused his accusation of whoredom (149-150).

Because whatever offence she may have committed has been so small, she believes that she will regain his love by receiving him into her bed once again as a submissive bride.



It is significant that at the very point at which Desdemona declines into the role of a conventional wife, Shakespeare has Emilia argue, very much along the lines of Jane Anger, that women's infidelity represents a reaction to their husbands' promiscuity and to the double standard that allows men a freedom which is denied to women. Though in Shakespeare's source, Othello has had an affair with Emilia, the play provides no grounds on which to suspect her of any misconduct. Though Iago treats her so badly as to provide ample motivation for Emilia to be unfaithful, in fact, throughout the action her conduct has been that of the submissive, obedient wife. Coming, therefore, as it does at the moment of Desdemona's apparent submission from one who has remained faithful and obedient despite provocation, Emilia's defence of everywoman offers a very powerful counterbalance which undercuts any implication that Desdemona, by her submission, is now acting rightly and that in her earlier spirited self-confidence and independent-mindedness she had been behaving wrongly.

In the final analysis, what has defeated Desdemona is Othello's retention of the typical male attitudes toward women. Exceptional in many other ways, Othello is not exceptional in his sexual attitudes. Desdemona had begun her marriage, however, confident both in herself and in Othello's good will and nobility. As general to the Venetian Republic, Othello had rejected sexual desire as destructive to the heroic career of a public servant. Desdemona, taking the initiative in the courtship, had awakened his love and his sexual desire. The only partly rejected and half-recognized fear of eros and distrust of human, and especially female, sexuality contributes to Othello's readiness to believe Iago. Iago draws out that fear to undermine his love. For Othello, having seen Desdemona's love more as a compassionate response to his sufferings—"She lov'd me for the dangers I had pass'd,/ And I lov'd her that she did pity them." (1.3.167-168)—fails to appreciate that her love also involves a sexual and emotional response to the man who had endured the sufferings. Inga-Steena Ewbank

says that his account before the Venetian senate of their courtship suggests that he was really in love with his own fantasy of her, believing her love for him the result of his “verbal persuasion,” a response to his stories of adventure and adversity (227). Therefore, as Cavell says, he is shocked to find her a real flesh-and-blood woman whom, therefore, he can see only as a wanton. Like Cassio, Othello has idealized Desdemona, seeing her as Divine. Iago, however, *knows* that she is “flesh and blood”, with normal and healthy desire, and perverts that knowledge to make it appear that because Desdemona is flesh and blood she is wanton and lascivious. When Desdemona’s sexuality is presented to him in that way, “Othello cannot bear what Iago knows” (40). Just as, in Rose’s words, Cassio’s “sentimental exaltation” is readily “translated into Iago’s idiom of misogynistic contempt”, so too Othello’s idealism can be easily perverted.

Desdemona’s supreme self-confidence and unashamed sexuality identify her with the humanist and more liberal protestant view of a wife. She proclaims without shame that, as Neely says, she loves Othello for both his body and his mind (116) with a healthy physical passion about which she is quite forthright:

That I love the Moor, to live with him,  
My downright violence, and scorn of fortunes,  
May trumpet to the world.... (1.3.248-250)

Therefore, she refuses to stay behind in Venice while Othello goes to the wars:

...if I be left behind,  
A moth of peace, and he go to the war,  
The rites for which I love him are bereft me,  
And I a heavy interim shall support,  
By his dear absence; let me go with him. (1.3.255-259)

Henderson and McManus note that even in our supposedly sexually liberated age, “few new brides would confess to sexual desire before the English Parliament or the United States Senate” (55). As Rose notes, by her use of a “quasi-military idiom”, Desdemona “emphatically draws together public and private domains” (137-138). However,

contrary to the accepted “wisdom” and to the prevailing attitude of her Venetian compatriots, Shakespeare presents her sexuality as in no way compromising her virtue.

Othello’s contrary view of sexuality appears in his speech supporting his wife’s request to accompany him to Cyprus. In saying that he had married Desdemona because her compassion for his sufferings had moved his love, he subordinates her role in his life to his military career, and denies that it was sexual desire that drew him to her. Therefore, the “potent, grave and reverend signors” need not worry for his governance of the island if his wife is with him:

I...beg it not  
 To please the palate of my appetite,  
 Nor to comply with heat, the young effects  
 In me defunct, and proper satisfaction,  
 But to be free and bounteous of her mind;  
 And heaven defend your good souls that you think  
 I will your serious business scant,  
 For she is with me;.... (1.3.261-268)

It is possible that he speaks this way for the benefit of the Venetian senate, for on Cyprus, when he believes Desdemona has played him false, he feels her supposed betrayal in the depth of his being. Still, he seems never to share Desdemona’s positive view of sexual pleasure as of the essence of marriage. His words here imply that he sees it as merely one of the “perks”, a kind of permitted self-indulgence, or casual diversion from more serious matters, and as a temptation to dalliance. For him “the public and the private domains” are separate and distinct. Stockholder comments that Othello’s defence “renders [Desdemona’s] role in his life demeaning to rather than confirming of his manliness” and that “By playing to the Venetian view he maintains the split between his self-image and his passions” (88). Furthermore, he demeans and diminishes Desdemona’s sexuality, and, in fact, her very womanhood. He sees her role as comforting him in his distress, but not as being directly involved in the life that creates

that distress. He never gains anything like Desdemona's view of sexuality as the expression of a relationship of mutual love between equals.

Furthermore, his words "corrupt" and "taint" hint, in fact, that he sees sexual intercourse as something obscene. Desdemona's understanding of human nature and her understanding of marriage as a sexual partnership posits a modern standard of psychological health. Her husband's attitudes, however, correspond more to those of Augustine and the medieval theologians. Randal, in fact, suspects, on the basis of his remarks to Emilia in the "Brothel" Scene, that Othello's only previous intimate contact with women—his life having been spent almost exclusively in military camps—had been in real brothels (cf. 147-148).

Clearly, Othello has too thoroughly imbibed the ideology of his adopted culture that human sexuality in general and female sexuality in particular is a dangerous temptation leading to the perversion, rather than to the fulfillment, of one's humanity and so is, from the beginning, prone to credit the accusations Iago will make against Desdemona. The relationship between Othello and Desdemona, thus, is founded on an unexamined and fundamental conflict of understanding that makes their relationship vulnerable from its inception.

Through Desdemona Shakespeare suggests that there should be no conflict between personal wholeness, which includes a healthy sexual desire, and the role of wife. In this way, he challenges the traditional view that woman's sexuality is inevitably lascivious and so must be severely constrained. The culture of Renaissance Europe, however, was finally unable to free itself from its legacy of medieval attitudes toward sexuality. It too readily judged women in general by its ingrained cultural stereotypes,

just as Othello, who has accepted and internalized the attitudes of European culture, judges Desdemona in particular.

Part of the problem lay in the fact that Renaissance humanists, with few exceptions, were unable fully to free themselves from traditional attitudes. They urged that women be educated, but offered little scope for the educated woman other than to be a wife more able, by her education, to please her husband. Though they also urged husbands to be more kindly disposed to their wives, most of the humanists argued for no fundamental changes in the social structure. The Reformers, too, were caught in the same dilemma. The wife was her husband's equal, but she was also to be submissive and obedient. As Rose notes:

Throughout the heroics of marriage is riddled with ironies and paradoxes that are continually inscribed but inconsistently acknowledged. Although they are everywhere present, most of the unresolved logical discrepancies center on the issue of equality between spouses and the corollary tenet of wifely obedience and subordination (126).

The educated wife was, in the final analysis, no less subservient than the uneducated wife. Carole McKewin notes that "Shakespeare realized the full range and power of feminine identity, but he was also aware that even a brilliant woman had to modulate her independence to the mores of his own age" (20).<sup>8</sup> The same was true in the matter of freedom of choice: children were free to choose their own partners but they must not marry without parental consent.

Thus the continued contradiction between ideas of woman's freedom and equality and the demands that as wife she be subservient to her husband turn the qualities that make Desdemona such a remarkable woman into defects rather than assets, into "pitch" rather than virtue. *The Tragedy of Othello* is almost equally the tragedy of Desdemona who tried to reconcile the traditional role of the wife with the woman of accomplishment, independence and strength of mind and character. Her failure was not

a failure of character, but one of assuming too much of the society in which she lived and of the man she married. She fails to recognize that neither her husband nor her society and culture had really absorbed and accepted new ideas and so were unready for her kind of woman. The play suggests that, until it has also developed males who can appreciate mature, cultivated women, there is little point in a society's urging women to develop their inner potential.

The social conflict also constitutes Desdemona's inner conflict. She has tried and failed to reconcile two conflicting positions, that of the woman of independence and personal autonomy with that of the obedient and submissive wife, and falls back finally on the latter attitude.<sup>9</sup> Her momentary revival at the end, wherein she blames herself for her own death and appears to forgive her "kind lord" Othello, is the ultimate assertion of her submission and surrender. It is her admission of defeat, but at the same time reveals the self-destructiveness of the conventional stereotype. At the conclusion, Emilia, who has up to that point been an entirely obedient wife to a husband who despises her, even committing the theft he has demanded of her and then remaining silent about it to Desdemona's detriment, in the face of an outrage she can no longer accept, manifests a courageous spirit in denouncing both Othello and Iago. Especially when the part is played by a fine actress, Emilia's final outrage can "steal the show." Perhaps Shakespeare in this way gives dramaturgical demonstration to Desdemona's defeat. Yet the "reward" of Emilia's courage is also death. Bianca, too, Cassio's mistress who has also shown great courage, in her last appearance is led off to prison, her ultimate fate left unresolved, but with a strong suggestion that it will not be a happy one. Emilia's rebellion which results in her death, and Bianca's unsuccessful endeavor to rise above her condition, and especially Desdemona's final submission, which fails to make atonement for her previous boldness or save her from death, all reflect the unhappy circumstances of women in a society that has not yet learned to accept their

full humanity and grant them equality with its male members, a society that speaks equivocally, encouraging women to develop their full human potential while at the same time denying that potential any real scope. The play reveals the potentially tragic consequences to women of Renaissance society's failure or refusal to resolve the issues that it has raised about women's nature and role.

Like Desdemona, Cleopatra is also a woman of rich and complex character whom the males of her world cannot understand and whom they persist in trying to force into conformity to their stereotypes of womanhood. More so than with Desdemona, Cleopatra is associated with conflicting images of divinity, with both Isis and Venus, and therefore with both fecundity and harlotry. Until recently, most criticism has tended to see Cleopatra as a courtesan, but a "magnificent" one, "a creature of gaiety, instinct and passion with few if any higher feelings than the enjoyment of the moment" who, because she is unique among woman, "can defy all normal rules of propriety and morality" (G. B. Harrison in Shakespeare, *The Complete Works*, 1222). Perhaps following Coleridge,<sup>10</sup> A. C. Bradley, in his well-known and in many ways still relevant 1909 lecture "Shakespeare's 'Antony and Cleopatra,'" sees her as the woman who "ruins a great man" but whose inner "spirit of air and fire...glorifies the arts and the rages which in another would merely disgust or amuse us" (Signet *Antony and Cleopatra* 238, 239-240). Like Bradley, critics frequently have seen Cleopatra as the seducer, the betrayer, and the destroyer whose seduction, betrayal and destruction of Antony we forgive, or even overlook, because she herself is so magnificent. More recently, however, several critics, not exclusively feminists, have challenged that interpretation.

Critics often note that Shakespeare in *Antony and Cleopatra* followed his source, in this instance Plutarch, more closely than in almost any other play. Bradley, for example quotes Coleridge: "There is not one [historical play, as Coleridge designates it]

in which he has followed history so minutely..." (218). Interestingly, Bradley suggests that Coleridge's assertion "might well be disputed", perhaps on the grounds that Shakespeare builds Plutarch's minor figure Ahenobarbus into the major character Enobarbus, and that he more sharply delineates Octavius Caesar. Critics, however, have tended to adopt the negative, unflattering portrait of Cleopatra that is found in Plutarch and reflected in the views of many of the play's Roman characters (See Dash 212 and *passim*), rather than to see her as Shakespeare presents her.<sup>11</sup> Despite recognizing that Shakespeare, even though he adheres relatively closely to its basic outline, does not slavishly follow his source, Bradley did not see that Shakespeare portrays Cleopatra as a much more complex and ambiguous character than Plutarch's sexual enchantress and destroyer of Antony.

Cleopatra is and represents something very different from Rome. As the personification of Egypt, she represents an alternative system of values. Bradley, whose interest is primarily in Antony and who sees the play as essentially (though not exclusively) *his* tragedy, says that Cleopatra is both Antony's "play-fellow, and yet a great queen" (233). In "Women's Fantasy of Manhood" (*SQ* 20, 1969), D. W. Harding notes in reference to her participation at Actium that:

Cleopatra, supremely, if not exaggeratedly feminine in her personal life, is also a ruler having powers and responsibilities like those of men rulers with whom she shares the world. Antony carries the main responsibility for the war, but he lacks full power; Cleopatra can insist upon entering the man's world, though she can no more stand the stress than Lady Macbeth could use the dagger herself (251).

Feminist critics may object to Harding's reference to her as "exaggeratedly feminine," but would agree with his recognition of her political role, a secondary emphasis, perhaps, in the play, but present and important nonetheless.<sup>12</sup> Cleopatra herself asserts both her sexuality and her royalty and sees no conflict between them. In part, Cleopatra's tragedy arises from the fact that the male-dominated world cannot accept



that royalty might be combined with an assertive sexuality. Her political role is seen as an affront and ignored while she is judged by the stereotypes of womanhood: temptress, seducer and emasculator.

Though her political role is kept largely in the background of the play, Cleopatra is a monarch, head of the Egyptian nation, and on occasion, particularly at Actium, she asserts her political role. Shakespeare presents her primarily, however, as the embodiment and personification of Egypt which represents values in conflict with those of Rome which stands for law, order, discipline, rationality, and political power. Such are the qualities embodied in the coldly efficient, unheroic, Machiavellian Octavius Caesar who symbolizes Rome as Cleopatra symbolizes Egypt. There was, however, another Rome which emphasized somewhat different values, and of that Rome, Antony is the representative. Whereas Caesar, the efficient, often ruthless ruler of the Mediterranean world, stands for Rome as it has become, Antony symbolizes an older, more heroic Rome, characterized by something of that plenitude and perfection of virtues called magnificence which are embodied in Prince Arthur in Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*. Although one might argue that in Antony the magnificence has gone a bit seedy, yet there is enough of a residue of the old heroic Roman virtues in Antony to make him dissatisfied with Caesar's redefining of Rome and resonate to Cleopatra. Although Antony is as politically ambitious as the almost heartlessly cold Caesar, he is, in contrast, of a warm, passionate nature. Although for political motives he marries Caesar's sister Octavia who "is of a holy, cold and still conversation", she cannot make him happy. Though, as Menas says, many a man would "have his wife so," Enobarbus recognizes Mark Antony "is not so" and "He will to his Egyptian dish again" (See 2.6.119-123).

Antony will indeed return, but Cleopatra should not be seen, as many have seen her, from Enobarbus's often clear-sighted but one-sided viewpoint. As Dash notes: "Because [Enobarbus] praises [Cleopatra's] 'infinite variety' as a woman, we believe him an objective commentator. But Enobarbus misdirects us if we identify with his point of view rather than listen to the characters themselves" (212). Enobarbus himself recognizes at the end that, though he has accurately judged Antony's failures, he has failed to recognize the greatness and nobility he still possessed despite them. We should be wary, therefore, of seeing Enobarbus as a choric figure who represents the views of the author. Enobarbus, Dash notes, denigrates Cleopatra as much as, if not more so than, Philo at the outset. Cleopatra is much more than just an "Egyptian dish."

However, Enobarbus's references to Venus in his description of Cleopatra's arrival at Cydnus do point up the Queen's sexual allure:

For her own person,  
 It beggared all description: she did lie  
 In her pavilion—cloth of gold, of tissue—  
 O'er picturing that Venus where we see  
 The fancy outwork nature. (2.2.197-201)

So does Caesar's description of her in "th' habiliments of the goddess Isis" in his account of Antony's behavior on his return to Egypt (cf. 3.6.17). That allure is confirmed by Antony's return to her after his sojourn in Rome and his political marriage to Octavia. Cleopatra attempts to use her sexuality to her advantage when, for example, she instructs Charmian to deliver contradictory messages to Antony as he prepares to depart for Rome:

If you find him sad,  
 Say I am dancing; if in mirth, report  
 I am sudden sick. (1.3.3-5)

On this point Linda Fitz (Woodbridge) comments that Cleopatra is "almost unique among Shakespeare's female characters in her use of feminine wiles" in order to "remain fascinating" to the man she loves. She adds that "while Shakespeare may

disapprove of feminine wiles, he understands why Cleopatra feels...that she must practice them: she is getting old." She says she is "with Phoebus' amorous pinches black,/ And wrinkled deep in time" (1.5.28-29). Woodbridge adds that "Shakespeare understood that women, unlike men, are valued only when they are young and beautiful" so that Cleopatra "has adopted desperate means to compensate, by being fascinating, for the ravages of age" (299-301). The protagonist of the Sonnet which begins

That time of year thou mayst in me behold  
When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang  
Upon those boughs that shake against the cold,

might argue that the problem is not always exclusive to women, but in general, however, Woodbridge is probably right. It should be noted, however, that in this one instance where the Queen attempts to use her wiles, she is unsuccessful, for contrary to her hopes, Antony, "Roman thoughts" weighing heavily on his political conscience, frees himself from his "dotage" and departs for Rome. Normally Cleopatra is quite straightforward, but here she is desperate, trying to prevent Antony from leaving Egypt. She nevertheless demonstrates here her versatility and her self-control which enable her to adapt to every situation and to turn everything to her own advantage.

The Romans, however, cannot appreciate the aspect of Cleopatra's sexuality that the play emphasizes and which makes her fascinating to Antony. What for the Romans make her merely a *femme fatale*, also make her, as Enobarbus notes, a life-affirming energy which transforms her "wiles" into something more. She is associated with Venus, goddess of love, but also with Isis, the restorer of Osiris. She is, also, the "serpent of old Nile" (1.5.25), who symbolizes fertility as does the Nile itself whose mud breeds life both for "the seedsman" who "Upon the slime and ooze scatters his grain" and for "Your serpent of Egypt" and "your crocodile" spontaneously generated "from your mud by the operation of your sun" (2.7.20-23, 26-37). As Dipak Nandy notes, "The Nile

is the symbol of the indissoluble unity of growth and decay, and twice [3.13; 5.2] Cleopatra links the Nile with herself”—a link which “seems to suggest an undercurrent of dynamic processes continuing beneath and through decay” (Kettle 187). In the Judaeo-Christian tradition, however, the serpent is associated with evil and temptation, and Venus was also seen as a voluptuary. Therefore, the symbols associated with Cleopatra suggest something of the ambiguity and complexity of her character. She is a temptation for Antony; at the same time she represents the potential for integration and nurture.

Criticism has tended to stress one aspect or the other of Cleopatra's character. For many, the implications of Enobarbus's description of Cleopatra at Cydnus are negative and destructive. Neely, on the other hand, argues that qualities traditionally condemned in other women as changeability and inconstancy are in Cleopatra “transmuted” to and praised as an “‘infinite variety’ that guarantees perpetual pleasure” (Neely 154). Even more positively, Dash maintains that Cleopatra is one who, if Antony would let her, might nourish his greatness (225). The desire of feminist critics to redress the balance is understandable, but the tendency of some of them to stress positive aspects of her nature to the exclusion of others is also to distort and oversimplify her character. Much of Cleopatra's fascination lies in her ambiguity. She is capable, as occasion warrants, of playing any of the roles traditionally ascribed to women—the coquette, the submissive female, the termagant, even the fickle female—but always at her own will and discretion. As Enobarbus notes, she always transforms the stereotype. Whatever role she plays, she plays it by choice, and she is always, or nearly always, in control of the situation.

Those who condemn Cleopatra often praise and pity Octavia, Caesar's sister. Because she is used as a pawn in the political chess game played by Antony and her

brother Octavius Caesar, Octavia can be seen as an object of pity. She represents the qualities traditionally valued in women, “beauty, wisdom, modesty” (2.2.241), and embodies all the Roman virtues. Octavia does not possess, however, Cleopatra’s vitality and “variety.” Furthermore, the juxtaposition of scenes with Octavia against scenes with Cleopatra works to the detriment of Octavia, showing that Octavia’s loyalty is equally divided between Caesar and Antony, or as Dash puts it, her “allegiance to her brother equals her allegiance to her husband” (226). In sharp contrast, Cleopatra remains totally concentrated on Antony in his absence.

In addition, Cleopatra’s loyalty and devotion to Antony contrast sharply with his disloyalty to her. Dash refers to Act 1, scene 5, and the first part, at least, of Act 2, scene 5 as Cleopatra’s “two separate scenes of longing and loneliness.” The second of these scenes contrasts her loyalty with the fact that Antony is “feeling very unattached to her...” (223). Before Antony’s departure for Rome, Cleopatra knows that Antony’s mind and heart are divided, only a part of them hers, the other part Rome’s. She realizes that in refusing to receive the messengers, Antony puts on an act for her, and that his pretense of indifference to Caesar and to Rome is denied by the very vehemence of his protests. She knows he really wants to hear the news from Rome:

Call in the messengers. As I am Egypt’s queen,  
Thou blushest, Antony, and that blood of thine  
Is Caesar’s homager: else so thy cheek pays shame  
When shrill-tongued Fulvia scolds. The messengers! (1.1.29-32)

Similarly seeing through the hyperbole of his protestation that they are such a “mutual pair” that Rome might “in Tiber melt”, and seeing herself as a fool for having become his mistress without first receiving any kind of commitment from him, she replies with blunt truthfulness:

Excellent falsehood!  
Why did he marry Fulvia, and not love her?  
I’ll seem the fool I am not; Antony  
Will be himself. (1.1.33, 36, 40-43)

In much the same way, Cleopatra had seen through the hypocrisy of his parting declaration of “his love, which stands/ An honourable trial”, responding:

So Fulvia told me.  
I prithee turn aside and weep for her,  
Then bid adieu to me, and say the tears  
Belong to Egypt. (1.3.74-78)

Because Antony had shed no tears for Fulvia’s death, Cleopatra questions the real depth of his feeling for herself, seeing his protestations as mere hyperbole, and implies that he is a hypocrite. Dash comments that in

Accusing him of dishonesty in his dealings with her, Cleopatra understands what Antony fails, at this early point to recognize—that their union is more than one of sexual attraction, that it represents... the best of love between man and woman...that is a love that includes companionship (220).

Cleopatra demonstrates the genuineness of her love at Antony’s departure, when the depth of her love renders her inarticulate, in sharp contrast to Antony’s forced hyperbolic bombast:

Courteous lord, one word:  
Sir, you and I must part, but that’s not it;  
Sir, you and I have lov’d, but there’s not it;  
That you know well, something it is I would,—  
O, my oblivion is a very Antony,  
And I am all forgotten. (1.3.86-91)

Here is no pretense; she plays no games, exercises no wiles. For one of the few times in the play, the Queen is not in control of her feelings; they are in control of her.

M. R. Ridley, in the Arden *Antony and Cleopatra* (29b-30a n. 90-1) interprets her words “I am every way forgotten,” as an affirmation that she virtually ceases to be or to know herself. So complementary are they to one another that she lacks an essential part of herself when Antony is not with her.<sup>13</sup> Long before Antony does, Cleopatra knows and understands the depth, importance and significance of their love, and she regrets that she is merely a mistress and not a wife. She has some sense that they might, indeed, be the mutual pair of Antony’s hyperbole, and she desires the fullness of relationship

that such mutuality ought to involve. When at her death she cries, "Husband, I come!" she claims the relationship she had always wanted with him.

Though others in the play see her only as a temptress, her role as such is linked to her desire for a closer deeper relationship with Antony. To some degree he shares that desire but feels it conflicts with his Roman and imperial ambitions. It is for this reason that Antony cannot really recognize or accept the depth of the relationship into which he has entered with Cleopatra. "Roman thoughts" constantly break into his consciousness, and he can see Cleopatra only as "this enchanting queen" who keeps him in "dotage" and away from what he sees as his true role.

The tension within Antony between the lover and the soldier-politician leads him into disloyalty to Cleopatra. Initially, it is not she who is disloyal to him. Antony's Roman side finds his Egyptian "dotage" shameful. Stockholder notes that he "crumbles before Caesar's mockery of his Egyptian life with Cleopatra" (154); and Dash notes that Antony "experiences perpetual conflict between self-realization as a soldier and a lover, between male bonds and heterosexual ones, between his own autonomy and his commitment to Cleopatra" (209), a commitment which he experiences as, in Stockholder's words, "loss of selfhood" (148). Cleopatra, on the other hand, in Neely's words, experiences no conflict "between her roles as Queen and lover...Her desire for Antony affirms rather than threatens her identity" (138). Dash notes further that "In *Antony and Cleopatra*, Shakespeare suggests that a woman of power has the unusual opportunity of combining her sexual and political selves" (209), an opportunity which Antony cannot grasp or appreciate.

Antony sees the world of Egypt and Cleopatra only as a place of dalliance and of "strong Egyptian fetters" (1.2.113). He rouses himself temporarily to reassert his

political and military role. As Stockholder notes, "To prevent the serpent that 'hath yet but life' from becoming poisonous, Antony flees to Rome, whose values overtly contrast to those of Egypt" (151). He soon realizes, however, that politics and a political marriage by themselves can never satisfy him. When the Soothsayer tells him,

Thy daemon, that thy spirit which keeps thee, is  
Noble, courageous, high unmatched,  
Where Caesar's is not; but near him, thy angel  
Becomes afeard, as being o'erpow'r'd... (2.3.18-21),

Antony realizes that he "hath spoken true" (2.3. 32), but he does not yet understand that the Soothsayer's words are, as Dash states, counsel of "departure from a life whose values conflict with one's own and espousal of a life where one's 'unmatchable spirit may flourish. In such a world, Cleopatra, far from inhibiting Antony's greatness, nourishes it" (225). A Caesar-dominated Rome destroys his genius, whereas Egypt under Cleopatra nurtures it. Antony, however, sees his return to the East as a return merely to the "pleasure" which he believes only Cleopatra can provide.

The struggle of the play is, at least partly, the effort to integrate the sexual-emotional and the heroic-political roles of the two characters. It is, as Neely says, to overcome the "antithesis", enunciated at the beginning by Philo and confirmed by Antony, between "love and heroism" (147). Even though he does not fully understand the nature of his relationship to Cleopatra, a reconciliation of sorts occurs on his return to Egypt between "heroic activity and love", so that, as Neely says further, he and Cleopatra

now play more mutual roles. Loving and fighting together their union is political, erotic, dynastic. Antony delegates power to Cleopatra, and she rules, gives audiences and fights (not well). She, in turn, now that Antony is fighting on her side, wholeheartedly supports his political and military goals instead of mocking them (145).

That reconciliation is implied by Antony's apparent willingness that the Queen should be present with him at the Battle of Actium and in her support of his decision to meet



Caesar in battle at sea, a decision which, in the play, in contrast to Plutarch's account, is wholly Antony's. Also, as Dash notes, Cleopatra is rightfully there as a monarch, as "president of [her] kingdom" (3.7.17) as she herself says to Enobarbus who denies her that right on the grounds that her "presence must needs puzzle Antony". (3.7.10) She rejoins that as Queen of Egypt "A charge we bear i' the war" (3.7.16). Antony, at least, seems to have some recognition of her sovereign right.

Cleopatra involves herself with Antony at Actium as his equal partner. However, it is not her participation in the battle that is disastrous, as Enobarbus feared it would be, but her retreat. But her venture into this traditionally masculine world of war suggests that she is not opposed to Antony's participation in the world of Roman politics *per se*, but only in so far as that life keeps him from entering fully into a life with her and excludes her from his. At all times she demands that Antony the Roman Triumvir accept her both as woman and queen, and that woman and queen are one person, not, as usually they tend to be in Antony's mind, separate identities. Here at Actium at least, Antony does appear to accept their unity.

Enobarbus, however, is at least partly right. Though Cleopatra does have the sovereign right to be there, she has no military ability. She flees—whether from fear or because she had made a deal with Caesar is never made completely clear—and Antony follows her, even though as Scarus notes, Antony followed "When vantage like a pair of twins appeared/ Both as the same, or rather ours the elder." (3.10.12-13) The question of why Antony fled is also not clearly answered by the play. Nevertheless, Antony blames Cleopatra for his defeat, telling his followers that "I follow'd that I blush to look upon" (3.11.12). Yet, just as his blush in the opening scene betrays his incomplete commitment to his profession of love to Cleopatra, here it is an implicit and unrecognized admission of his own fundamental responsibility: "I have fled myself and

instructed cowards/ To run and show their shoulders” (3.11. 6-7). He knows his generalship to be better than Caesar’s, and he says that it is from his own better generalship that he has fled. Brower says, “Antony acknowledges—though for a time he will forget it—that his defeat was his own, a failure within, not a betrayal by Cleopatra” (331). Here he implicitly acknowledges that it is not Cleopatra herself who has made him act like a coward but his own “dotage”, his love for her that he cannot reconcile with his military-political role and which the military-political part of him finds shameful and un-Roman. Though the characters are otherwise quite dissimilar, Antony’s is a love, somewhat like Claudius’s love for Gertrude which makes her “so conjunctive to my life and soul/ That, as the star moves not but in his sphere,/ I could not but by her” (*Hamlet* 4.413-15. Arden). It would seem that Antony, without realizing it, has made, like Othello in Rose’s view, though with different results, his emotional attachment to Cleopatra central rather than peripheral to his life and being, so that when he finds himself torn between “the heroism of action” (Rose 140) and his unacknowledged emotional dependency, he chooses the latter.<sup>14</sup>

Antony’s real enemy is his divided soul which still cannot unite the soldier-politician and the lover. Here the lover wins out over the soldier-politician who then, as it were, turns and reproaches the lover. The lover, then in turn, reproaches the beloved. Antony forgets very quickly his recognition of his own responsibility. As soon as the Queen appears before him, he blames her for his defeat, saying:

Egypt, thou knew’st too well,  
My heart was to thy rudder tied by the strings  
And thou should’st tow me after. (3.11.55-57)

Here Antony falls back on stereotype: his “dotage” made him run from battle, but the one on whom he dotes is responsible because she has “caused” his dotage. Cleopatra, however, points out that her flight did not necessitate his: “I little thought / You would have followed” (3.11.55-56). As Dash notes, “Antony has reacted to her as a woman,

not as a head of state” who despite her “poor military judgment” had “acted as a political person”. She adds, perhaps somewhat overstating the case, that the audience cannot easily accept Antony’s claim that she is at fault (231).

Cleopatra, despite her protest that Antony had no need to follow her, takes the blame. Here she acts somewhat as Desdemona does in the face of Othello’s displeasure: she becomes submissive. Dash says that “Cleopatra pitying his anguish, adopts the female role only, taking sole responsibility for the defeat by repeating, chorus-like, the word ‘pardon’ ” (232). Whatever her motive, she does for a time at least restore Antony’s vigor. He is quickly reconciled and recovers his confidence:

Fall not a tear, I say, one of them rates  
All that is lost: give me a kiss,  
Even this repays me.... Fortune knows,  
We scorn her most, when most she offers blows. (3.11.69-74)

By their urging her to go to him, Enobarbus and the women imply that only she can restore Antony, and Cleopatra plays the role of submissive female to rouse Antony from his suicidal despair. This apparent submission of Cleopatra, in fact, manifests her power over him.

Cleopatra’s power over Antony consists only partly in her sexual fascination which Antony cannot resist. It also resides in the fact her sexuality is the female counterpart to and the nourisher of Antony’s warm and passionate side. Despite all his annoyances with her, all his petulance, his anger, and his vehement denunciations, despite the storminess of their relationship and the ambiguity of her conduct, they are indispensable to one another. Each finds personal fulfillment in the other. But it is only after the last battle, when still believing that Cleopatra had betrayed him he receives the false report of her death, that Antony realizes that without her his life is not worth living:

*Antony:* Dead then?  
*Mardian:* Dead.  
*Antony:* Unarm, Eros, the long day's task is done ,  
 And we must sleep. (4.14.35-36)

Furthermore, it is at this point that he at last understands the real nature of their relationship. Running on his sword, he says:

But I will be  
 A bridegroom in my death, and run into't  
 As to a lover's bed. (4.14.99-101)

Now, in Nandy's words, "The infatuation, the irrational compulsive power of his attachment to Cleopatra, which" Antony had originally seen and which "is seen by others as 'dotage' and 'lust'...is revealed to him as the very ground of his being. Without her he is nothing" (183). At the last moment he realizes fully that Cleopatra is the woman who ought to have been his wife, not merely the source of his "pleasure". She is the woman who could have been, as she wanted to be, the true partner of his greatness, both the woman who satisfied his deepest emotional needs and the queen who might have shared his rule.

Cleopatra's conduct, however, remains ambiguous. In her conversation with Thidias, Octavius's envoy, she seems to make her submission to Caesar even before Antony has been finally defeated, and so to have betrayed him. Yet, when Thidias tells her that Octavius "knows" that Antony is one she "embrac'd", not as one loved but as one "fear'd", her exclamation "O!" (3.13.56-57) sounds like a denial and suggests that she is temporizing with Caesar's messenger. The play has not shown her as a woman greatly fearful of Antony. A fearful woman would not have mocked him to his face as she has done so frequently. She suggests a political motivation when she says, "Not know me yet?" in response to Antony's "To flatter Caesar, would you mingle eyes/ With one that ties his points?" (3.13.156-157), a question by which she may be affirming the independence of action that her royalty and her sovereignty give her. As Dash argues, she is the ruler of a kingdom whose welfare, Antony's defence of it having been

defeated, and Caesar now in the ascendancy, she must consider (cf. 240-247). The issue, however, remains unclear, Cleopatra's words ambiguous, her motives unfathomable. Cleopatra's character is far more complex than Antony and, for that matter, all the other male characters in the play, including Caesar who thinks he can dupe her, ever realize. Hamlet rebukes Rosencrantz and Guildenstern for trying to "pluck out the heart of [his] mystery". Few in the play would credit Cleopatra with even having a mystery to pluck out. They all judge her by the accepted stereotypes of femininity. Perhaps more than any other of Shakespeare's heroines, Cleopatra, by her mystery and ambiguity, demonstrates the inadequacy of those stereotypes.

Antony also blames Cleopatra for the defection of the Egyptian fleet at the last battle, but though Plutarch suggests that she has temporized with Caesar, Shakespeare gives no clear indication that she had ordered it. After Antony's bungled suicide attempt, Diomedes clearly denies that she did (See 4.14.121-124), and when Cleopatra finally meets Caesar, nothing is said on the subject as, had there been any collusion, one would expect. After Antony's death, Cleopatra does indeed appear to attempt some rapprochement with Caesar. Her situation is desperate, and self-preservation may be at least part of her motivation. Antony, in his loving farewell to Cleopatra, advises her, mistakenly as it turns out, on how to keep herself safe and make some rapprochement with Caesar. Probably sincerely at the time, Cleopatra denies that she would ever seek such safety, but she does appear to temporize. When, however, she finds that there is no security either for her or her kingdom, she carries out her already determined intention to die. Though her death is not the outwardly heroic one of running on a sword, it is, nevertheless, in "the high Roman fashion" because it asserts and maintains her own dignity and autonomy.

Though there remains, therefore, something equivocal about Cleopatra's conduct in the final scenes, any treachery in her conduct is outdone by the treachery of Octavius Caesar to whom Cleopatra may have been willing to extend the benefit of the doubt. Dash is probably right in arguing that Cleopatra "matches dishonesty with dishonesty" (245) to confirm what she already believes is her adversary's true intent, namely, to carry her to Rome to enhance his triumph. Assured that "He words me, girls, he words me that I should not/ Be noble to myself" (5.2.191-192), she resolves to follow Antony in death.

Ultimately, Cleopatra's love for Antony and her sense of her own integrity and worth triumph. In her heart Antony's memory remains dominant:

I dreamt there was an Emperor Antony.  
O such another sleep, that I might see  
Such another man. (5.2.76-78)

That this Antony of whom she dreams is the idealized Antony of her imagination only shows the intensity, the depth, and the sincerity of her love.

Cleopatra may be seen to die for the man she loves as the stereotypical bereaved woman, but she transforms both her own death and Antony's into a kind of apotheosis. She will die to join him in the Elysian world where he is the ideal man he sought to be and where she too can be her own ideal self, and where they will fulfil each other. Only in "a new heaven, a new earth" (1.1.17) can they be that "mutual pair" of which Antony had spoken. But Cleopatra will die also for herself and be, like Antony, "conqueror of [her]self" (4.14.16). Antony ran on his sword in order, as he thought, to join Cleopatra in Elysium, but also to avoid being humiliated "with pleach'd arms, bending down/ His corrigible neck, his face subdued/ To penetrative shame" (4.14.73-75) in Caesar's triumph. So too Cleopatra refuses to watch "some squeaking Cleopatra boy my greatness/ I' the posture of a whore" (5.2.219-220). Her suicide defeats Caesar's

final desire, preventing, in Neely's words, "the debasement of her sexuality" (158) by thwarting his desire to display her as the "ribaude nag of Egypt" (3.10.10) and Antony's "Egyptian dish". Thus, her death preserves her royal dignity and simultaneously deprives Caesar of a vicarious triumph over Antony through the public display of his captive mistress. Now, having resolved on this course of defiance which will make Caesar an "ass unpolicied", she at last feels worthy to claim the title of wife for which she had longed: "Husband, I come!/ Now to that name my courage prove my title!" (5.2.287-288). Meeting death in her crown and royal robes, she, with her ladies in waiting, does "make death proud to take us" and is "Bravest at the last."

Shakespeare in *Cleopatra* has created a woman of remarkable complexity and power. She has unashamedly asserted both her sexuality and her royalty and dared to be both woman and queen. In a world dominated by stereotypical masculine values and attitudes, she has refused to deny either her womanhood or her status and prerogatives as a monarch and ruler in her own right. As Dash says, "In contrast to the women of the [history plays], she refuses to separate her political from her sexual self" (212), for, unlike her Roman adversaries, and even Antony, she sees no conflict between the two. The roles of queen and lover, however, as those of lover and triumvir in Antony, are not perfectly integrated, though she comes closer to achieving that integration than he. As with Antony, only in death can she envisage that ideal integration. Yet as the more nearly integrated of the two, Cleopatra attempts to make Antony a similarly more integrated person, to bring into fusion the man of warmth, passion and generosity with the soldier and the politician. That she never fully succeeds is largely because of Antony's resistance to such an un-Roman course.

It has even been argued that Cleopatra endeavors to integrate the feminine with the masculine aspects of Antony's nature. Caesar comments that Antony in Egypt

is not more manlike  
 Than Cleopatra, nor the queen of Ptolemy  
 More womanly than he.

(1.4.5-7)

Cleopatra has also noted how, “having drunk him to his bed,” she dressed him in her “tires and mantles” while she “wore his sword Philippan” (2.5. 21-23), an action undertaken as a lark, but perhaps symbolic of the kind of integration she sought both for him and for herself.<sup>15</sup> Thus, far from being Antony’s destroyer, as frequently has been urged, she is the potential integrator of his divided personality and, as Dash has said, the “nurturer of his greatness.”

It is primarily because Antony cannot reconcile the tension and the conflict within himself between the lover of Cleopatra and the Roman triumvir that he is defeated, and in his defeat he takes Cleopatra down with him. Yet there is one sense in which Antony’s defeat springs from his relationship with Cleopatra, though not because Cleopatra has corrupted him and seduced him from his destiny. Rather, it is because he has associated himself with an un-Roman world, of which Cleopatra is the embodiment, that does not harmonize with the values of the Roman world of Octavius Caesar. Cleopatra, both in herself and as ruler of Egypt, represents a set of values which, both for Antony and for Caesar, are an affront to Roman values. Thus, not only by his ambitious rivalry with Caesar, but also by allying himself with Cleopatra and her world, Antony has made conflict with Caesar inevitable. He is defeated because he cannot fully accept either her on an equal footing with himself, or her world as of equal value with the world of Rome.

Caesar’s Roman world triumphs militarily and politically but Cleopatra’s Egyptian world triumphs in the imagination. Because Rome has subdued and destroyed Antony and Cleopatra, it will be a much narrower, more limited world than it was. Caesar’s “time of universal peace” will be a “narrowly political, male and barren” peace, as



Neely says (164). Perhaps looking beyond the political ideals both of the Roman world and of his own Shakespeare saw in an Antony a potentially integrated lover and triumvir, and in a Cleopatra a potential for integrating a personal life with the demands of being a ruler. Such an integration would raise the possibility of a new political order, a kind of order in which the “Roman” values of law, discipline and rationality might be tempered and humanized by the “Egyptian” values of nourishment and fertility. Certainly he showed Cleopatra asserting her Egyptian values in a wider world that was hostile to such values but diminished without them. Unable to integrate Antony’s two conflicting natures and to bring his military and political power wholly to her side, she, in the world of the *Imperium Romanum*, as much as Desdemona in the world of Renaissance Venice, is doomed to defeat. Yet, as Cohen notes, “The suicide with which Cleopatra caps her career removes her from a new world in which she, like Antony, has no real place. In this respect the lovers’ deaths constitute a judgment on the process of history” (305). Once again, and for the last time, Cleopatra transforms and transmutes her action into something of transcendent worth.

If the portrayals of Desdemona and Cleopatra are any indication of Shakespeare’s understanding of women, then they indicate that he saw them as fuller, deeper, larger, and more roundly formed beings than the traditional categories would allow them to be. He exposed the inadequacy of simplistic categorizations to encompass the self-assurance, the strength, the devotion, the gentleness, and the fidelity of a Desdemona and the richness, the vitality, and the regenerative energy of a Cleopatra. If Sophocles, “saw life steadily and saw it whole,” then Shakespeare, far more than his society in general, saw women steadily and whole and portrayed them in the fulness of their humanity. Shakespeare seems to have agreed fundamentally with Cornelius Agrippa’s view that “by substance of soul...both [men and women] have equal dignity and worthiness.” In addition to strength and individuality Desdemona and Cleopatra

possess a great store of the qualities traditionally prized in women, such as devotion, beauty, gentleness (in the case of Desdemona), nurturing, and docility (when called for). Through them Shakespeare suggests the possibility that those qualities, rather than being hostile and opposed to strength of character and independence of mind and even political power, may be harmonious with them. If, however, as Coppelia Kahn says, he could see no practical alternative role for women in his society other than that of wife and mother, he probably cannot be considered an advocate and crusader in the modern sense of feminism. Carole McKewin notes that "Shakespeare realized the full range and power of feminine identity, but he was also aware that even a brilliant woman had to modulate her independence to the mores of his own age" (161). He seems, therefore, to have recognized that women suffered greatly under the restraints and restrictions of his male-dominated, hierarchical society and, as many modern critics recognize, subjected that society, in many subtle ways, to criticism.

In portraying women in their full humanity, he challenges the stereotyping and the subjection which social custom and male vanity and fears had seen as the necessary qualifiers of that role. By portraying the richness of women's characters straining, in conflict with social mores, for recognition and fulfilment, he shows the destructiveness often wrought on women's lives by their necessity to subject themselves to male authority. In these two great tragedies, self-assured women pay a terrible penalty for their efforts simply to be themselves. Shakespeare, by exposing the inhumanity of the paternalistic and hierarchical order of his day, may at least have been making an appeal for it to be more humane and more open and tolerant. Bamber says that woman in Shakespeare is the "Other"; Marilyn French says that woman in Shakespeare represents the "outlaw principle," that is, a principle or a force different from and in some sense opposed to the dominant and essentially masculine values of society (Cf. 21-31). Shakespeare seems to suggest in these two plays that his civilization must open its

social consciousness to that otherness, integrate it and make it “in-law” rather than “outlaw”, in order to create a much richer and healthier society and civilization.

## END NOTES TO CHAPTER TWO

1. See, for example, Brian Vickers, "Shakespeare's Hypocrites", *Daedalus* 108.3 (1979), 45-83, in particular n.63-64, for some discussion of Iago's dominance of the action of *Othello*.
2. Citations of the texts of Shakespeare's plays refer to *The Arden Shakespeare* editions.
3. The editor of the Arden *Othello* points out in a note (p.32 n194) that the readings in Q1 and F vary. Q1 reads:

I here do give thee that, with all my heart,  
I would keep from thee.

F interpolates between the two lines of Q1 the line:

Which, but thou hast already, with all my heart.

The interpolation seems to make the first "with all my heart" seem as though Brabantio is making a loving bequest. Taken together, however, the lines, as the Arden editor states, should be read ironically. In a sense they mean that Brabantio's heart goes with Desdemona, that with her gone to the Moor, he has no heart left. Another way, perhaps, of explaining how Othello's "match" to her "was mortal to him" (5.2.206).

4. See, however, for another view, Robert B. Heilman's well known article "Wit and Witchcraft: An Approach to *Othello*" (*Sewanee Review* 64.1 [Winter 1956] 1-4, 8-10 and *Arizona Quarterly*, Spring 1956, 5-16, repr. Signet *Othello* with transitional material supplied by the author, 227-244) where he says: :

By *witchcraft* Iago [and Brabantio, one assumes] means conjuring and spells to induce desired actions and states of being. But as a whole the play dramatically develops another meaning of *witchcraft* and forces upon us an awareness of that meaning: *witchcraft* is a metaphor for love. The "magic in the web" of the handkerchief, as Othello calls it (III.iv. 69), extends into the fiber of the whole drama (Signet *Othello* 238).

5. Irene G. Dash in *Wooing, Wedding and Power* argues that Othello had already heard and accepted the ideas of his adopted culture even before he married Desdemona, so that he, as much as Iago, believes that a woman who has no shame in her sexuality is a wanton and is therefore easily made to believe in Desdemona's infidelity. Iago, as Coppelia Kahn says:

only takes to hand attitudes commonly held in his society and demonstrates their inner workings. Man's fear of cuckoldry is his primary weapon.... Iago needs only drop a few hints about the pranks his countrywomen dare not show their husbands, only remind Othello that Desdemona deceived her father, and the 'monster in his thoughts' awakens the sleeping monster in Othello's mind, the 'green-ey'd monster' jealousy (*Man's Estate* 143).

6. Despite a number of critics' assertions to the contrary, perhaps following Coleridge in his *Table Talk* who thought it "monstrous" to think that "this beautiful Venetian

girl" should fall in love with "a veritable negro" (Quoted Arden *Othello*, li), there can be no doubt that Othello is a black man. He refers to himself as black., Roderigo calls him "the thick lips", and Brabantio speaks of his "sooty bosom." He is a "blackamoor," a Negro, not a Moroccan, a Moor. Even today the idea persists that Othello was not really a black man. The BBC production of the 1970s, for example, presented an Othello who looked merely as though he had spent his last leave sun-tanning on the Italian Riviera. Racism is a factor in this tragedy, *Othello* being, as many have noted, in part the tragedy of an alien whose foreignness and ignorance of much of the real nature of his adopted culture make him vulnerable and, so, over-anxious to identify with and conform to its mores and expectations. His anxiety, ignorance and desire for acceptance all make him vulnerable to Iago's machinations. There is also something exotic about Othello's blackness, and that may well have been part of his fascination for Desdemona. T. M. Raysor in *Coleridge's Shakespearean Criticism* (Everyman's Library, 1960) believes the paragraph from which the Arden editor quotes may have been interpolated by H. N. Coleridge. See Terrence Hawkes (ed.) *Coleridge on Shakespeare* (Narmondsworth Penguin, 1950) 188 n. 4. The passage is quoted on the same page.

7. Kay Stockholder argues in *Dream Works* that while Othello's vulnerability "links him to the gentleness by which she defines herself...his strange and violent life compels her," and, "unaware of her own attraction to his potential violence...she also wants to share in his heroic violence" (92). That would suggest that Desdemona herself is not completely free of cultural stereotypes, identifying both masculinity and heroism with violence and suggests something of the insidious power and influence of those stereotypes.
8. Even the Renaissance writers most supportive of women, including the women defenders of their own sex against male denigrators, saw no other role for women than that of wife. In Ester Sowernam's address to the London Apprentices, she tells them that "the chiefest thing you look for is a good wife," (Shepherd 89) and her account of the reasons for woman's creation follows the line of argument that woman was made to be for "That delight, solace and pleasure, which shall come to man by woman..." (Shepherd 93). The more enlightened humanists and reformers said that the husband must not be a tyrant, but must love his wife, and show her due regard. As Rachel Speght says:

The other end for which woman was made was to be a companion and helper to man: and if she be an *helper*, and but an *helper*, then are those husbands to be blamed which lay the whole burden of domestic affairs and maintenance on the shoulders of their wives. For as yokefellows they are to sustain part of each other's cares, griefs and calamities (Shepherd 71. Original emphasis.).

Shepherd's *The Woman's Sharp Revenge* (London: Fourth Estate, 1985) contains texts of Jane Anger, *Protection of Women* (1589), Constantia Munda, *The Worming of a Mad Dogge* (1617), Esther Sowernam, *Esther Hath Hang'd Haman* (1617), and Rachel Speght, *A Mousel for Melastomus* (1617). Emilia's defense of women's sexual misconduct at 4.3.86106, as Henderson and McManus point out, and as noted in the text, echoes Jane Anger's argument in which she cites the case of Menelaus, stating that the men who "follow a smock as Tom Bull will run after a town cow" are often provided with "a pair of tooters"—horns (Shepherd 34).

9. Dash calls Desdemona a woman "defeated by marriage" (126) because she has clung "to conventions, believing that mutual respect can co-exist in a relationship

where a woman owes 'duty' to a husband and considers him almost godlike. Slowly, unwillingly, she discovers the contradictions implicit here." (119).

10. "But the art displayed in the character of Cleopatra is profound in this, especially, that the sense of criminality in her passion is lessened by our insight into its depth and energy, at the very moment that we cannot help but perceive that the passion itself springs out of the habitual craving of a licentious nature." Coleridge, *Works*, ed. W. G. T. Shedd, quoted by L. T. Fitz (Linda Woodbridge), "Egyptian Queens and Male Reviewers," 303.

11. For example, Dipak Nandy, writing in 1964, says:

There is nothing romantic about Shakespeare's Cleopatra. Against her he concentrates the full intensity of that loathing and disgust with sexual infidelity that had bulked so large in *Troilus*, *Hamlet*, *Lear* and *Timon*. She is the Dark Lady of the Sonnets...But she is more than that, and the merely negative attitude of *Troilus* and *Hamlet* is transcended here in Shakespeare's final portrait of the lady. (Kettle, ed. *Shakespeare in a Changing World*, 187).

Such criticism sees Cleopatra as destroyer of Antony in line with the view of woman as vampire and castrator.

Bradley quotes from Coleridge's single page of commentary "'Antony and Cleopatra' Feliciter Audax," found among his manuscript notes. See Hawkes, *Coleridge on Shakespeare*, 269.

12. Reuben A. Brower notes that "She easily commands governmental and legal language: 'powerful mandate', 'dismission', 'process', and 'homager'." (*Hero and Saint: Shakespeare and the Graeco-Roman Tradition*, [New York and Oxford: OUP, 1971], 321.)

13. Neely sees a somewhat different emphasis in these lines:

When Cleopatra tries to articulate the magnitude of their love in conventional terms she fails; but she does intimate that both love and its loss involve reciprocity and fusion.... Forgotten by Antony, Cleopatra forgets simultaneously him, herself, and the means to express their love; but even with the past, present, and future of their love obliterated, Antony fills up the void (140-141).

14. Professor Katherine Sirluck of the English Department, University of British Columbia, has suggested to me a possible parallel with the "Dark Lady" Sonnet no. 143 in which the protagonist speaks of himself as being like a "neglected child" chasing "afar behind" the mother who has left him to "catch/ One of her feathered creatures [who] broke away". Cleopatra does seem to "play the mother's part" to Antony and to "kiss [him and] be kind."
15. Bevington in *The Cambridge Antony and Cleopatra* (25ff) summarizes some of the arguments for this view. He cites among others, Peter Erickson's View in *Patriarchal Structures in Shakespeare's Drama*, 1985, that Antony, at his best, is capable of participating with Cleopatra in "a gender-role exchange that enlarges but does not erase the original and primary sexual identity of each" (133).

### CHAPTER THREE. JOHN WEBSTER: VITTORIA COROMBONA AND THE DUCHESS OF MALFI

Like Shakespeare in *Othello* and *Antony and Cleopatra*, Webster in his two great tragedies *The White Devil* and *The Duchess of Malfi* portrays independent-minded women whose sense of self-worth and autonomy bring them into conflict with the traditional mores of their societies and with those with a vested interest in maintaining a facade of conformity to those mores. As with Desdemona and Cleopatra, so with Vittoria and the Duchess, the attempt to live in accord with the dictates of their own natures leads to their destruction by those who cannot understand, appreciate, or tolerate their deviations from the patterns of conduct expected of them. Much in Shakespeare's work seems profoundly and seriously to question the social and political order of his era, and the previous chapter of this study noted in particular the plays' implicit criticism of his society's treatment of women. Webster appears to carry on that criticism and, if anything, to expose in an even more thorough-going way than Shakespeare the shortcomings and the hypocrisies of his world. Dena Goldberg sees Webster as an iconoclast, sceptical of the "old order in church and state" (*Between Worlds* 6) and particularly concerned with the conflict "between the desire of the individual will to express and fulfil itself and the conflicting demands of the public world" (7).

It has been a critical commonplace that Shakespeare came to the stage at a time of optimism, when it was still possible to believe in the validity of the Renaissance synthesis of Christian faith and classical culture. By the end of his career, however, when Webster came to the stage, the optimism engendered by the new dynasty, the reform of religion, and the humanist program for social renewal through classical learning enhanced by a renovated Christianity had begun to fade. The forces which

Hiram Haydn has called the Counter-Renaissance were now more and more in the ascendant and cynicism and pessimism began concurrently to replace the former optimism.<sup>1</sup> More recent scholarship, however, has seen this view as a rather oversimplified understanding of the changes that occurred in the Jacobean era. Elizabeth's reign, especially in its first half, had been a troubled one, and the troubles of her reign were not so much solved as submerged and contained, left to fester under the surface calm. The moderate Marxist critic Walter Cohen, who writes of the conditions in both Spain and England, states that

The age [1600-1640]...reversed the dominant trends of the generation after 1575. This development may also be viewed, however, less as a radical break with the past than as an elevation to pre-eminence of those subversive tendencies that were present all along, beneath the superficial calm of the absolutist state. The early seventeenth-century monarchs were forced to live out the secretly troubled legacies of their more illustrious predecessors (155).

Nevertheless, there was, in Cohen's view, an initial element of discontinuity in the passage from the earlier era to the later one, and that the "drama of the seventeenth century represented new departures" (254). The plays of the earlier period, he argues, were dependent on the "fragile synthesis" of the interests of various social classes, the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie in particular, with those of the absolutist monarchy (which in England was never to become as firmly established as in France and most continental states). This synthesis the drama both "scrutinized and, with some misgivings, reinforced". The new conditions "not only produced different drama, but also changed the relations among drama, theater, and society. Although the basic problems of class remain, they are approached in a fashion that the sixteenth century had scarcely known" (Cohen 254). Cohen lays considerable stress on class conflict as an influential force, and it is certainly true that much of the drama of the Jacobean era makes a major issue of the pride of an aristocracy, whose prerogatives in the social and political world were being threatened by the growing power of the monarchy on the one



hand and of the landed gentry (most of whom were not originally people of the land) on the other.

Shakespeare appears to have been aware of the changed attitudes, but in the late Romances in some ways he reaffirms the older beliefs. He was as aware as Webster of the failures of his society to live up to its professed ideals, but he may not have seen that failure as the final reality. Webster, on the other hand, not only lays bare with brutal clarity the corruption beneath the surface brilliance of the Renaissance world order, he appears to see that corruption as endemic to its very nature, and the society, therefore, as unredeemable. For Webster, it seems, the social structures have not only outlived whatever usefulness they may have had and become destructive of whatever and whoever represented newness and vitality, but are by their very nature repressive and inhibitive. These structures merely mask aggressive power exercised for its own sake and are the excuse and justification for the maintenance of that power.

The thought of the foregoing paragraphs, it may be argued, is based on the dangerous assumption that it is possible in the absence of external evidence to obtain some idea of a writer's thought from his writings. Though there is a fair degree of consensus that Shakespeare was a conservative, many, as the previous chapter has indicated, are finding more implicit criticism of his society in the texts of his plays than was previously recognized. His so-called conservatism is perhaps what Coppelia Kahn suggests in *Man's Estate*, simply a recognition that no alternative was readily available to the hierarchic and patriarchal social structure his age had inherited. On the other hand, all do not agree, as will be seen, that Webster is a radical critic of his society. Those, however, who say he is seem, again on the basis of the texts, to have the better argument.

Cohen sees Webster's two tragedies as representatives of what he calls intrigue tragedy, a sub-genre which he regards as closely related to satiric comedy (cf. 357, 364) such as that of Jonson and Middleton and of which Webster himself, in *The Devil's Law-Case*, written probably after his two tragedies, produced a major example. Satiric comedy, according to Cohen "may demonstrate the self-destructiveness of vice, [but] unlike the morality [to which it is generically linked], it rarely shows the efficacy of virtue, much less the ordering presence of a just and benevolent deity" (283). It is a form, he says, which "structurally excludes a positive moral perspective" (282), "has much to criticize" but offers "no positive alternative to contemporary reality, either because [the playwright] has none to offer or because he considers reform unattainable" (283). Cohen says that intrigue tragedy, because of its "loss of a national perspective" (359), "reveals a narrowing range and a deeper pessimism" (357) together with "a sense of the problematic nature of moral action" (359). In this type of tragedy, "the characters and their deeds acquire a kind of opacity that defers clear judgment and that consequently has resulted in substantial interpretive controversy over a number of plays" (358). Cohen's views, which imply that a kind of subversiveness is inherent in the genre, may not be completely beyond criticism. The virtue and heroic death of the Duchess of Malfi, for example, have some positive effect on Bosola, though not on the wider society. In general, his understanding reflects much of what occurs not only in the tragedies of Webster, but also those of Middleton. Certainly, critics have been very sharply divided in their interpretations of these plays. Part of the reason for their "opacity" and ambiguity may be, as Greenblatt argues, a kind of deliberate "negotiation" with official censorship, but it may also reflect the moral and spiritual uncertainties felt by many in the period, including very probably the playwrights themselves.

Because women throughout the history of western society have been so consistently victimized and repressed, and because in Webster's time some at least of them were beginning, often in overt defiance of social mores and conventions, to demand recognition as full human beings, Webster appears to have seen in them real tragic potential.<sup>2</sup> In his two great tragedies, his protagonists are two women who in their different ways have chosen to challenge the conventions of their societies in the name of a new, more inclusive humanity. Their persecution, therefore, effectively illustrates the repressiveness of traditional society toward all that is new, challenging, and humanizing, and in particular the suffering it often inflicted on women, even when, as in the case of Vittoria Corombona, the woman is clearly morally culpable.

Vittoria Corombona and the Duchess of Malfi are women who, in their different ways, attempt to live their lives in accordance with the inner dictates of their own natures. As women of strong individuality with a sense of purpose and of their own worth, they seek fulfilment as women and as human beings. That effort causes each, of necessity, to break with the conventions and mores, and in the case of Vittoria, the morality, of her society. As a result their lives come into conflict with those whose power depends on the maintenance, however hypocritically, of those traditions and conventions. Significantly, in each play the chief wielders of power are a tyrannical duke and a worldly, vengeful and hypocritical cardinal, representatives of the state which enforces the rules and the church which gives them moral sanction. Though these representatives of power do not themselves live by the traditional morality, they make it the buttress for their own authority and admonish and expect the protagonists to live by it. The women themselves, even Vittoria in her antisocial conduct, do not aim to subvert the social order, but seek only self-fulfilment. Because they are contrary to tradition, their actions are regarded as subversive and threatening by the representatives of the *status quo* who, therefore, believe that they must destroy the

women. In fact, the women's actions *are* subversive, for they constitute, in effect, a declaration of female independence from the constraints of the male dominated and male oriented hierarchical society. If allowed to succeed, the women would indeed undermine the received order.

In contrast to the hypocrisy of the agents of the *status quo*, Vittoria and the Duchess, each in her own way and despite their breaches of social convention, exhibit a kind of integrity of person which, particularly in the case of the Duchess, shames her adversaries. Moral integrity can hardly be attributed to Vittoria Corombona, but critics see in her a sense of wholeness and singleness which constitutes an integrity of sorts. Webster's women, Forker says, "evince qualities of interior strength that suggest a kind of integrity in the extended 'heroic' sense of the term" (282). Although some critics have tried to make a moral *exemplum* of the Duchess, seeing her as justly punished for her breaches of social decorum, their case involves a considerable amount of special pleading. Vittoria, on the other hand is a more complex and ambiguous figure. By another kind of special pleading, some more recent critics almost try to exonerate her of all guilt, but Vittoria is clearly guilty of criminal acts. Nevertheless, there is much in the play that extenuates her evil conduct. Though Webster shows that those who act contrary to social conventions will suffer the consequences of their acts, the sympathy he arouses for the Duchess and to some degree for Vittoria undercuts any view that these consequences are divinely ordained punishments.<sup>3</sup> Dena Goldberg sees the societies in which the two women must conduct their lives as "essentially opposed to life" (33), whereas the two women, despite the great differences in their characters, seek to live to the fulness of their potentials. Certainly in *The Duchess of Malfi*, the condemnation falls far more on the society that has forced her to break with convention than on the Duchess. With Vittoria, the case is less clear, but it may be argued that her society is at least as much condemned as Vittoria herself. Lever perhaps goes too far in

*The Tragedy of State* in saying that “The White Devil is not Vittoria Corombona but Renaissance Europe” (Holdsworth 200), for Brachiano, Flamineo, and Vittoria herself, are part of Renaissance Europe. It may be his point that Vittoria, Brachiano, and Flamineo are all tainted by the society and culture in which they live. As Forker says, in *The White Devil*,

All the institutions of a theoretically Christian society—family, palace, church, court of law—are seen to be in an advanced state of disintegration, honeycombed by viciousness, corruption, and hypocrisy. In this climate, those who seek to order or fulfill their lives through human bonds reap only cruelty and disaster (263).

Forker’s point is well illustrated in the crucial scene of Vittoria’s trial. Although Vittoria shares the guilt for Camillo’s death, she cannot, as she herself indicates, receive a fair trial in a court presided over by a Cardinal hardly disinterested in his prosecution of her backed by a similarly self-interested Duke. In contrast, what attracts audiences so strongly to both Vittoria and the Duchess is their vitality, their strong affirmation of life in contrast to and defiance of the life-denying world order in which they find themselves.

The sub-title of *The White Devil* is *The Tragedy of Paulo Giordano Orsini, Duke of Brachiano with The Life and Death of Vittoria Corombona the Famous Venetian Curtizan* (See, for example, Lucas I.105).<sup>4</sup> Dalby says that it was not until the Restoration that the play came to be seen as Vittoria’s. Possibly some in Webster’s audience would have seen the play as depicting the tragic consequences for Brachiano of his passion for Vittoria, but that would have been a very simplistic and conventional understanding of a play of great complexity. For, as Dalby also notes, “Brachiano’s qualities” are—at least in many aspects—“very far from heroic” (38),<sup>5</sup> and the play climaxes with the deaths of Vittoria and her brother Flamineo. Vittoria, Dalby points out, appears in only five scenes, but each of these is “structurally speaking a key scene, and... she dominates three of the most important scenes” (38). Thus, because Vittoria receives as much

dramatic emphasis as Brachiano, the tragedy may be seen to be hers at least as much as his. Certainly for most modern audiences and readers, regardless of their moral judgments, the strong and vital personality of Vittoria dominates the action, and conceivably many in the Jacobean audience would have experienced the play in much the same way.

Roma Gill notes in "Quaintly Done" that Vittoria "is one of the most complex and challenging characters of the drama of this period" and also "one of the 'new women' on the English stage", a "creature of suffragette eloquence who suffers the agonies of sexual and social ambition in a way that Shakespeare's heroines never know.... When such a woman comes on stage...strong as her heart", audience reaction tends to be very complex (Holdsworth 150, 154 155). Though Vittoria's wickedness repels, her splendor and vitality attract. Forker, somewhat less sympathetic to Vittoria than some other critics, says that "The beauty and ugliness that modify each other so mysteriously in Webster's white devil finally evoke a divided response" (282). Ranald calls Vittoria "evil" yet "strangely admirable" (*John Webster*, Intro. xi), and sees her as "criminally guilty" but also "to some extent the feminine victim of an ambitious family" (106). Vittoria, in some ways, is like the roughly contemporary Spaniard Tirso de Molina's Don Juan in *El burlador de Sevilla* whom most (the rather prudish Beethoven a notable exception in regard to Mozart's recreation of him as Don Giovanni) admire, in spite of themselves, for his perverse integrity similar to Vittoria's. Don Juan, in Cohen's words, presents through his vitality an "alarmingly attractively anarchic challenge...to human and metaphysical order" (368). Cohen makes the comparison that "like Webster's malcontents", of whom Vittoria might be considered one though probably he has Flamineo and Bosola more in mind, "'el burlador' combines witty insouciance with an at times murderous immorality in such a way as to reveal the sordid reality lurking just beneath the surface of society" (365). Part of our admiration of Vittoria lies in the

fact that, through her challenge to her society, immoral though it is, she shows up the perhaps even greater immorality of her enemies who represent the social *status quo*. J. B. Layman draws also a strong contrast between Vittoria and her cynically malcontent brother Flamineo, between “mask wearer and mask stripper” (*PMLA* 74, 342a), between the “healthy and sanguine” and the “diseased and melancholic” (337b). Vittoria, whose life, he says, “it would be dangerous to argue...is any less immoral than her brother conceives it to be” (343a), nevertheless, by her vital life affirming nature, “would...seem to be some kind of dramatic and also dialectic counter-force to all the black and despairing elements in the play which achieve their focus in Flamineo” (337b). For all her wickedness, Vittoria shines as a bright light in a dark world, a light which in many ways shows just how dark the darkness really is.

Certainly, Vittoria is motivated by an ambition which takes an evil course to reach its goal. Her husband Camillo, though related to the powerful Cardinal Monticelso, is of little social or political consequence, whereas Brachiano is a Duke. It is important to note, however, that Brachiano takes the initiative with Vittoria’s own brother Flamineo, whom Layman calls “the dedicated disintegrator of his own family” (338a), acting as pander.<sup>6</sup> In the opening scene, Lodovico notes that Brachiano “by close panderism seeks to prostitute/ The honour of Vittoria Corombona” (1.1.43-44). Until that time Vittoria had been seen as a woman of honor. When Vittoria first appears, she is quite willing, however, to receive Brachiano’s advances, and though her account of her “foolish idle dream” suggests that she had received his advances prior to what appears to be their first meeting, there is no hint that she has enticed Brachiano. Her agreement to accept his adulterous advances makes her by Renaissance standards a whore, but by giving the initiative to Brachiano, Webster appears to question the historically conditioned double standard by which it is the woman’s fault that her beauty overcomes a man’s fortitude.

Vittoria, nevertheless, is motivated by the desire for sexual fulfilment. Her husband Camillo, his first appearance dramatically juxtaposed against Brachiano's, is presented as a possessive, and, from Flamineo's reference to him as a capon, an impotent old fool.<sup>7</sup> Therefore her desire to escape from such an unfulfilling marriage is placed in a context that generates understanding if not approval. Boklund says that the "foolish idle dream" she relates to Brachiano may be "open to interpretation and as poetry...[may tend] to obscure the purpose behind the telling of it", but it is, nevertheless, a dream of "far-reaching implications" (*Sources* WD 164). Flamineo certainly thinks that by telling her dream she has "taught" Brachiano "To take away his duchess and her husband" (1.1.263-264).<sup>8</sup> The yew tree itself is associated with death, and editors see the word also as a word play on "you", referring to Brachiano. That "a massy arm" should be torn from that yew tree to strike dead her husband and Brachiano's wife, who in the dream, have been threatening Vittoria with pick-axe and rusty spade, suggests very strongly that she wishes her lover to murder those who stand in the way of their union. Furthermore, the events of the dream occur in a grave yard, the haunt of ghosts and demons, at the witching hour of midnight, so that the whole relation is invested with connotations of evil. Brachiano's subsequent actions indicate that he has interpreted Vittoria's account of her dream as urging him to remove the impediments to a relationship between them.

Vittoria's means for escaping her unfulfilling marriage are culpable, but the text minimizes moral condemnation and, instead, emphasizes the frustration the vital Vittoria suffers in her marriage to Camillo. A criticism of enforced marriage as political and financial contract is implied by the fact that Vittoria was forced against both her will and her nature into marriage to Camillo by her family's economic necessity. In his bitterly sarcastic retort to their mother Cornelia's moralizing, Flamineo reveals that his and Vittoria's father had "proved himself a gentleman,/ Sold all's land, and like a



fortunate fellow,/ Died ere the money was spent” (1.2.323-325). In the “Arraignment” scene, Camillo’s kinsman Monticelso charges Vittoria:

You were born in Venice, honorably descended  
From the Vitelli; ’twas my cousin’s fate—  
Ill may I name the hour—to marry you.  
He bought you of your father (3.2.235-238).

Such passages suggest that to improve the lot of the family Vittoria was sold to Camillo. Though that circumstance does not justify murder, the play nonetheless makes an implicit criticism of the subservience that society imposes on women.<sup>9</sup> Goldberg notes:

The ties that bind Vittoria are typical of her time. She is the victim of a marriage arranged by her family in a futile effort to reverse the trend of economic decline initiated by a spendthrift father (22).

Vittoria’s family have treated her as a chattel and disposed of her in accord with familial prerogative, and, in effect, enslaved her to the play’s most ridiculous character for whom no other character has a good word to say.

Vittoria’s desire to escape and her ambition to rise socially are, thus, set in the context of her dreary marriage. As Roma Gill notes, “Boredom with her husband has stifled all emotion but ambition, and she does not hesitate to snatch this opportunity [offered by Brachiano] to release herself from a frustrating marriage” (Holdsworth 152). Vittoria counters her mother’s moralistic remonstrance against her conduct with Brachiano:

I do protest, if any chaste denial,  
If anything but blood could have allayed  
His long suit to me— (1.2.297-299)

And as her life ebbs away, Vittoria again affirms, “Oh, my greatest sin lay in my blood!/ Now my blood pays for’t” (5.6.241-242). “Blood” means, as in the final instance, “life”, but in the two earlier instances it means also “passion,” “natural desire,” “the demands of the natural self,” and the two meanings blend into each other. In her relation to Brachiano Vittoria asserts her worth as a person and her right to sexual fulfilment. Her

passion for living, Goldberg contends, is for Webster the true “natural law,” the “law” of nature itself. She argues that what is called natural law in the philosophy and theology which justified the traditional morality and the paternalistic, hierarchical ordering of the society of his era, Webster regards as unnatural. Webster, she says, “poses the question whether nature is not, in itself, more benign than the laws that corrupt human reason creates, since those laws present restriction and destruction of life as their only solution to human problems” (32). Vittoria cannot be confined within the restrictions placed on her by her society if she is to fulfil herself as a human being and as a woman. Her corrupt world, paying hypocritical lip service to the traditional morality by which it no longer lives, binds her in an unnatural and unhappy marriage that deprives her nature of legitimate means of fulfilment. In following the antisocial path of adultery and complicity in murder to obtain release, she acts for personal motives after the criminal example of those who wield power in this corrupt world. Inevitably she will come into conflict with those wielders of power who see her will to power as a threat to their positions.

That Monticelso and Florence had already determined to overthrow the Duke of Brachiano even prior to the deaths of Camillo and Isabella shows the darkness of Vittoria’s moral world. Admonishing Brachiano to his face on his duty to uphold the accepted morality, they mask their intentions behind a facade of morality. The Cardinal says:

It is a wonder to your noble friends  
That you, having as ’twere, entered the world  
With free scepter in your able hand,  
And to the use of nature well applied  
High gifts of learning, should in your prime age  
Neglect your awful throne for the soft down  
Of an insatiate bed.

(2.1.26-32)

After the public separation of Isabella and Brachiano and the Duke’s departure, they reveal that they had all along been plotting his overthrow:

*Francisco.* So, 'twas well fitted: now shall we discern  
How his wished absence will give violent way  
To Duke Brachiano's lust.

*Monticelso.* Why that was it;  
To what scorned purpose else should we make choice  
Of him as sea captain? (2.1.377-381)

Thereupon they reveal their intention to use the villainous Lodovico, whom they themselves had earlier banished, as their agent. As the scene closes, Francisco gloats: "Like mistletoe on sear elms spent by weather,/ Let him cleave to her, and both rot together" (2.1.399-400). As Goldberg says "Francisco and Monticelso at first appear to be interfering in Brachiano's affairs for the sake of the people concerned, [but] they soon reveal their interest in punishment for its own sake" (36-37). Class interest, too, is an issue, for though well born, Vittoria is not of the same class as the Cardinal, the Duke and his sister Isabella. Thus, Vittoria through her liaison with Brachiano becomes the victim of those who, for personal reasons and in the interests of their class, already plot his destruction. She thus gives them further excuse for their actions, but she was not a factor in their original motivation.

Nevertheless, Brachiano and Vittoria by their actions participate with the morally corrupt forces of a *status quo*. By playing what Shaw's Blanco Posnet calls "the rotten game" because it seems to them the only game to play in order to achieve their desire for the life of personal fulfilment and satisfaction, they submit themselves to the "rules" of those who are determined to maintain their power. Because the established order confers their power, the Duke and Cardinal are, therefore, hostile from the outset to Vittoria's and Brachiano's personal interests, which, if allowed to succeed would call that order into question.

Vittoria, therefore, presents a very ambiguous figure, attractive in many ways, with much in her circumstances to arouse sympathy, but also evil, with much in her character to elicit condemnation. Her deplorable marital circumstances arouse sympathy for her

desire for release. Her vitality and energy arouse admiration and a corresponding condemnation of its suppression in an unfulfilling relationship. Even her acceptance of Brachiano's advances evokes a degree of sympathy even though the liaison itself is not condoned, but her advocacy of murder to achieve her ambitions evokes condemnation.

Webster, however, further destabilizes moral judgment by making Vittoria, and to some degree Flamineo and Brachiano, "bad guys" though they are, more attractive characters than the "good guys" of the play. Cornelia steps forward at the climax of the wooing scene just as Brachiano and Vittoria are about to make love, crying "Woe to light hearts, they still forerun our fall!" (2.1.275). Some have seen Cornelia, with Marcello and Isabella, as the moral centre of the play. Others show, however, that Webster constantly undercuts the moralistic stances of these characters. Roma Gill says:

Cornelia ought to be the fixed point that James Smith [*John Webster*: London, 1951.] welcomed her as, the character from whom 'we can take our moral bearings when, amid the amount and variety of vice, they are in danger of being obscured' (273).

Certainly Cornelia's is the "voice of decalogue morality; but in Webster's theatre this voice sounds a wrong note" (Holdsworth 157). When Cornelia demands moralistically, "What? because we are poor/ Shall we be vicious?" Flamineo upbraids her with the remembrance that his and Vittoria's father, her husband, had spent the family fortune and then died, leaving his family to reap the consequences of his profligacy. Her son then demands of her, "Pray, what means have you to keep me from the galleys [and] the gallows?" (1.2.319-324).<sup>10</sup> His point is similar to Undershaft's to Cusins in Shaw's *Major Barbara* that one were better to choose the strength and safety of money and gunpowder over honest poverty and decent squalor and destitution. (Shaw himself, seeing in Webster only "the Tussaud laureate," seems not to have noticed the similarity.) There are, of course, major differences between the views of the

seventeenth-century and the twentieth-century playwrights. Seeing such action as Undershaft's from the viewpoint of his religion of Creative Evolution and the Life Force, Shaw gives approval to it. Webster, on the other hand, probably does not approve of the attitude and conduct of Flamineo and Vittoria. Unlike Shaw, he would probably have answered "no" to Cornelia's question to Flamineo. Like Shaw, however, he raises the question of how in an immoral and constrictive world one is not only to survive but find personal fulfilment.

Flamineo also justifies to Cornelia Vittoria's adultery on natural grounds by alluding to Vittoria's unnatural marriage to the impotent Camillo:

Go, go,  
Complain to my great lord cardinal;  
Yet may be he will justify the act.  
Lycurgus wondered much that men would provide  
Good stallions for their mares, and yet would suffer  
Their wives to be barren (1.2.345-350).

Webster here seems to be adopting a view somewhat like our modern one that natural impulses, while not always constructive, cannot be repressed and must find some kind of positive and creative outlet. He suggests, much as Middleton does in his tragedies, that the society of Vittoria, Flamineo and Brachiano, by not providing such outlets, encourages natural impulses to seek socially negative and destructive ones.

Cornelia, Lever says, "is soon silenced by Flamineo's withering scorn", and he affirms that she, Isabella and Marcello, though "Innocent and virtuous... have no vitality on the stage", and their virtue, even though permitted to speak out, "has no field of action" (Holdsworth 194-195).<sup>11</sup> Boklund says that the virtue of Cornelia and Marcello is smug (177) as well as pale and conventional. Theirs is the morality of disapproval rather than of positive virtue. Ultimately, the virtuous stance of Cornelia and Marcello is undermined by their apparent compromise of their honor by accepting the favor

which Brachiano offers them after his elopement with Vittoria from the House of Convertites. Layman says that by this ineffectual presentation of traditional virtue, “Webster tries...to sunder us from familiar and conventional moral themes and attitudes” (337a).

Isabella, nevertheless, is a more sympathetic, pitiable character, her conduct motivated to a degree at least by love, so that she is something of a foil to Vittoria. Yet in contrast to Vittoria’s, albeit unprincipled, determination, she seems far too passive and submissive. Vittoria’s singlemindedness gives her a kind of perverse integrity which makes her seem almost admirable in comparison, and her vitality preferable to Isabella’s passivity. This contrast intensifies the sense of energetic vitality which makes her appear attractive despite her evil and adds to the play’s moral ambiguity.

The so-called agents of justice also illustrate the moral ambiguity of this play and of Vittoria herself. Lever says that “In form a revenge tragedy, [*The White Devil*] rejects the clear polarities of vice and virtue, oppression and revolt, which set up the moral tension of this class of drama” (Holdsworth 195). Writing of *The Duchess of Malfi* but with relevance to *The White Devil*, Goldberg notes that

traditional revenge figures such as Hieronimo, Hamlet, and Vindice...are *forced* into political opposition in order to carry out a personal vendetta. In *The Duchess of Malfi*, the roles of avenger and victim are reversed. The revengers are supported by the highest authorities, while the victims find themselves alone and helpless before the forces combined against them (81. Emphasis added).

In this revenge play, not the avengers but the protagonists are the victims, and the avengers represent the forces of evil.

Francisco, Duke of Florence, the revenger, is himself more evil than those on whom he takes revenge. Cynically, he uses as his agent Lodovico, a violent and vicious

man with blood already on his hands, established from the outset as thoroughly malevolent. Lodovico is perhaps the most heinous character of the play, in whose banishment for murder Francisco had probably been instrumental. The Duke then leaves his tool villain to take the punishment for what is equally his own crime. Forker states that

Webster presents the Florentine Duke as the ultimate horror—the spirit of the carefully nurtured hatred, inhumanly Machiavellian and bloodlessly disengaged, a sort of death’s-head who presides quietly, efficiently and *invulnerably* over the lives of everyone in the play (264. Emphasis added).

Thus, contrary to the usual pattern of revenge tragedy, the Duke goes unpunished. Thus the play asserts that there is no justice, only power.

Many critics see Giovanni, too, ostensibly the agent of the re-establishment of a better order, as a very ambiguous character. Flamineo says of him that “He hath his uncle’s villainous looks already”(5.4.30) and that he is like a young eagle whose “long talents [talons]...will grow out in time” (5.4.10).<sup>12</sup> Giovanni is the son of Brachiano, who has not been the best of parental examples, and he is nephew and protege of Francisco, whose influence is also far from exemplary; but his actions suggest that his character is relatively sound. If anything, he takes more after his mother Isabella, presented in the play (as distinct from history) as virtuous, than after either his father or uncle. However, though Giovanni vows revenge on the murderers of his father and Vittoria, one wonders whether he is sincere, because Brachiano and Vittoria are implicated in the murder of his mother Isabella. Also, because the very powerful Duke of Florence instigates both murders, it is doubtful that Giovanni has the power to bring about his punishment, though he acts with dispatch against the agents, who are, in any event, expendable. Again, the view that power alone rules the society and that virtue is ineffective is confirmed.

The brilliant Arraignment scene exposes the hypocrisy of Vittoria's enemies, undercutting Vittoria's judges, and to some degree their judgments of her. The Cardinal, in fact, uses the law and his ecclesiastical power to obtain revenge for the death of Camillo, but that is a subterfuge, for he had little regard for his nephew. He says before the trial begins that he intends to make Vittoria, through "the proofs/ Of her black lust...infamous/ To all our neighboring kingdoms" (3.1.6-7), but he acknowledges that they "have naught but circumstances/ To charge her with about her husband's death" (3.1.45). He cannot convict her, but he will try to discredit her by bringing against her the customary accusation of whoredom.

Vittoria's conduct in this scene throws an unflattering light on the Cardinal. Layman notes that she takes and retains the offensive and with "poised wit and delicate narcissistic assurance...she vanquishes moral responsibility simply by transforming herself into a serene force of nature" (340b). Vittoria so turns the tables on the Cardinal that, in effect, she puts him on trial. Though we acknowledge with the French ambassador that "she hath lived ill", with the English ambassador we recognize that she also "hath a brave spirit" which tends to direct audience emotional sympathy toward her.

To the charge of whoredom, Vittoria retorts, "Ha! whore! What's that!" (3.2.77). Layman says that her "query...forces us to take stock of our confused impressions of Vittoria" (339b). The Cardinal responds to it by delivering what amounts to a conventional prose character of the whore (3.2.79-101) which the discerning in Webster's audience would have recognized as a caricature.<sup>14</sup> In her retort to the Cardinal—"This character escapes me" (3.2.101.)—Vittoria recognizes the conventional nature of his attack. Certainly she is not sexually pure, but, on the basis of what we have seen of her, the overall application of the description to her by the



Cardinal seems excessive. She rejects the charge of whoredom as having more to do with culturally conditioned stereotypes than with the way she experiences herself. In denying the accusation of whoredom Vittoria rejects the equation of her womanhood itself, of which she is unashamed, with wantonness and harlotry.

The Cardinal's accusation is also based on the stereotype that the woman who dresses well and loves pleasure is clearly a whore. Swetnam, for example, says in *The Arraignment* that "If a woman be ...merry and pleasant, then is she like to be a wanton," calling her "a common hackney for everyone that will ride; a boat for everyone to row" (Henderson and McManus 205). Vittoria's life of pleasure seems to the Cardinal justification for this line of attack, and so he fits her to the stereotype:

Who knows not how, several night by night  
Her gates were choked with coaches, and her rooms  
Outbraved the stars with several kind of lights,  
When she did counterfeit a prince's court  
In music, banquets, and most riotous surfeit?  
This whore, forsooth, was holy. (3.2.71-76)

What seems prevalent in this description of Vittoria's conduct is that she has emulated the princely life.<sup>15</sup> We know that Vittoria is ambitious, and the Cardinal, brother of the Duke of Florence, is motivated more than anything by aristocratic pride. Vittoria is an upstart. Vittoria, however, recognizes the stereotypes—"the paradigm scenarios"—behind the accusations leveled against her. As the trial draws to its close and the foregone conclusion of her condemnation, she says:

Sum up my faults, I pray, and you shall find  
That beauty, and gay clothes, and a merry heart,  
And a good stomach to a feast, are all,  
All the poor crimes you can charge me with. (3.2.207-210)

She is not ingenuous in this defence, yet she forces the audience to recognize that her accusers are not attacking her on real evidence so much as on the fact that in her *joie de vivre* she does not conform to the culturally established pattern of a good woman, to

what society demands of her, but instead, appears to conform to the pattern of the wanton.

Vittoria's performance at her trial is a *tour de force* of virtuosity which carries her audience's sympathy along with her. David Gunby comments that "The courage, wit and resourcefulness which Vittoria displays in facing her accusers is such that it is tempting to accept without question her version of events" (Webster, *Three Plays*, 422). Lucas says that "when in the trial scene she stands at bay against both worlds, against the power of State and Church, of Florence and Rome, we cry 'Not guilty' despite ourselves and the truth" because Webster has endowed his heroine with "such a power of beauty and intellect, of pride and passion and indomitable will" (Webster, *Works* I, 94). Gunby adds, however, that "Webster is careful to show that she is that dangerous mixture of attractiveness and criminality which the epithet 'white devil' comprehends" (John Webster, *Three Plays*, 422).

Vittoria's comment that she did not come in mourning to her trial because she was unaware of Camillo's death (cf. 3.2.122-123) can hardly be accepted at face value. Nevertheless Webster forcibly directs our sympathies toward Vittoria and against her accusers by making her, in contrast to them, so vividly alive. Undoubtedly Webster means to draw attention to and direct criticism against the corrupt and hypocritical abuse of moral precepts by Vittoria's accusers. By drawing such a strong contrast between "life" values and moral ones, Webster seems to call upon his society to question and examine the narrowness and rigidity of its definitions of morality and to see that the rigors of law are often displayed in the service of the corrupt social order, represented here by the Cardinal and the Duke.

Lever calls Vittoria's arraignment "a flagrant travesty of justice, in which the Cardinal acts as both prosecutor and judge and condemns her on palpably flimsy evidence" (Holdsworth 194). Vittoria herself protests against the conduct of her trial and questions its justice. She says to the Cardinal:

What! is my just defense  
By him that is my judge called impudence?  
Let me appeal from this Christian court  
To the infidel Tartar. (3.2.126-129)

and

If you be my accuser,  
Pray, cease to be my judge; come from the bench;  
Give in your evidence 'gainst me, and let these  
Be moderators. (3.2.225-228)

All that can be creditably established is that she has become Brachiano's mistress. Vittoria is sentenced without other warrant than the Cardinal's hatred and the fact that she has defied the conventions of her society in seeking a sexually fulfilling relationship. She is condemned purely on the basis of innuendo which, Goldberg demonstrates, was acceptable as evidence in Jacobean courts, and sentenced to the House of Convertites. Against this travesty of justice she cries: "A rape! a rape!.... [Y]ou have ravished justice,/ Forced her to your pleasure" (3.2.273-274). The English Ambassador's observation that "the cardinal's too bitter" (3.2.106-107) confirms that Vittoria is arraigned by a court biased against her as a personal vendetta. Goldberg believes that Webster in this scene questions the whole "social basis of law" (52).<sup>16</sup>

Here more than anywhere else in the play, we see the ambivalence that characterizes the presentation of Vittoria: she is evil, yet strangely attractive; wrong, yet wrong in such a way as to make her enemies appear more wrong and more evil than she. Layman says that when Vittoria first appears "nocturnally" in Act I, she appears "as a whore without qualification, lacking all whiteness." She "invites the lewd *double*

*entendres* of her lover and...sets Brachiano on his path of murder” so that we “form a first impression of [Webster’s] heroine which quite excludes radiance” (339a). It is not until the scene of her trial that she appears as “that impossible thing, a *white* devil” (338b. Original emphasis.) Vittoria affirms vitality, whereas her enemies appear to represent all that brings about emotional and spiritual, as well as physical, death.

The arraignment is, thus, an attempt to silence Vittoria’s disturbingly powerful female voice. Therefore, the Cardinal heaps upon her all the traditional aspersions of wantonness and lust used to justify woman’s subjection. Despite the advocacy in some cultural circles for a more liberal attitude toward woman’s sexuality, the prevailing attitude had been little affected. This was still an age which regarded a woman of Vittoria’s vibrant sexuality and femininity as wanton, and the Cardinal’s attack on her is based very largely on cultural stereotypes of the whore. His reference to her as “a woman of most prodigious spirit” (3.2.59), and his accusation that “were there a second Paradise to lose,/ This devil would betray it” (3.2.69-79) reflect men’s belief and fear that woman’s sexuality uncontrolled by male domination is a disruptive force and—much as many regard homosexuality today—a threat to social cohesion.

At the time of the trial Vittoria has become Brachiano’s mistress, but even as mistress Vittoria does not conform to stereotype. Though perhaps not from motives of love so much as from her own ambition, she has committed herself to him; and in becoming his mistress, she has exposed herself to the charge of whoredom. Her emotional outburst at the House of Convertites may indeed be a temper tantrum contrived for the occasion, but the circumstances which give rise to it suggest that it may also express the genuine anger and disappointment of a woman who objects to shabby treatment from the man for whom she has risked all. Brachiano had not only abandoned her to her accusers at her arraignment, but now, solely on the basis of

Francisco's letter, he charges her with infidelity. She wanted to be Brachiano's wife—whether from love or ambition or both is not clear—and even though he has murdered both spouses, he seems initially reluctant to make her so. Unlike Antony, who only at the moment of death recognizes his true relationship to Cleopatra, Brachiano does marry Vittoria. In this regard, Vittoria achieves the consummation that eluded Cleopatra. However, Brachiano marries Vittoria only after her anger has shamed him into doing so. Like Cleopatra, Vittoria objects to being used merely for dalliance.

She had become his mistress simply because her society permits no other alternative to a loveless marriage than an adulterous union. That this should be so implies criticism of a society that provides women no legitimate outlet from enforced and loveless marriages such as Vittoria's to Camillo. If so, Webster was in advance of his time, though he may, in fact, have been following some of the more liberal reformers. Though it would be written from the male point of view and to some degree out of his own bitter experience, Milton's *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce* which advocated mismatch of mind and spirit as better grounds than adultery for dissolution of marriages was still thirty years in the future.

It is difficult, therefore, to see this play of moral ambiguities as a morality play or to draw the simplistic conclusion that Vittoria's story is meant to be seen as a warning against breaking with social convention. Those who, like the Cardinal, act as the representatives of justice are more evil than either she or Brachiano and use as their agent Lodovico, the most vicious character in the play. As Lever notes, "the revengers are more repulsive than those they punish" (Holdsworth 195), and it seems difficult to see Vittoria, even with her manifest evil, exclusively and most conspicuously as the

“white devil” of the play’s title. One begins to suspect that the title may be intended as in some sense ironic.

Vittoria’s heroic death also draws audience sympathy to her. True, her next-to-last words are “My soul, like to a ship in a black storm,/ Is driven I know not whither” (5.6.249-250). Unlike the Duchess of Malfi, Vittoria, despite her prayers, does not die in the hope of heaven. Moralizing critics have taken these words as indicative of Webster’s negative judgment on his heroine. However, although Vittoria is guilty of much, her dying words should not be taken as the final or ultimate overall judgment of her made by the play, especially since, as noted, Vittoria’s executioners are far more evil than she. Furthermore, the black storm in which Vittoria has been driven is the world in which she has lived, a world of self-interest hypocritically posing as moral rectitude and justice and where ultimately might makes right. In many ways, in fact, Vittoria’s dying words reflect her experience of her life formed by and carrying the values of the world which has bred her. If Vittoria is the white devil of the title, she is so in large measure because her world has taught her to be. If her fate may be called punishment, she is punished because in her efforts to fulfil her human potential she had to act, or at least believed she had to act, in the same manner as those who ruled her society. Even the virtuous Duchess of Malfi found she had to use deceit to live the life she wished in a treacherous and deceitful world.

Vittoria’s society punishes her less for what she has done than for what she is. It punishes her also because she has failed, and she has failed because she lacked the power and the final degree of ruthlessness of those who opposed her and who are the real forces that govern her world. Hence her final words, although they sound platitudinous, should be taken seriously: “Oh, happy they that never saw the court,/ Nor ever knew great men but by report” (5.6.262-263). Michael Cameron Andrews

comments that “This couplet has been said to contain ‘the only words that fall from her that she could never have uttered’.”<sup>17</sup> Yet as Bliss observes, “Vittoria’s final knowledge may indeed be to discover by experience the truth of such maxims”—even though “the trite, simplistic formula inadequately expresses our response to her life or to her death” (131). Vittoria’s words are very similar to Antonio’s final line in *The Duchess of Malfi*: “And let my son fly the courts of princes” (5.4.71). In the light of the actions of both plays which expose corruption in high places, both utterances, despite their platitudinous nature, must be regarded as significant. Vittoria, as to a lesser degree Antonio, has tried to play the corrupt courtier’s and great man’s game, the only way she saw open to her, and lost. Lever’s judgment that the white devil is not Vittoria but Renaissance Europe appears less and less hyperbolic.

Vittoria has been induced to try to play the courtiers’ game because, as she says, “I am too true a woman.” She cannot play the role of “Patient Griselda.” The “spirit of woman”, even perhaps also “the spirit of greatness”, to use Cariola’s words of the Duchess, if greatness may be taken as a sense of her own worth, motivates Vittoria. Bogard says:

This aspect of her nature [her truth to herself as woman] is not presented as an excuse for her conduct, but as a cause...as inevitable, under the circumstances, as it was anti-social. Yielding to Brachiano is, to Vittoria, a necessity, for she cannot deny the dictates of her own passionate nature (58).

It is her unflinching allegiance to her womanhood and her assertion of the worth and validity of her femininity and her sexuality that constitute the integrity of character that many have ascribed to Vittoria. Goldberg says, “*The White Devil* is the tragedy of a society whose most brilliant and attractive people can find no honorable outlet for their creative energies” (22). Goldberg perhaps goes too far toward exonerating or at least excusing Vittoria and Brachiano, but her comment contains a strong element of truth nonetheless. Webster does in this play raise the whole issue of moral conduct in an

immoral world, a world whose attitude to morality is Machiavellian in the pejorative sense that word has acquired, a world which preaches one standard and acts by another, and which encourages those who wish to live fully to take the main chance. A number of modern studies argue that criminality is not simply the result of a bad social environment. Nevertheless, Vittoria's society encourages more strongly the dark elements in her personality than any potential she has for virtue. Webster in *The Duchess of Malfi* presents another and very different solution to the dilemma of individual morality in a corrupt world, although, ultimately, one which leaves the audience with no less a sense of devastation than that with which one leaves *The White Devil*.

*The White Devil* is as much the tragedy of those attractive individuals whom that society destroys as of the society. Vittoria's dying cry that her "greatest sins lay in [her] blood" which now her blood "pays for" acknowledges that she pays the penalty of her sins. In another sense she detaches and separates herself from her blood, her passions. As at her arraignment she rejected the equation of her womanhood with whoredom, so here she affirms that through the sins of her blood something else had been striving to emerge and assert itself. More than a mere creature of passion, she has striven to be fully a woman rather than the restrained, limited being her society has expected of her. That, perhaps, is what she means when she says that she has been "too true a woman." In her death as in her life she refuses to be stereotyped. The penalty she pays is, therefore, as much, if not more, punishment for trying to be "the new woman" as for her sins. In her quest for fulness of life as woman and human being she has challenged the social order which has denied and seeks to continue to deny women that opportunity. For such a woman as Vittoria, society was not yet ready. Because her society could neither understand nor accommodate her richness and complexity, it could see no alternative but to destroy her.



Even though *The Duchess of Malfi* is based on events which occurred more than half a century earlier than those of *The White Devil*, the world of the later play is the same corrupt world of the failed Renaissance as that of the earlier play.<sup>18</sup> Here too the corrupt and destructive society is represented by an unnamed hypocritical Cardinal and Ferdinand, a power-mad and, as Forker says, a “criminally deranged” duke (304). Similarly, the natural forces of life are also represented in this play by a woman, the young, beautiful and virtuous Duchess of Malfi. Though certainly a more virtuous character than Vittoria Corombona, the Duchess bears many similarities to her. Like Vittoria, the Duchess is an unashamedly sexual being who might, as well as Vittoria, at the moment of her death have affirmed as explanation of, even justification for, her conduct, “I am too true a woman.” She is also, like Vittoria, strong willed and self-possessed, though she manifests these qualities in much gentler and more morally acceptable ways. As much as Vittoria she desires self-fulfilment and is as determined to achieve it.<sup>19</sup> Also, like Vittoria, because she lives in a world similarly hostile to the fulfilment of her goals, she has to pursue her goals by devious means, though certainly not those of adultery and murder. As Jacqueline Pearson notes, though the Duchess is a good woman, she “is forced by the threatening society around her into an equivocal situation, hiding behind ‘masks and curtains’ [3.2.159] when she would prefer frank and open demonstration of feeling, expressing herself in ‘riddles and dreams’ [1.1.450] when she would prefer to speak clearly and unambiguously” (84). The Duchess, in fact, believes that “masks and curtains” (3.2.159) are more appropriate to her adversaries. Indeed, at the time of her arrest and during her subsequent torture, Bosola cannot appear before her except masked or otherwise disguised, bearing out, probably by deliberate authorial intent, the Duchess’s view. Bosola’s masks and disguises indicate his increasingly uneasy conscience as he becomes more and more aware of the Duchess’s virtue and the heinousness of his actions against her.

Although the Duchess desires just as much as Vittoria to enjoy life and to find sexual fulfilment, a major difference between them is that the Duchess's sexuality is more generative and nurturing than Vittoria's. She bears Antonio three children in addition to the one she had born to her first husband. The Duchess, in fact, is the only tragic heroine of the plays discussed who does bear children. Although Vittoria's circumstances probably preclude child bearing, she gives no indication of any desire for motherhood. Despite having to keep secret her marriage, her pregnancies, and the births of her children, the Duchess relishes child-bearing and motherhood.

Also, unlike Vittoria, the Duchess is not motivated by ambition and has no need, at the outset, to escape intolerable circumstances. She marries Antonio her steward, her social inferior from whom she can gain no advantage other than personal fulfilment, purely for love. The marriage is doubly risky, nevertheless, because her powerful brothers have expressed hostility to any marriage she might contract and would be even more hostile to such a marriage to a social inferior.

The Duchess, thus, combines the new woman and the old. In her independence, her desire to marry for love, her rejection of social convention in marrying outside her class, she represents the newer thrusts in social thinking; in her desire to be a nurturing wife and mother, she appears to conform to stereotype. Perhaps through the Duchess, Webster, like some twentieth-century feminists, is saying that there is no necessary conflict between women's independence and autonomy and those roles which she has always performed.

Yet no less than Vittoria, the Duchess is a rebel. She rejects the claims of institutions and social structures—family, church, hierarchy—to control and determine her life. Her rebellion is less flamboyant than Vittoria's but is no less determined.

Furthermore, though she flouts social convention, she violates no moral principle in her rebellion. Nevertheless, she has had her critical detractors. Lucas was the first to notice the similarity between the Duchess's case and that of Lady Arabella Stuart, a relative of King James and a potential claimant to the throne who died in the Tower as the victim of James's displeasure at her marriage to a social inferior. From that similarity many have constructed a case against the Duchess, making the play a didactic tract in support of official attitudes. James L. Calderwood, in "*The Duchess of Malfi*: Styles and Ceremonies" (*Essays in Criticism*, XII [1962]), says that the Duchess's and Antonio's marriage is, in Peter B. Murray's paraphrase in *A Study of John Webster*, "a perversion of ritual because it is against the norms of their society" (Holdsworth 187, n7). Lever notes that in the same essay Calderwood says "the Duchess is punished for her 'uninhibited passion', her 'violation of degree', and her disrespect for external realities" (Holdsworth 212, n8). Joyce Peterson sees the Duchess herself as the play's "curs'd example" because of her violation of degree, contending that the "generic expectations" of what Peterson calls commonweal tragedy "and the action insist inexorably on her culpability as a ruler, her responsibility for her fate, and worse, for the disruption of her duchy" (78), so that the Duchess's cruel fate becomes just punishment or retribution. Such views are based on a very narrow perception of an age which, as Forker notes, was one "of considerable social mobility" (298). Lever comments that in Calderwood's essay "opinion hardens into dogma", and Murray reminds us that "Webster doesn't hold up [the play's] society as a model." Noting that "commonweal tragedy" is a sub-genre of Peterson's own invention,<sup>20</sup> Goldberg says that Peterson "makes the mistake of attributing to the play... rather too much of the moral play qualities she sees as its inheritance" and adds that "the Duchess' own violations of order are minuscule compared to those of her powerful brothers, which makes it hard to see her as the 'curs'd example' of the play" (89, n.15).

Boklund says that, although such marriages as the Duchess's beneath her rank were "among the common scandals of Elizabethan and Jacobean England" (DM: *Sources* 26), "the Duchess' behavior was far from unparalleled in Elizabethan and Jacobean England" (68). Forker notes that "neither Elizabeth nor James showed any compassion for the suffering couples, particularly if their marriage was dangerous to the state" (68-69), but that otherwise, as he also shows clearly, marriages of widows, secret marriages, and marriages between persons of unequal social rank were not universally disapproved and often were viewed sympathetically.<sup>21</sup>

Some critics have found, too, an element of moral, or at least ethical, ambiguity in the Duchess's apparent promise to her brothers not to marry when she had no intention of keeping such a promise. Webster may here be suggesting that a good woman is not necessarily a perfect woman who in everything she does conforms to the moral and ethical ideal. The Duchess is not to be damned because she bends the truth on occasion. On the other hand, knowing both the hostility of her brothers and the nature of her world, the Duchess has little choice but to resort to deception. Forker notes that one of the paradoxes of the play is "that truth to self must not only disguise itself but be forced for defensive purposes to adopt the devious tactics of the enemy" (301). Like Desdemona, the Duchess marries contrary to the social expectations of her class. Unlike Desdemona, who married the brilliant general on whom Venice's security depended, the Duchess marries one, who though not of mean birth, is a relative nobody with no power or influence to enable him, like Othello who as a Moor was also, from the Venetian point of view, Desdemona's social inferior, to "carry it off" despite social disapproval. Therefore, though the Duchess's marriage to Antonio is not immoral, for social and family reasons, particularly because of the overweening and overbearing aristocratic pride of her brothers, she must, unlike Desdemona, keep her marriage secret.

The Duchess's culpability, therefore, exists only in the minds of her brothers, the Cardinal and the Duke. Truth to self prompts the Duchess's actions because, for her, truth to self constitutes the highest value. Like Vittoria, she asserts her right to fulfil her sexuality and her womanhood. Wooing Antonio she says:

This is flesh and blood, sir,  
 'Tis not the figure cut in alabaster  
 Kneels at my husband's tomb. Awake, awake, man,  
 I do here put off all vain ceremony.  
 And only do appear to you, a young widow  
 That claims you for her husband... (1.1.457-462).

Forker, noting the Duchess's "vitality in the midst of so macabre and deadly a setting" and her "appetite for life", says that "Webster associates her with nature and natural process" (322). Shaw, once again, had he seen Webster as other than the "Tussaud laureate," might have seen in the Duchess's desire to be a mother as much as a wife the qualities of a "vital genius", an agent of the Life Force like Ann Whitefield in *Man and Superman*, neither would he have had any problem with the woman's taking the initiative in courtship, though, in this instance, as Antonio's social better the Duchess must take the initiative. As she says, "The misery of us, that are born great,/ We are forced to woo because none dare woo us" (1.1.103-104).

Irregular though it is, "the marriage of the Duchess and Antonio, foolish by any of the standards of their world and explicitly lacking the sanction of the Church," says Murray, "is fruitful and spiritually true" (Holdsworth 167). Hence the purely rhetorical nature of the Duchess's questions "What can the Church force more?" and "How can the Church build faster?" She adds that "'tis the Church/ That must but echo this" (1.1.489, 492-494). When later she calls Ferdinand's intrusion into her domestic life a violation of "a sacrament o' th' church" (4.1.38), she seems to assert that her secret marriage *Per verba de praesenti*, even though it has never received ecclesiastical sanctification, has the same sacramental nature and validity as if it had. The Duchess

and Antonio have taken at full value the Church's own basic theology of marriage that a man and a woman marry each other and the Church merely blesses the union already established. The Duchess, therefore, seems to accept the protestant tendency to see the sexual act as in and of itself sacramental. Her marriage is valid and sacramental because it is the natural expression and fulfilment of her and Antonio's human sexuality "for the procreation of children...and for the mutual society, help and comfort that the one ought to have of the other" that the Book of Common Prayer says is the reason "for which matrimony was ordained" in the state of humanity's "innocency." The Duchess may even indeed imply that theirs is a marriage like the innocent marriage of the prelapsarian Adam and Eve in Eden. Certainly the Duchess's and Antonio's marriage, despite its irregularity, fulfils all the standards of Christian marriage with which Webster's English audience would be familiar from the Prayer Book marriage service. What, indeed, he encourages them to ask, can the Church force more? Later, fleeing from her brothers' persecution she laments the fact that what is simply natural is not, as it ought to be, free:

The birds, that live i'th' field  
On the wild benefit of nature, live  
Happier than we; for they may choose their mates  
And carol their sweet pleasures to the spring. (3.5.17-20.)

The Arragonian brothers, especially Duke Ferdinand with his pathological obsession with woman's supposedly insatiable sexual desire,<sup>22</sup> retain, however, the traditional attitude that woman's sexuality is mere lust. Therefore, they assume that their sister, *qua* woman will be ruled by lust and that as a widow who has been sexually aroused, she will be all the more sexually rapacious. As they part from her, they admonish her forcibly:

*Cardinal:* We are to part from you: and your own discretion  
Must be your director.  
*Ferdinand:* You are a widow:  
You know already what man is; and therefore

Let not your high promotion, eloquence—  
*Cardinal:* No, nor anything without the addition, honour,  
 Sway your high blood.  
*Ferdinand:* Marry! they are most luxurious  
 Will wed twice.  
*Cardinal:* O fie!  
*Ferdinand:* Their livers are more spotted  
 Than Laban's sheep. (1.1.292-299)

The Cardinal's "O fie!" is not so much a denial of Ferdinand's contention, there probably being a *double entendre* in "high blood," an allusion both to her noble birth and to her aroused passion, so much as an assertion that for him that is not the issue. Goldberg states that "To the Cardinal, his sister's greatest sin lies in her refusal to let considerations of status and reputation take precedence over passion" (83-84).<sup>23</sup> The Cardinal's obsession with family and class pride and with status perhaps reflects the fears of an aristocracy in crisis, their position of power and influence threatened from one side by the increasing grasp for total control by absolutist monarchs and, on the other side, by the growing power and wealth of the bourgeoisie and the gentry.<sup>24</sup>

In fact, as a widow, as well as by virtue of her title, the Duchess, unlike the unmarried daughters of noble families, has the legal right of free choice in marriage, and she makes use of that right to follow nature rather than social convention in marrying Antonio. (Webster leaves her unnamed perhaps for that reason, to emphasize that in all she does, the Duchess acts legally.) What Cariola calls the "spirit" of her own "greatness" (1.1.506) motivates her, but so too does the spirit of woman. The urgency and celerity with which she pursues a second marriage suggests that as a young, sexually experienced widow she is more readily aroused and sexually desirous than if she were a virgin, and the whole tenor of the play implies the acceptance of such strong sexual desire as natural. Particularly because her sexuality manifests itself as healthy, wholesome, and life-affirming love, and in fertility and nurture, her active sexuality is shown, in sharp contrast to the negative, unhealthy, and in the final analysis, deathly view of the Cardinal and the Duke, to be fundamentally good.

That positive view of human sexuality espoused by the Duchess and Antonio is far too revolutionary for the Arragonian brothers, and was no doubt for many in Webster's audience who held similar views. As the case of the poet John Donne and Ann More shows, those who married for love were frequently subjected to persecution, either legal or extra-legal. Webster has incorporated into the play, Forker says, "all the outraged conventionality, rigid class distinction, political expediency [and] family hostility" that would oppose such a marriage as the Duchess's, setting the representatives of those attitudes "in unflattering contrast to the life-affirming and courageous decision of the Duchess to be true to her own deepest need for completeness and self-realization" (297). She knows that she must find her way in a world hostile to her desires. She says to Cariola:

Wish me good speed,  
For I am going into a wilderness,  
Where I shall find nor path, nor friendly clue  
To be my guide. (1.1.365-368)

Her action is one of almost reckless courage, yet she believes that once faced with her marriage as a *fait accompli*, and over time, her brothers will relent in their hostility and accept it. When Antonio, who has very accurately sized up her brothers and is probably even more aware of the dangers than she, queries her about their attitude, her response seems naively dismissive:

*Antonio:* But for your brothers?  
*Duchess:* Do not think of them.  
All discord, without this circumference,  
Is only to be pitied and not feared.  
Yet, should they know it, time will easily  
Scatter the tempest. (1.1.471-475)

Though aware that she follows a dangerous course and must take precautions, her faith in the goodness of her natural desires blinds her to the depths of evil to which her brothers will go to undermine and destroy her happiness. Even more than Vittoria, the Duchess underestimates the vicious determination of those whose opposition she has defied, and her deviousness is no match for those opponents who are prepared, as



Goldberg says, to use all means, “both legal and illegal to achieve their end”, so that “the victims find themselves alone and helpless before the forces combined against them” (81). The Duchess sees her marriage to Antonio as a knot which can never be untied. Though in her pious expression of hope, she sees the prospect of violent opposition, she yet trusts that their union, blessed by heaven, will be strong enough to withstand and overcome that opposition, that the violence cannot untie it: “Bless, heaven, this sacred Gordian, which let violence/ Never untwine.” (1.1.481-482) Lucas reminds us, however, that “the doom of the Gordian knot was no other than to be severed by the sword” (Webster, *Works* II, 24-25), an indication that the Duchess’s glorious venture is doomed from the start because it conflicts with the wishes of the vested interests of her brothers who represent the power of both church and state. Those who oppose her, as Goldberg says, “are supported both by traditional morality and established power” (81), where traditional morality has become the justification for established power.

Nor can the Duchess’s assertion of her natural rights save her even from the calumny of the ordinary members of a society committed to outward form, who see her deviation, therefore, as a threat to the social stability which orders their lives. Goldberg notes that

It is not only the Duchess’ brothers who find her behavior shocking. The voice of the people first proclaims the Duchess a ‘strumpet’ [3.1.26] and then, when the fact that she and Antonio have been married all along is revealed, it expresses wonder at her choice of a social inferior ...These reactions indicate the social norm, in the world of *The Duchess of Malfi*, in attitudes toward sexual love—a norm of cynicism and fear that is concretely embodied in the mutually opportunistic sexual relationship between the cardinal and Julia (80).

It may be simply that the common people do not like to be disturbed in the complacency and the acceptance of the *status quo* which makes bearable their mundane and often desperate lives. Peterson bases her contention that the Duchess has failed in

her duty as ruler of her duchy in part on the passage from Act 3 to which Goldberg refers, but Goldberg's commentary on the passage is adequate refutation of that view. Although the common people may not live their lives in the same manner as their "betters," they are influenced in their thinking by the prevailing social philosophy.

The Duchess by her irregular but valid and legal marriage to Antonio, perhaps even far more than Vittoria in her initially illicit liaison with Brachiano, has challenged the male-oriented hierarchical society. As Goldberg says, her status as widow of the Duke of Amalfi and therefore Duchess in her own right enables her to liberate herself from male dominance, and it is precisely that which so offends her "two powerful brothers" who "would rather see her dead than let her go her own way" (80). They fear that she will do exactly what she does, marry beneath her station, an action which they feel will sully their honor as aristocrats. Like Hamlet in the Prayer Scene, and like villain revengers such as Vindice, the brothers are not content merely with the death of their victims; they seek immortal revenge, namely her damnation. By the horrendous persecution and torture to which the brothers subject the Duchess they attempt to reduce her to committing the unforgivable sin of despair. In that they are unsuccessful. They seem to come close when the Duchess curses the stars, but to curse is not to despair but to resist. She curses also her brothers, calling down "Plagues" to "Consume them" that they may "like tyrants/ Never be remembered but for the ill they have done" (4.1.103-104). Her curse is, in fact, an act of self-assertion which enables her to retain her integrity and achieve the a calm acceptance of her fate. When Bosola says "Look you, the stars shine still", the Duchess replies, "Oh, but you must/ Remember, my curse hath a great way to go" (4.1.101-102). Forker states that

The dynamics of the fourth act—what might be called the "passion" of the Duchess—are built upon her psychic progression from outward control through frustration, rage, and near despair to a deeper kind of serenity rooted in self-recognition, the tragic acceptance of evil, and quickened religious faith (325).<sup>25</sup>

Ultimately, Forker says, she achieves “a more resilient self-definition” (326) which enables her at the height of her torment, after the masque of the madmen, to affirm, “I am Duchess of Malfi still” (4.2.142). It is a statement by which she asserts that in all her actions she has been a free agent, a woman of personal dignity who will not in any way repudiate, or repent of anything that she has done, for she has acted honestly and with integrity out of the essence of her own being and personhood. It is also her affirmation that she has not been driven to despair, that she has retained the integrity and possession of her soul, and it fulfils and confirms the affirmation she had made to Ferdinand her brother at the time of his intrusion into her bed-chamber: “For know, whether I am doomed to live, or die,/ I can do both like a prince” (3.2.70-71).

Andrews argues that “Bosola’s purpose is to induce in her a *contemptus mundi* rather than the passionate involvement with life that has characterized her throughout” (64). To Bosola’s question “Why do you do this?”, Ferdinand replies “to bring her to despair” (4.1.115-116). Andrews cites Roger Stilling to the effect that Ferdinand’s aim is for her to denigrate her body and so to denounce her love and her marriage. Ferdinand thinks that by her base marriage she has defiled her own body and also himself because of their near kinship:

Damn her! That body of hers,  
While that my blood ran pure in’t, was more worth  
Than that which thou wouldst comfort, called a soul.      (4.1.121-123)

He therefore seeks to destroy her, both body and soul, by driving her mad. Ironically, it is himself he drives mad, not his sister.

Bosola tells her “Thou art a box of worm seed, but a salvatory of green mummy”, and Asks “What’s this flesh? A little crudded milk, fantastical puff-paste”, and calls the human body “contemtable” (4.2.124-128) to try to bring her to denigrate her physical nature which she has never regarded as anything but wholesome and natural. Stilling

comments that her statement—"I am Duchess of Malfi still"—is "an act of romantic self-assertion. She disowns nothing of her past actions or of her love and marriage, for to do so would be to disown a part of herself" (244). Andrews says that Bosola, and the Duke his master, "cannot subvert what has given her life meaning. All he can do is kill her" (64). Whether the Duke's aim is to bring the Duchess to religious despair or to make her denounce the validity of her life, and probably he tries to achieve the former goal by means of the latter means, for the Duchess there is really no distinction. She has from the beginning seen her love for Antonio as a holy thing having divine sanction. For her, to renounce her love, as much as to renounce her faith, would have been a kind of blasphemy.

The Duchess's assertion of her identity and status is also an implicit assertion of individualism. That individualism is at least nascent in her secret marriage *pro verba praesenti* and in her confidence that this marriage has received heaven's blessing. There can be no doubt that the Duchess is genuinely devout, but she is devout in her own way, seeing no need for religious formalities and conventions. She may be compared with Shaw's Saint Joan, who never considered herself anything other than a dutiful daughter of the Church despite her following of what she believed were direct personal revelations. Like Joan's, the Duchess's religion is the protestant spirit taken to its ultimate extreme of the individual soul alone with its God. Also like Joan, she does not see that as in any way contradicting conventional religious devotion. The Duchess is, however, like Joan and like Barbara Undershaft, "quite original in her religion." She is as unconventional in religion as in the other aspects of her life. She seems to assume that if her actions are in accord with her own nature they must also be in accord with the divine will which has made her that way. Perhaps that is why, unlike Cariola who is horrified and very apprehensive, the Duchess, has no qualms about disguising her retreat from Amalfi as a religious pilgrimage. Interestingly and perhaps significantly,

the conventionally religious Cariola, unlike the Duchess, is unable to face death with calm assurance, seeking, as she does, to avoid death by pretending to the pregnancy which in a court of law would have saved her from the gallows..

The natural piety, if it may be called that, of the Duchess also contrasts sharply and pointedly with the hypocrisy of her brother the Cardinal, the official representative of institutional religion. The Duchess's faith, though unorthodox in its manifestations, has sufficient strength to assure her at her death that she is joining the communion of saints, whereas the Cardinal can "pray" only to "be laid by, and never thought of" (5.5.90).

Perhaps through the Duchess, the only genuinely religious character in the body of his work, Webster criticizes religion in the same way as he does marital conventions, asserting that restrictions and regulations poison rather than nurture what they are intended to preserve, and that, as the reformers had proclaimed but as the reformed churches themselves had failed to practise, true religion is a matter not of law, but of grace and faith. Furthermore, by showing the Duchess as religiously independent, yet nonetheless devout, Webster challenges his society's misuse of religion to buttress and sanctify its repression of women.

A further point is that because the Duchess, unlike Vittoria, remains virtuous in an immoral world, her death takes on something of the character of a martyrdom. Here may be the answer to the question seemingly posed by *The White Devil*: In an immoral world, what place does virtue have, what role does it fulfil, what point is there in being virtuous? One answer is Bosola's that in a world where virtue receives little or no reward, there will be little or no virtue. As tool-villain Bosola (whose role Webster has greatly expanded from that in the source where he is simply the murderer of Antonio),

like the similarly malcontent Flamineo in *The White Devil*, has the stature almost of a major protagonist. Also like Flamineo, he is a cynical figure who plays the role of “satyr” who “sees through” the characters and comments incisively on and their words and actions. Unlike Flamineo, however, Bosola has a repressed conscience which the Duchess’s heroic endurance of her unmerited suffering awakens, though his disillusionment with princes because of the Duke’s refusal to reward him for carrying out his wishes is also a factor in his change of heart. Nevertheless, because of the influence of the Duchess’s goodness Bosola’s repressed conscience greatly troubles him through almost the whole course of his gruesome task. His task is completed, Bosola attempts both to help Antonio and to avenge the Duchess. Thus, the Duchess’s active, positive virtue, unlike the negative judgmental morality of Cornelia and Marcello in *The White Devil*, has positive effect.

Boklund says that “in spite of the title, Webster chose to make [*The Duchess of Malfi*] Bosola’s tragedy as well” because the Duchess’s conduct forces him to ask the question “is there after all a justifiable alternative to a completely self-centered way of life?” (DM: *Sources* 118, 121). Goldberg says that “Before his conversion, Bosola has been trapped by a conviction that he might as well be evil as good, since there is no just authority to reward and punish.... He passively accepts the society that his betters have created for him and only seeks to find something for himself within that framework....” He sees his role of “intelligencer” or spy as “base”, but believes that he acts like everyone else who “Prefers but gain and commendation” and that “men who paint weeds, to the life, are praised” (3.2.326-330). “The example of the Duchess teaches him,” Goldberg continues, “that goodness is desirable for itself, and that his failure to choose goodness has stemmed from cowardice” (96). So another answer to the question posed by *The White Devil* might be that one remains virtuous in spite of the immorality

of one's world and society, that virtue has nothing to do with personal comfort or gain but is a value in and of itself.

In her quiet confident way the Duchess faces death as courageously as Vittoria. Unlike Vittoria, the Duchess does not die in a spiritual mist. Both, however, when they know they cannot escape death, face it courageously, even defiantly, Vittoria baring her breast to the knives of her assassins, the Duchess telling her executioners to "Pull and pull strongly" (4.2.230) on the garotting cords and that they should "go tell my brothers, when I am laid out,/ They then may feed in quiet" (4.2.236-237). In this way each woman asserts that her murderers cannot frighten her or destroy her spirit. The Duchess also implicitly affirms thereby that her life has been one of personal integrity for which she has no apologies to make. When in her next-to-last thoughts the Duchess expresses concern for her children, she reaffirms the positive value of her right to self-fulfilment in calling attention to the fundamentally fruitful, healthy and benevolent consequences of her actions.

Nothing in the play suggests that the Duchess's confidence and faith are misplaced. That she is the only character in the play who dies in such faith and with such hope reflects positively on her purity of motive and essential goodness. On the other hand, the manner of the Duchess's death, though it does not necessarily deny traditional religion, is not sufficient basis to establish the play as the religious tract affirming the basic religious tenets of the era that some have made it. If Webster's vision is in any way a religious one, it is, on the whole, a very dark one of a world fallen far from grace where only a few find salvation. Some have seen Webster's vision for that reason as a Calvinist one. Certainly it is not the optimistic Humanist vision of a humanity virtually perfectible through the use of right reason aided by grace. It may be that Webster is saying that in a dark, immoral world, genuine faith is not only rare but

also hard come by and maintained only with great courage and perseverance. It is a commitment to the perception of a truth and a value beyond the immediate circumstances of one's existence. The Duchess's undefeated faith, tempered by great tribulation, stands out, therefore, as the final manifestation of her commitment to life, of her heroic stature and of her heroic refusal to yield to the forces of death and hatred that surround and assail her.

Both Vittoria and the Duchess unashamedly follow their passions. Webster challenges the traditional understanding of female passion as a negative, destructive force leading inevitably to immorality by presenting that passionate nature in an essentially positive light as the potential, at least, for love, procreation and nurture. Society, therefore, his plays assert, must accept and value woman's passionate nature rather than denigrate it. That passionate nature is not itself a destructive and disruptive force; rather, as in the case of Vittoria, the attempt to constrain and stifle it leads to frustration that contributes to antisocial acts with socially disruptive consequences. Those anti-social effects are not, however, fundamental to passion, for on the other hand, the instance of the Duchess shows woman's passionate nature as a positive force of love, procreation, and nurture, a source of warmth, gentleness and compassion. Webster in his two tragedies shows us societies which by their denial of this normal and natural aspect of human nature traditionally associated with woman and the feminine have become sterile, tyrannical, and concerned more with death than for life. The constraint of woman's passions denies society an important and beneficial quality and debilitates life itself.

In a society, especially one in its death throes but desperately clinging to such life as remains to it, which regards woman's nature and woman's independence of action as dangerous, the woman who follows her passions in her search for self-realization will



inevitably face opposition and, without the support of powerful agents in that society, her efforts to be her own person will come to naught and very probably lead to her destruction. Vittoria's tragedy arises in part from the fact that Brachiano is not as powerful as the Duke of Florence; the Duchess's from the fact that she has no support at all.

Vittoria and the Duchess live in a world in which, as Catherine Belsey notes, women's "liberty is glimpsed but not authorized" (Kastan and Stallybrass 144). Each in her own way represents a new world and a new womanhood struggling to establish themselves, but as yet, in Matthew Arnold's phrase, "powerless to be born." They represent strongly self-assured womanhood conscious of its worth and no longer prepared to accept subservience, requiring and beginning to demand freedom of action. Goldberg comments that Webster's decision "to centre his tragedies around [sic] women is one of the most significant manifestations of his rejection of the hierarchical ideology of his time" (104). Webster seems to consider that the contemporary corruption of the traditional paternal, hierarchical society is too far advanced to be remedied and is, in fact, by its very nature fundamentally inimical to women. In his two tragedies he demonstrates that such a crumbling society, in its desperate struggle to prevent its own demise, becomes all the more vicious in its endeavors to destroy anyone whose way of life it sees as threatening, all the while hypocritically justifying itself by calling upon the traditional values by which it no longer lives. With the forces of such a society, represented by the two Cardinals and the two Dukes who embody the traditional authority and power of Church and State, Vittoria and the Duchess, choosing to follow the new, more natural way of life, inevitably come into conflict and are doomed to destruction. The real issues in the struggle of these women with their societies are not so much virtue and vice as conformity and non-conformity to conventional requirements and authorities. Both Vittoria and the Duchess are opposed

and finally destroyed because they dared to follow their own life-enhancing interests rather than the dictates of those who draw their power from the traditional ordering of society.

Webster in his two tragedies presents the male power brokers in the social hierarchy as agents of death, and presents his two major women as the agents of society's renewal, as the vanguard of a richer and fuller life. That richer fuller life cannot be realized, he implies, until women are allowed freedom for their full self-development, and that cannot happen until society, particularly the males who dominate it, see the positive worth of woman's nature. In presenting Vittoria Corombona and the Duchess of Malfi as complex, richly gifted human beings, he provides a new paradigm of women and woman's nature as a potentially revitalizing force in human life.

### END NOTES TO CHAPTER THREE

1. This cynicism is often expressed through the many malcontent characters of whom Flamineo in *The White Devil* and Bosola in *The Duchess of Malfi* are among the most brilliantly conceived and developed examples. Flamineo is one of the most prominent and imaginatively developed and in some ways one of the most interesting characters in *The White Devil*. Webster, as Gunnar Boklund notes, has given him "the standard characteristics of a tool-villain and a pander, as developed by Marston and Tourneur" as well as "the malcontent aspects of Malevole and Vendice" (*Sources of WD* 148). Bosola, similarly developed in *The Duchess of Malfi* and given a latent conscience which emerges in response to the nobility with which the Duchess bears her undeserved suffering, is perhaps an even more interesting character.
2. This was the age of the female transvestite as well as the era when many young people, sometimes with and sometimes without parental sanction, were beginning to act on the view of the more enlightened humanists and reformers that, because marriage is meant to be a partnership of mutual love, the prospective partners ought to have free choice to follow their hearts in marriage. See for example the works of Stone, Rogers, Stenton, Woodbridge, Wright, and Wrightson listed in the Bibliography.
3. Forker in *The Skull Beneath the Skin* refers to such criticism as "a tradition of prim moralism" (241). Roma Gill in "Quaintly Done" refers to Clifford Leech's "grudging admiration" of Vittoria Corombona as one whose "beauty, adroitness" and "brave spirit" should not blind us to the fact that "she is the devil of this play's title" (Cited from *John Webster* 44). Gill comments that Leech "has succumbed to the ever-present temptation to fit Vittoria into a recognizable pattern" (Holdsworth 150). Forker, though he sees the love of Vittoria and Brachiano as a "deeply flawed romance" (263) comments nevertheless that the "hostile moralism" of other characters while it "discourages our approval of the romantic values of the play...it can also reflect negatively upon the detractors themselves, exposing their malice, their frustration, or their emotional and imaginative poverty" (263). A great many critics, as Lever notes in *The Tragedy of State*, invoke "a hypothetical Jacobean opinion" which "unanimously agreed on certain certainties" (Holdsworth 203). Gunnar Boklund in *The Duchess of Malfi: Sources, Themes, Characters*, puts the matter in perspective perhaps as well as any:

Very few Elizabethans seemed able to refrain completely from discovering the hand of God in the disasters that overtake sinners (Marcello is made to comment in this vein in *The White Devil*), but seldom can two such unattractive instruments for the punishment of lust and ambition [the motives, respectively, of the Duchess and Antonio in Belleforest] as the Arragonian brothers have been offered to the English theater public. One of the hack writers for the stage might have fallen for such a simpleton's attitude, but not John Webster, whose treatment of the rewards of virtue and the penalties of vice in *The White Devil* is nothing if not sophisticated. The challenge of Beard and Goulart, those two merciless Christian upholders of social decorum can hardly have given him serious pause, although some members of his audience would undoubtedly have been ready to accept it as genuine (65).

Boklund's discussion of the morality of *The White Devil* (*Sources* 158-180) is thoughtful and thorough, and his final conclusion worthy of respect:

The quest for the theme of *The White Devil*...has ended in a relatively simple conclusion. Webster's cynicism has been identified with the cynicism of facts, his study of virtue found a system of Christian morality practically inapplicable in a world where vice reigns, and his study of vice found amorality an insufficient philosophy of life in a world where man is troubled with a conscience. [Boklund has Bosola in mind.] The immeasurable gap between the laws of God and the ways of man has seldom been illustrated with such piercing irony as in *The White Devil* (181).

4. The best study of Webster's possible sources is Gunnar Boklund's *The Sources of The White Devil*. The historical Vittoria Accoramboni was born, not at Venice, but at Gubbio in the Appenines. Lucas suggests that in calling Vittoria the "Famous Venetian Curtizan" he was confusing her with Bianca Capello, the model for Bianca in Middleton's *Women Beware Women*, who was the mistress and later wife of the historical Duke of Florence on whom the character in *WD* is also based, but Boklund disagrees (138). In the Renaissance "the name of a Curtezian of Venice is famous over all Christendome" (T. Coryat, *Coryat's Crudities* (Glasgow 1905), 1.401, cited Boklund 138), and therefore, Webster—or perhaps his publisher—may have been capitalizing on that city's reputation (cf. Gunby 416)—though, in fact neither Vittoria Accoramboni nor Bianca Capello was a courtesan, nor does either dramatist so present his heroine. Although the possible sources are many, the most probable appears to be a newsletter circulated by the German financial house Fugger which, not long after it had occurred, gave a very detailed account of Vittoria's murder on December 23, 1585—something of a *cause celebre* throughout Western Europe at the time. Webster may also have known *A Letter Lately Written from Rome*, another document contemporary with some of the events, notably the coronation of Sixtus V, and probably written by John Florio. The scene of Monticelso's coronation as Pope seems to be based on that account (cf Boklund, *Sources* 31-32). Other details of the story seem to have reached Webster in garbled form, perhaps by hearsay. Boklund notes that

The general meagreness of the material remains conspicuous. As a result the dramatist had to rely more extensively upon dramatic tradition and his own imagination than has hitherto been realized .... The only part of Vittoria's career of which Webster had ample information was, according to our conclusions, its very last phase, the incidents at Padua at Christmastime 1585. Otherwise his material was sparse, a sparsity which, however, was bound to affect different parts of his tragedy in different ways (140).

5. Boklund says, "The play depicts an existence disordered and without a core, and in order to do this convincingly the dramatist created a tragedy without a hero" (*Sources* WD, 184).
6. Layman says of Flamineo that "He is, by his own account, drunk 'with wormwood water' (v.vi.6)" and that "he makes about humanity, with an un-Machiavellian nausea, the Machiavellian assumption that all behavior which is not patently lustful, vicious or silly is manipulative; and his driving need is to have his cynicism confirmed by experience" (338a). Comparing him with Vittoria, Layman says, "He is diseased and melancholic; she healthy and sanguine; and as he repels, she attracts" (337b). The "constant need of his imagination" is "to reduce everything to a uniform bestiality" (343a). Therefore, he strives "to reduce [Vittoria] to nothing more than a particularly disgusting specimen of the only world he is willing to

recognize" (337b). Ironically, in the end he finds himself impelled "to pay her the greatest tribute" (337b).

7. Historically Vittoria's first husband was the young, handsome and valiant Francesco Peretti of whom she seems to have been quite fond. He appears to have been murdered by her own brother Marcello who was known to have been a henchman of Paolo Giordano Orsini, Lord (later Duke) of Bracciano. (Webster has given the character of Marcello to the historical younger brother Flamineo. Bracciano had murdered his *unfaithful* wife Isabella long before he knew Vittoria.) Nevertheless, despite her apparent affection for Peretti (whom, it seems, she had warned not to venture forth on the night of his murder), Vittoria, much like Gertrude in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, very quickly accepted Bracciano, the probable instigator of her husband's murder, as her lover and then, very soon afterwards, as her husband (though because of the opposition of the Duke of Florence and Cardinal Montalto, later Pope Sixtus V, they had to undergo three ceremonies of marriage). Webster may not have known the facts about Vittoria's first marriage, but for whatever reason, his changing of the character of Vittoria's first husband is of major dramatic importance in making Vittoria a sympathetic character.
8. All quotations from *The White Devil* and *The Duchess of Malfi* are taken from texts as presented in *Drama of the English Renaissance*, Volume II: *The Stuart Period*, ed. Russell A. Fraser and Norman Rabkin, (New York: Macmillan, and London: Collier Macmillan, 1976) unless otherwise noted. The standard edition of Webster's *Complete Works* is that of F. L. Lucas, four volumes, (London: Chatto and Windus, 1927) to which all subsequent editions are greatly indebted.
9. Ostensibly that society is Italy, "that country stereotyped by English Renaissance playwrights as a sink of iniquity, the epitome of depravity, the home of murder, rape, and corruption both religious and sexual" (Ranald 19). Lever, however, reminds us that the writers of revenge tragedy [in which sub-genre *WD* and *DM* are often included] should not be judged by standards of historical realism. Their aim was not to recreate history but to express contemporary anxieties by transposing them into a period and setting which had become the type and pattern of naked despotism (Holdsworth 19). Although the setting is Italy, the issues of the plays are those of contemporary England. Lever notes further that "in *The Duchess of Malfi* the affairs of England, and in particular the inner life of the victims of state and their persecutors, shape the world of the play beneath its Italian surface..." (Holdsworth 201). Setting plays dealing with English issues in foreign locales is all part of what Greenblatt calls "negotiation".
10. Commenting on Flamineo's lines, Dena Goldberg notes the "implications of the 'rogues and vagabonds' statutes enacted in the latter part of Elizabeth's and in the reign of King James. The average Jacobean could take little comfort in being poor but honest, for these laws made poverty and economic dislocation punishable offenses, subject to imprisonment, whipping and deportation. I have even come across an instance where men were sentenced to death for being without means of support. The obvious implication of the laws was that if one had to choose between poverty and dishonesty, there was something to be said for the latter" (48). The historian John Guy in *Tudor England* (Oxford and New York: OUP, 1988 pbk) notes that throughout a large part of the Tudor age, it was assumed that "people were unemployed because they were idle, and then to deem 'wilful' unemployment criminal", a belief which "was modified as the century progressed" for "positive" as well as "negative" reasons (42).

11. In *Tragedy and Tragicomedy in the Plays of John Webster*, Jacqueline Pearson comments that "In *The White Devil*, a play whose effect is moulded by distancing and detachment, we view the action through characters who use comedy and comedy and tragedy become almost indistinguishable" (69), and that "a repeated pattern in *The White Devil* is that of a serious action followed by its parody.... The play piles up ironic repetitions so that human dignity and seriousness are mocked and deflated" (78). Boklund says:

There is something bordering on smugness in the remarks of Isabella, Cornelia and Marcello. If the irresponsibility of such virtue is not implied, the impracticality of it most certainly is. Both the virtuous Cornelia and the virtuous Marcello get their sustenance from the bounty of Brachiano, a source of income which Vittoria's and Flamineo's much condemned conduct has made available...[T]he average character in *The White Devil* is far too involved in the business of the world to make any moral law applicable at all (177-178).

12. Flamineo performs the role of what Kernan in *The Cankered Muse* calls the satyr, the cynical malcontent "whose own moral stains do not impair the ultimate correctness of his judgment" (148).
13. At the first performance of the play in 1612 at the Red Bull Theatre just outside the northwestern suburb of Clerkenwell in about 1605, a theatre which seems to have been the Jacobean equivalent of the grade B movie house, Webster felt he did not have such a discerning audience. He complains in his preface "To the Reader" in the published version "it was acted in so dull a time of winter, presented in so open and black a theatre, that it wanted (that which is the only grace and setting out of a tragedy) a full and understanding auditory: and since that time I have noted, most of the people that come to that playhouse, resemble those ignorant asses (who visiting stationers' shops, their use is not to inquire for good books but for new books)..." (See, for example, Fraser and Rabkin 432).
14. The group of thirty-two characters added to the third edition of Overbury's *Characters* (1615) is attributed to Webster. Critics wishing to establish a case against the Duchess of Malfi often compare her to the Character of "An Ordinary Widow." Such a position, however, fails to take into account the stereotypical nature of these pieces. It is hard to believe that Webster was so naive as to think that the real life of a milkmaid corresponded with his character of her. Forker refers to the "ordinary Widow" Character as a "satiric caricature" (297). So too, the Cardinal's character of the whore must be seen for what it is, a caricature and a conventional, stereotyped portrait. Forker adds that though others than those "with a vested interest in her disgrace" call Vittoria whore, "Monticelso's perfect character of the courtesan [3.2.79ff], his execration of her 'black lust' [3.1.7] is as much a comment on the cardinal's bitterness as on his defendant's morals" (263).
15. Webster may have in mind here the ineffectual efforts of Elizabeth and James through the sumptuary laws to restrain members of the middle class from dressing in the finery considered suitable only to the nobility.
16. Goldberg says that in *The Devil's Law Case* Webster, having rejected the "ideology of absolute power as a necessary imposition on the chaos of human nature" is "groping toward a more fundamental rationale for an ideology of social order" as the valid basis for law (114). In that play he shows Crispiano, who as a judge "manifests a sense of rule and order unusual for his time", in sharp contrast to

Monticelso in *The White Devil*, voluntarily withdrawing from the case “when he discovers he has been made a party to it by Leonora” (125). Ariosto, who takes his place, whose “primary allegiance to conscience is evident throughout the play” is “an equity judge” who “values natural and divine law above the law made by human beings” and is “honest and merciful enough to function in a court where a great deal is left to his own conscience” (123). Thus Webster seems to try to present a view of law operating on humane principles rather than rigid legalism and “power over”.

17. The quotation is from Frederic Boas, *An Introduction to Stuart Drama*, (Oxford: OUP, 1946), 198.

18. The historical Duchess of Amalfi was Giovanna D'Aragona who was married in 1490 at the age of twelve to Alfonso Piccolomini who died in 1498 shortly after becoming Duke of Amalfi. Giovanna bore him a posthumous son. Sometime thereafter she secretly married her steward Antonio Bologna, and in 1510 she left Amalfi for Loretto where Antonio had preceded her. Antonio was murdered in Milan by Daniele de Bozolo, possibly a paid assassin employed by the Duchess's brothers, though there is no clear evidence to connect the Arragonian brothers with the deaths of the Duchess and her family. Giovanna died the same year at her castle in Amalfi under suspicious circumstances. Webster's source was probably the version in William Painter's *Second Tome of the Palace of Pleasure* (1567) which is derived from the account in Francois de Belleforest's *Histoires Tragiques* whose source is the twenty-sixth story in the first part of Matteo Bandello's *Novelle* of 1554. (There are other accounts such as that in *The Theatre of God's Judgements* of Thomas Beard, 1597.) Behind Bandello's story there lies a large body of historical documentation. D. C. Gunby in his Penguin edition, John Webster, *Three Plays*, speculates that Webster, however, may not have realized he was dealing with historical material (433). Again, Gunnar Boklund, *The Duchess of Malfi: Sources, Themes, Characters* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U P, 1962) gives the most thorough discussion of the sources of the play. The story was also dramatized by the Spaniard Lope de Vega as *El Mayordomo de la Duquesa de Amalfi*, printed 1618.

19. Bogard says:

The Duchess of Malfi, superficial differences aside, has much in common with Vittoria Corombona. Although she might appear to be a development of Isabella rather than a sister-under-the-skin to Vittoria, it is truer to say that the Duchess is Vittoria, evil purged, passionate temperament alchemized to gentleness and sympathy. The Duchess would not have been able to make the sacrifice Isabella makes for Brachiano. To her such a sacrifice would involve loss of dignity and honor, for she is much more the noblewoman than Brachiano's wife. In this she is closer to Vittoria. Both women maintain their dignity and integrity above all things. Both, in different ways, possess courage and faith; neither will swerve from a chosen course, once it is deemed right. But here the resemblance ends and the Duchess emerges as a woman in her own right (*Tragic Satire* 63).

20. It is, of course, true that many of the categories into which Renaissance plays are classified are the designations of more recent critics. Such categories, however, as “Revenge Play,” “Love Tragedy,” etc., are based on rather obvious characteristics and are not exclusive. Peterson's “commonweal tragedy” is the product of rather too much ingenuity, and as she develops the concept, leaves little scope for

variation or exception. Only the most rigid of critics would see such categorization as completely determinative. Webster's two tragedies exhibit aspects of revenge tragedy, love tragedy and political tragedy.

21. Though its irregularity has been much harped on by negative, moralistic critics, the validity of the Duchess's and Antonio's marriage *Per verba de praesenti* has been well established. Though the Council of Trent—historically much later than the events on which the play is based—forbade it in Roman Catholic countries, it was accepted in Protestant jurisdictions and despite the Italian setting of the play, the English situation was in the minds of both playwright and audience. Although Henry VIII had abolished the practice in England, it had been restored under Edward VI with the intent that it must receive ecclesiastical ratification through a church service. Forker sees the Duchess's remark that "tis the Church/ That must echo this" as indicating that she intends some time to obtain such ratification, but Dena Goldberg believes that she is in fact challenging the Church's authority to sanctify what she sees as the natural response to the human sexual impulse (91-92).
22. Ferdinand's morbid obsession has been seen as incest. Goldberg, for example, in reference to Ferdinand's comment about "sin in us", speaks of "the strange bond Ferdinand feels exists between them" (91), and says that "there is every reason to accept the theory that incest is part of Ferdinand's complicated motivation. His preoccupation with his sister's body would be hard to explain in any other way" (93). Forker argues forcibly and at length (315-318) in favor of the view, saying that Webster has "anticipated some insights of twentieth century pathology" (318). Boklund rejects the idea (DM: *Sources*, 99-100), and although Lucas admits that the idea might have crossed Webster's mind, he sees it as "an inessential one" for an understanding of the play (Webster, *Works* II, 23-24). Lever notes:

The appearance of sexual anger in the brother-sister relationship results in a pattern of thought and behaviour which modern readers promptly diagnose as a case of subconscious incest. Yet it is by no means certain that this was the impression Webster wished to create. Jacobean playwrights were not at all reticent in their treatment of incest, and had he wished Webster could well have made Ferdinand's urges quite explicit. Dramatic construction and tragic effect explain his treatment more convincingly than a quest for psychological complexity beyond the capacity of the age, and in any case of little relevance to the main theme. Ferdinand's rages and remorse make their impact as a perversion of natural affection by deep-seated prejudices of rank and blood which, like the prejudices of race and class in our own society, need only factitious pretexts to erupt into savage violence (Holdsworth 207).

Lucas comments "that [incest] is an ingenious idea, though it seems to me out of the question that Webster meant his audience to take that view.... We find it difficult to imagine the violence of family pride in the sixteenth century Spaniard or Italian" (Webster, *Works* II, 23-24)—and, very probably, in many an English aristocrat. Frank Wigham, in "Incest and Ideology: *The Duchess of Malfi*" speaks of Ferdinand as "a threatened aristocrat, frightened of the contamination of his ascriptive social rank, and obsessively preoccupied with its defense." Thus "Ferdinand's incestuous [stance] toward his sister is a *social posture*, of hysterical compensation—a desperate expression of the desire to evade degrading association with inferiors" (Kastan and Stallybrass, 266. Original emphasis). To see the Duke as motivated by incest may be an over-reading of the text; but it is an over-reading to which the text gives some credence. The Duke is a morbidly self-interested and



self-absorbed character, and to see him as incestuous is in keeping with that characterization and adds to the strong contrast with the openness of the Duchess.

23. Goldberg goes on to note that the Cardinal's "sense of honour is not the deep passion we find depicted in the plays of the French classicists, but a mere concern for appearances" (84). Ferdinand, in fact, might be said to be the more passionate, even paranoid, about family honor.
24. Cohen writes of the reliance of the English Crown on "Parliament and above all of the gentry in the House of Commons" for support (122). He says further that the aristocracy, deprived of "its military function", was becoming "Increasingly civilian, commercial, and common...the ruling class was losing its stake in an absolutist state. Its interests were converging instead with those of the rapidly growing capitalist classes in the towns" (123). It was this situation that Stone has called "the crisis of the aristocracy." Stone points out that the aristocracy eventually recovered to a very considerable extent from this crisis, noting that "by the end of the seventeenth century the peers, like the Anglican Clergy and the King, were firmly back in the saddle" (6-7). Laslett shows that the "patriarchal system...succeeded in maintaining permanence in spite of shortness of life, the fluctuations of prosperity, the falling of leases, the wayward habits of young folk in service, and the fickleness of their employers" (76). As Stone notes, "The forces of inertia ensure an amazing degree of continuity in human affairs, whatever the strength of the pressures for change that are brought to bear" (12). (Those forces of inertia were the main enemies of women in the drama under consideration as well as, very probably, in the real world.) Yet it remains true that the aristocracy did for a time consider its position and stability threatened, and it is possible to see Ferdinand's and the Cardinal's concern, which borders on paranoia in the case of Ferdinand, over their sister's possible marriage in the light of this threat.
25. Forker notes that the Duchess's faith had not been "free of conflict and inconsistency" (324). That does not mean, however, that it was not genuine. As noted in the text, her religion is unorthodox, though she herself is not, perhaps, totally aware of her heterodoxy.

## CHAPTER FOUR. BEAUMONT AND FLETCHER: EVADNE

In Evadne in *The Maid's Tragedy* Beaumont and Fletcher have created a woman, somewhat like Webster's Vittoria Corombona, of almost awesome sexual power combined with an equally powerful ambition and strong will. Evadne is unlike Vittoria in that she repents of her antisocial conduct, but it is a mark of her strong will that her repentance, though it seems genuine at last, has to be forced from her at sword point. Furthermore, when roused to anger Evadne manifests a ferocity that Vittoria never demonstrates; and even after her repentance she remains an awesome and terrifying figure, the power of her sexuality and the strength of her will in no way diminished. Renouncing the role of King's mistress, she does indeed endeavor to find a place in society by assuming the role of submissive wife to Amintor. He, however, is so committed to conventional morality that he rejects her. Her power is too disruptive of and threatening to social peace and stability either for Amintor's acceptance or society's. Without the former, Evadne has no hope of the latter, and so she is left with no recourse but suicide.

The wider issue of the play, as many critics indicate, is that of royal absolutism and the abuse of power that such absolutism almost inevitably entails. That issue was very much in the minds of Englishmen during the reign of James I who was an ardent proponent of the doctrine of divine right. The tragic situation in *The Maid's Tragedy*, involving Amintor, Aspatia and Evadne and ultimately resulting in their deaths, is created by the King's abuse of his power in ordering Amintor to break his betrothal to Aspatia and marry Evadne to make "More honorable" the sinful relationship between Evadne and the King.<sup>1</sup> Such a circumstance has been seen as far-fetched, but Danby argues that the "unreality" of their plots enables the playwrights to make "a judgment...of the habits of mind of...a world of radical self-division and clashing

absolutes” (161). By placing their characters in radical situations where they are unable to decide between conflicting absolutes, Beaumont and Fletcher call into question a whole ethical structure based on such absolutes. The situation in *The Maid's Tragedy* may have been created as a reflection on James's claim that kings have the right to “make and unmake their subjects” whose “bodies and goods are due for their defence and maintenance” (*Defence of the Right of Kings*, quoted Bowers 171). The King forces Amintor into a position where he must make a choice between the absolutes of personal honor and allegiance to the doctrine of divine right. This dilemma so paralyzes him that he becomes a totally ineffectual non-hero throughout the rest of the action of the play. Amintor's ineffectuality then becomes an element in the destructive effect of the King's action on the two major women characters Aspatia and Evadne.

The maid of the title is ostensibly Aspatia. In fact, however, her role in the play, as many critics have noted, is somewhat marginal. As Bliss notes, “For Aspatia loss is certain but wholly arbitrary; she never even discovers the reason for the switch in brides” (101).<sup>2</sup> Many find her, as Leech does, “wearisome” (126) for what others have noted as her self-indulgent and almost perverse pleasure in her grief. In her long speech to her women in the second scene of Act Two, demonstrating “her mastery of the art of grieving in some of the most frequently admired passages of the canon” (Finkelpearl 194) by comparing herself to the suffering women of classical antiquity and Amintor to the classic betrayers of women, she urges her maidservants, whom she has warned to distrust “that beast man” (2.2.27), to indulge her by joining in her grief:

Come, lets be sad, my girls.  
That downcast of thine eye, Olimpias,  
Shows a fine sorrow—mark, Antiphila—  
Just such another was the nymph Oenone's  
When Paris brought home Helen. Now a tear,  
And then thou art a piece expressing fully  
The Carthage queen when from a cold rock,  
Full with her sorrow, she tied fast her eyes  
To the fair Trojan ships; and having lost them,

Just as thine does, down stole a tear. Antiphila,  
 What would this wench do if she were Aspatia?  
 Here she would stand 'till some pitying god  
 Turn'd her to marble.

(2.2.25-39.)<sup>3</sup>

Here, in a passage somewhat reminiscent of Richard II's similarly self-indulgent speech beginning "For God's sake, let us sit upon the ground/ And tell sad stories of the death of kings" (*Rich. II*, 3.2.155-156), Aspatia plays to the hilt the role of forsaken woman, directing Antiphila so to weave her tapestry as to give her likeness to the forsaken Ariadne as "Sorrow's monument" (2.2.74). Shullenberger calls her speeches the seductive "rhetoric of self-pity" (153).<sup>4</sup> By a kind of cruel irony, she has been required to attend on the wedding night that ought to have been her own. Yet she might have avoided the situation by feigning illness. Thus she gives a strong impression of indulgence in grief.

Aspatia's extreme characterization, however, dramatizes the real nature of her tragedy, for her rejection is, for her in her society, not only a personally painful circumstance but a major calamity. As Bliss says, "Aspatia's psychological annihilation, her sense of being lost in a wild desert is true" (105). By overriding her betrothal, the King shows the arbitrariness, the depersonalization, unfairness and precariousness of the woman's situation and circumstances in that society where the disposition of her life is so subject to male social dominance. Parting from Evadne on her wedding night, Aspatia says:

Madam, good night. May all the marriage joys  
 That longing maids imagine in their beds  
 Prove so unto you.

(2.1.86-88).

Aspatia had been one of those "longing maids" and now feels deeply the denial of "all the marriage joys". For all her perverse pleasure in her grief, Aspatia "reveals in an oblique and parodic way the rage against the masculine hierarchy which begins to haunt the play with the first words of Night in the masque" (Shullenberger 154). In Beaumont's and Fletcher's age and society where women were on the one hand

encouraged to become educated and to develop independent minds and on the other hand were constantly repressed by the weight of tradition, many women very probably felt such rage.

On the other hand, though the King's tyrannical act has denied Aspatia the role of wife which her society has taught her is the chief purpose of her life, her situation is not totally hopeless. There are other men in the world besides Amintor. Aspatia's morbid self-pity is set in sharp contrast to Evadne's strength and self-reliance. Furthermore, her morbidity and desire for death are in fact a very subtle and insidious means of obtaining a kind of perverse revenge on Amintor. Believing that by the breach of her betrothal her life is ended, she will make Amintor the instrumental cause of its end. Thus she will achieve revenge by making him feel guilty, first for betraying her, and finally for killing her.

Aspatia may be seen as representing the "chaste virgin" of the traditional and stereotypical separation of women into types. Evadne, then, represents the opposite pole of the dichotomy, the "whore". In the opening act, however, the court sees Evadne as a woman whose virtue matches her surpassing beauty, so that Amintor, who by the King's command becomes her husband, is the envy of all. The question arises why "lovely" (5.1.76) Evadne had so closely allied and identified herself with this King and his corrupt court? There must have been a time when Evadne was the "chastely sweet" woman that, before she stabs him, she tells the King she was. Danby calls the woman who appears to us on stage Beaumont's "White Devil" (187). The comparison is more appropriate than perhaps Danby realizes, for like Webster, Beaumont and Fletcher, in their treatment of Evadne, call into question the traditional, oversimplistic use of the word "whore". In this play which pits various social values, such as personal honor, royal absolutism and Courtly-Petrarchan concepts of ideal love against one another to

create insoluble dilemmas for the characters, notably Amintor, who espouse them, Evadne, who has seen through society's hypocrisies, prefers to take the main chance in order to liberate herself from enslavement to its strictures. By becoming the King's mistress in order to escape the traditional woman's subservient role, she makes herself, by the standards of the time, a whore.<sup>5</sup> The play, however, forces the audience, particularly in view of what happens to one like Aspatia who so abjectly bends to society's will, to question whether there was any better choice available for a woman of Evadne's nature and character.

Having, therefore, seen the way her society operates, and being an ambitious woman determined to rise to the highest possible level in her society, to be a king's mistress appears better to Evadne than to be the submissive wife of a lesser man; and, she makes that fact perfectly clear to the King himself. With an extraordinary and devastating honesty, she informs him that it is his position, not his person, that she loves. If he is overthrown, she will become the mistress of the usurper:

I swore indeed that I would never love  
A man of lower place, but if your fortune  
Should throw you from this height, I bade you trust  
I would forsake you and would bend to him  
That won your throne. I love with my ambition,  
Not with my eyes. (3.1.178-183)

She had shown a similar blunt honesty with Amintor on their wedding night when she denied him her bed, but by speaking thus with the King she shows herself a woman of remarkable courage.

The cited passage raises the question of who was the seducer and who the seduced in Evadne's becoming the King's mistress. Bliss says that Evadne was "willing" to be seduced by the King (89), and that may indeed have been the case, but in the light of Evadne's words to the King and of her strong, independent character, it seems possible

that Evadne might have been the seducer, or that at least she signaled a willingness to be seduced, that, in other words, she herself took the initiative in establishing the relationship. If, on the other hand, as she herself implies, the initiative was the King's, then he certainly played to her ambition.<sup>6</sup> Evadne's ambition, an aspect and an outgrowth of her strong personality, would at least have given her added incentive and stimulation to accede to the King's seduction, for she recognizes that in her society a woman's role is to be subservient and to endure repression, and that, therefore, a woman is too often likely to suffer Aspatia's fate, a fate which Evadne rejects. As Bliss notes, "a woman of passion and ambition, Evadne freely embraces the world discovered beneath society's platitudes. A Hobbesian reality of aggression, power, and lust offers her scope, the chance to shape her fortunes in a way denied her by the traditional order" (94).

Bliss says of *The Maid's Tragedy* that "No one of the principals [Aspatia, Amintor, Evadne, and Melantius] dominates the play" (89-90). Yet from the point of view of audience and reader response, and in emotional and psychological impact, Evadne dominates the play. In one sense, the central action is that involving Amintor and Melantius and their reactions to the King's seduction of Evadne and his violation both of Amintor's and Aspatia's betrothal and of Amintor's honor. Yet, says Shullenberger, "these characters prove too unstable and shifting to provide the psychological and the dramatic momentum and coherence which the conventional Jacobean Revenger provides. Instead, Amintor and Melantius are almost clinical studies of avoidance" (141). Evadne can be seen as "the sacrificial pawn in Melantius's strategy", but if so, Shullenberger asks, "Why, then does she emerge as the most awesome figure in the play?" It is partly because she has the courage to commit the crime, the murder of the King, "which the patriarchal warriors of the drama implicitly dread". Her power, in fact, "has been implicit from her first appearance in the play": it is the power of her

sexuality. Like, or perhaps even more than Vittoria Corombona, Evadne “radiates a sexual authority which she refuses to curb or shame” (Shullenberger 147).

Evadne’s power, however, is not merely sexual. She is a strong woman fully in command of herself. Lysippus, the King’s brother refers to her as

A lady,  
That bears the light above her, and strikes dead  
With flashes of her eye.... (1.1.74-76)

Such a description, while to some degree an expression of male reaction to a woman of Evadne’s great physical beauty, and strongly sexual in its overtones, yet more than merely sexuality, it suggests also a forceful character and personality.

It is, however, Evadne’s sexual power that most affects Amintor who at the king’s command has broken his betrothal to Aspatia to marry her. Later he will feel guilty for his betrayal of Aspatia, but initially he is overjoyed at the prospect of losing his “lusty youth” with her and of growing “old in her arms” (1.1.141-142). The sight of her prepared for what he thinks will be his marriage bed is able to “blot away the sad remembrance” of his momentary guilt on seeing Aspatia as he proceeds to the bridal chamber:

Away, my idle fears!  
Yonder she is the lustre of whose eye  
Can blot away the sad remembrance  
Of all these things. (2.1.133-136).

Even after the disillusionment of that wedding night, he still finds the peacefully sleeping Evadne so attractive and desirable that it is hard to disabuse himself of the Petrarchan view that such beauty could be a sign of anything other than inner virtue. Even when, at the end of the play, she comes to him with her hands red with the King’s blood, she can still exert power over Amintor. As a divine right absolutist he feels that



he must reject her as a regicide, yet he is forced to acknowledge that she awakens “something that troubles me”, and to recognize that “I lov’d thee once” (5.3.166-167).

Another aspect of Evadne’s power is her ability to see through the sham of her society’s moral pretensions to the hypocrisy beneath. In that, she contrasts sharply with other characters in the play, particularly the obsequious Amintor and the morbidly submissive Aspatia. Through that insight into her society and her great sexual influence, Evadne sees a means of escape from the kind of enslavement her society inflicts on women to which she will not allow herself to be subdued. She sees a way to avoid the exploitation that renders women, like Aspatia, dispensable and expendable. Although Evadne pities Aspatia, Brodwin says that “this pity is not a sympathetic emotion, rather a detached comment on the pathos that attends such lack of emotional control as she prides herself upon” (131). It is the somewhat condescending pity for one who is a victim of the social system by one who feels she has escaped its control.

Amintor, believing initially that her refusal to go to bed with him is the Petrarchan “coyness of a bride”, or perhaps the fulfilment of an oath to her as yet unmarried friends to maintain her virginity for one night after the marriage, is utterly dismayed and horrified by Evadne’s cynically disabusing and, in McLuskie’s words, “show stopping” rejoinder (193), “A maidenhead, Amintor,/ At my years!” (2.1.190-191). Tomlinson says “It has of course been made plain earlier what Evadne’s years amount to” (245). In fact, we are not told Evadne’s years, but Amintor’s reference to her “tender body” (2.1.137) suggests that “She is in fact a young woman” (Tomlinson 245). The normal assumption would be that she is a few years younger than Amintor, but Evadne’s sophisticated understanding of the reality behind her society’s facade of morality makes her seem both much older than probably she is and also older than Amintor who seems like a panting, love-sick adolescent in comparison. Danby, in fact,

speaks of the “adolescent intensities” of the world of James I and Charles I, and Bliss applies the expression to Amintor himself saying, “The ‘adolescent intensities’ are grounded in an adolescent reluctance to enter the complicated, disappointing, often mystifying adult world of compromise, deceit, and rebellious sexuality” (96).

The mores of his society and culture give Amintor conjugal rights and the expectation that his bride will come to him a virgin. It is clear from the outset that, whatever characters may believe in private, the moral realities of Rhodes are those of its king. He has commanded Melantius home from the wars, forbidden that commander’s brother from attending him there, and has done so because he requires their attendance at the wedding of Amintor and Evadne which he has ordered in defiance of Amintor’s previous betrothal to Aspatia. Having recognized that reality, Evadne sees society’s mores as mere shibboleths, and therefore, she rejects any “rights” that these shibboleths enjoin. Evadne’s insight into the hypocrisy of her culture’s social codes quickly disabuses Amintor of his belief in the efficacy, inviolability and, above all, the sacredness of those codes, and her maturity and sophistication beyond her seeming years is one more manifestation of the power she wields over him and over the King.

The wedding masque staged by the King’s command seems to tell Amintor that his conjugal expectations will be met. However, that masque, dominated as Shullenberger notes by Night and Cynthia’s rejection of “her own regenerative aspects” and from which Hymen is absent (136), is disturbingly ambiguous and anomalous. As Neill demonstrates, it ends on a note of irresolution and tension that is very likely to make the audience feel uneasy. Both the ending of the masque and much of its imagery foreshadow the tensions of the wedding night scene and many of the other developments of the plot.<sup>7</sup> Bliss says that Amintor had seen “himself and his relationships, as friend and lover, in terms of these bright romantic ideals” of his culture

(93) which the masque purports to demonstrate, but Evadne, by her hard-nosed realism, “explodes the myths by which Amintor has lived” (93), and her “truths threaten the fabric of [his] world” (94). He “becomes lost in the gap between appearance and reality, precept and practice” (95).

Once so confident in the orderliness of his world, he now finds that the moral absolutes of his culture no longer give him guidance or direction. He is tossed back and forth from one discredited absolute to another. Evadne’s beauty tells him she is the ideal of womanhood, but her refusal to consummate the marriage and her confession that she is the King’s mistress tell him she is a whore. His sense of honor tells him he must have revenge on the one who has cuckolded him, but because that person is the King, his commitment to the doctrine of divine right tells him he must not and cannot. Amintor’s adherence to divine right makes him manipulable. He has been manipulated by the King to renounce his betrothal to Aspatia and marry Evadne who in her turn calls on the doctrine to forbid him his conjugal rights. The King then forces him, again on the authority of divine right, to be an acquiescent cuckold. Finally, Melantius invokes the doctrine to prevent Amintor from disrupting his own plans for revenge on the King. The doctrines of absolutism could hardly be submitted to a more intense and penetrating scrutiny and criticism.

Not only does the doctrine of divine right make Amintor manipulable, it also paralyses him morally and effectually. He sees the King as a tyrant and, so, deserving death, yet, at the same time he sees him as “the Lord’s anointed”, and so, untouchable.<sup>8</sup> His inability to face the reality that Evadne exposes to him causes him to cling in desperation to the doctrine of divine right and the inviolability of the King’s person in an attempt to give some order and meaning to his so violently disoriented existence. Bliss comments that Amintor, his belief in all the courtly ideals of romantic love

devastated, “retreats to social meanings but must accept them in the newly devalued sense Evadne has exposed” (96). Amintor, who has shown himself valiant on the battlefield, where, in a sense, conduct is a simple matter of obeying orders, is left totally paralyzed morally, and completely incapable of action in the social world of the court.

Not only Amintor, however, but also the King himself suffers diminution through Evadne. After the bridal night, in a “small conspiracy” which, Leech says, “humanizes Evadne” (123) and indicates that she is not completely heartless, Evadne agrees, for the sake of Amintor’s reputation, to play in public the role of loving wife. Because Amintor plays too well the part of happy bridegroom, the King suspects that Evadne has, in fact, yielded to Amintor’s considerable charms and consummated the marriage. Therefore, he accuses Evadne of infidelity to him. He rebukes Evadne saying, “I see there is no lasting faith in sin:/ They that break word with Heaven will break again/ With all the world and so thou dost with me” (3.1.169-171). The implication that he has invoked Heaven to enforce Evadne’s fidelity to his lust makes a mockery of the religion which on so many occasions he indicates he professes.<sup>9</sup> It is at this point that Evadne disabuses the King of any notion he might have had that she loves him for himself but that it is only his status makes him different in her eyes from any other man. At the same time, she indicates that she believes his status depends, not on divine sanction, but on his own ability to maintain it. In saying that she does not love with her eyes, Evadne indicates that her conduct is not determined by ungovernable passion. Brodwin calls Evadne “totally lacking in feminine wiles” (135). She plays no games. With the King, as with Amintor, she is brutally honest about herself and her attitudes and feelings toward him. “Evadne’s seduction”, whether his of her or hers of him, Bliss says, “has for her demythologized the concept of kingship” (95) so that hierarchy no longer holds, if it ever had, any mystique for her.

Shullenberger says, it is her sexual power that “is the key to her independence of, and defiance of, the men who imagine they control her” (148). A strong will and the intelligence to control and direct it, however, figure equally with her sexuality in making Evadne so awesome and overpowering in her dealings with men. There is no doubt, however, of her strong sexuality. She tells Amintor on the wedding night:

Alas, Amintor, think'st thou I forbear  
 To sleep with thee because I have put on  
 A maiden's strictness? Look upon these cheeks,  
 And thou shalt find the hot and rising blood  
 Unapt for such a vow. No, in this heart  
 There dwells as much desire, and as much will,  
 To put that wished act in practice as ever yet  
 Was known to woman; and they have been shown  
 Both. But it was the folly of thy youth  
 To think this beauty, to whatsoe'er  
 It shall be call'd, shall stoop to any second.  
 I enjoy the best, and in that height  
 Have sworn to stand or die.

(2.1.282-294)

Here she admits to strong sexual desire, but also informs Amintor that she has it under the control of her ambition. It is both her desire and her control over her desire, not her strong sexuality alone, that makes her so powerful a character. She conforms to no stereotype, not to that of the chaste virgin that Amintor expects, nor to that of the whore that the King expects, and certainly not to that of the proverbial “weaker vessel”. She is determined to use her strength and power to be her own woman, not the slave of the male controlled and oriented social system.

Although Evadne is determined to free herself from the social constraints placed by her culture on the lives of women, she does not ultimately succeed. She is as much a victim of the system as Aspatia even though she knows the system has no special divine sanction. “She must live within the patriarchal social and political system and preserve its appearances, but she no longer subscribes to its ideals” (Bliss 94). Unwittingly, in fact, she has committed herself to it. By becoming the King's mistress, Evadne rises to the top of the social pyramid, but she cannot thereby escape from the male-dominated

structures which imprison every woman in the society. Despite her strongly independent spirit and sexual power, she has no real escape from a system which one way or another imprisons virtually everyone. "In choosing the king for her lover, and vowing to have no one less than a king" she "implicitly consents to [the system's] authority, and sets herself up for its judgment on her sexual audacity" (Shullenberger 148).

Her inability to escape is demonstrated by her treatment by her brother Melantius when he knows of her "whoredom" as mistress to the King. He has nothing but contempt for her, and she becomes his victim. Similarly, after her repentance, Amintor says he forgives her, but it is a very cold, formal forgiveness which does not, as true forgiveness is supposed to do, restore her to her true place as his wife which she now wishes to be in reality and not just in name. Amintor's attitude is similar to that of Frankford in Heywood's *A Woman Killed With Kindness* who also says he forgives his wife for her adultery but banishes her, apparently with the author's approval, from his presence and can bring himself to anything like real reconciliation only at the moment of her death. Similarly, Amintor's kiss of forgiveness, he says, is "The last kiss we shall ever take", and he adds self-righteously:

would to Heaven  
The holy priest that gave our hands together  
Had given us equal virtues. (4.1.273-275)<sup>10</sup>

Brodwin says that Amintor throughout the play continues to cling "to his formerly smug estimation of his worth" (135), and now, stereotypically and self-righteously, he sees Evadne as "tainted goods." Amintor, who knows in his heart that he has done wrong in abandoning Aspatia, invokes the double standard. Boys will be boys, but girls may not be girls. A woman is expected to forgive and accept her wayward husband any number of transgressions and receive him again to her bed, as, for example, Helena accepts Bertram in the almost cynically titled *All's Well That Ends Well* and as Mariana receives Angelo in *Measure for Measure*. (Though it may be argued that these gentlemen sinned

in intent rather than in deed, that was only because the women, and in *Measure for Measure* to some degree the “Duke of Dark Corners,” were too smart for them.) A woman, on the other hand, who once transgresses has committed what is seen as virtually the unforgivable sin. In sacrificing her chastity a woman sacrifices all. She receives no forgiveness, despite the promise of the husband, in the words of *The Book of Common Prayer*, to take his wife, as she takes him, “for better, for worse”, a promise which implies that he ought, as much as his wife, to restore his erring spouse to full conjugal rights. Had Amintor really forgiven Evadne, he ought to have taken her immediately into his bed. However, Amintor is totally committed to social convention, his conventionality symbolized by his morally paralyzing commitment to the doctrine of divine right. In saying “He/ Has not my will in his keeping” (2.1.127), Amintor recognizes that the King’s authority lies in the public, not the private, domain, but by obeying the King, he has compromised his own moral seriousness.

Yet despite his avowal that “The gods thus part our bodies”, Evadne believes that after she has killed the King, his rival, Amintor will welcome her to the marriage bed which she initially denied him. In particular, she believes that her intended murder of the King, which she thinks will free her from her oath and Amintor from the constraints imposed on him by his commitment to the doctrine of divine right, will make him accept her as the wife she had initially refused to be. Amintor, however, judges her merely as a regicide and so, unforgivable. That she has acted in part on his behalf and at the instigation of his friend and her brother Melantius does not in Amintor’s mind in any way mitigate her crime as certainly it is meant to in the mind of the audience. Again, absolutism as a standard of conduct is subjected to critical scrutiny.

Evadne’s repentance is problematic. Leech finds it unconvincing (123), and many other modern readers might also find it so. Yet the scene of her repentance, modeled, it

seems clear, on the Closet Scene in *Hamlet*, is theatrically one of the most powerful in the play, and a theatre audience would probably be convinced by it at least while watching it in performance. Wallis argues that Beaumont's and Fletcher's original audience would have seen the powerful effect of rhetoric, would have felt "the invincible Renaissance conviction of the persuasiveness of eloquence" at work in this scene (222). It is not necessary to believe, however, that everyone accepted the age's recorded ideas. Brodwin is probably more to the point: Evadne has felt herself invulnerable, but now, as "never before [she has] been brought to her knees" and this fact tells her "she is not invulnerable to [her brother's] sword." It is her recognition of her vulnerability, not "any ethical agreement with her brother [that] alters her feelings" (137). Thus, Evadne's repentance "is not...as profound a change as might appear...She understands that all her emotional control and royal support have not, in fact, rendered her invulnerable and it is precisely this course which is now proving most dangerous for her" (138). Her change, Brodwin says, is a matter of self-preservation.

Furthermore, Evadne, for all her seemingly cold, remorseless self-control, is capable of pity for Aspatia and Amintor. Though Brodwin calls it a "strangely detached pity", it is pity nonetheless. Evadne's humanity is not completely suppressed, and in that there is some basis for her belief that her repentance, however it was brought about, is genuine. It is clear also from Evadne's initial greeting, "Oh, my dearest brother,/ Your presence is more joyful than this day/ Can be unto me" (1.2.109-111), to her brother that she loves Melantius deeply.<sup>11</sup> Melantius exploits that love through what, in the upshot, proves to be a hypocritical appeal to family honor. Nevertheless, Evadne respects that honor and believes, when Melantius urges the point, that her conduct has sullied it. This is one of the few instances in the play where Evadne is shaken and her coolly controlled stance is undermined. The scene, in fact, shows that the ultimate basis of this society's control of women is not morality or family honor, but physical force.



When all else fails, it is male bullying and violence which secures woman's conformity.<sup>12</sup>

Thus, Evadne is the victim of both physical and emotional bullying. Wallis denies that Melantius "would have appeared a bully. Under such extreme provocation [as Evadne's having become the King's mistress] Jacobean fathers and brothers would be forgiven the use of force and the threat of death. The family honor was at stake. The audience would have been in sympathy with Melantius' behavior" (232). Some perhaps would, but it is unsafe to assume all would. Some in Beaumont's and Fletcher's audience might very well have found Melantius's conduct reprehensible and sympathized with Evadne, knowing as they do that Melantius intends to insure the overall success of his plan, but also his own safety, by gaining control of the fort. As he himself says:

To take revenge and lose myself withal  
Were idle, and to 'scape, impossible,  
Without I had the fort...  
I must have it.

(3.2.290-293)

Melantius determines revenge on the King, but rather than carry it out himself, he makes Evadne his instrument and agent. Finkelpearl, whose main purpose is to show the justification of the tyrannicide, feels unlimited admiration for Melantius for all his actions. He says that

Melantius's aim was to avenge the dishonor done to him, his family, and his friend; then, somehow, the survivors were to live happily. With all three "maids" dying, his plans went awry, but Melantius cannot be blamed for any of their deaths. At the end of the play the feeling is that the tyrannicide has the "better cause" and that thanks to him a temperate king who will not act like a tyrant is on the throne (203).<sup>13</sup>

Certainly, no one is sorry to see the end of the King; and it may be that Lysippus will reign better than his brother. His final comments, however, are so platitudinous

that his seriousness may be questionable. That aside, it is very difficult to see that Melantius, having made Evadne the instrument of his revenge and then secured his own safety in the action, really cares at all about Evadne's fate. Either she will kill the King, or he will kill her. On the grounds that she would rather kill than be killed, Melantius forces Evadne to be his agent of revenge, implying all the while that her act will be personally redemptive, while he himself avoids the charge and taint of regicide. By the morally questionable act of forcing his sister to do his "dirty work" for him, Melantius casts doubt not only on the reality and the depth of his rejection of the doctrine of divine right but also on his courage. In fact, it seems almost that he forces Evadne to kill the King for the very purpose of making her a regicide in order to punish her for sullyng the family name by becoming a whore as the King' mistress.

Standing secure on the walls of the fort while his sister goes about her grim business, Melantius never mentions Evadne. At the end he is totally callous about her death. Craik records a modern performance of *The Maid's Tragedy* in which the actor playing Melantius kicks Evadne's corpse when Diphilus draws his attention to it (cf. 32). This seems excessive, but it is an excess for which the text gives some warrant, for from the moment of Melantius's discovery that his sister has been the King's mistress, he has nothing but contempt for her and is indifferent to her fate. Hence, it is unlikely that the playwrights intended their audiences to see Melantius's attitude toward Evadne as their own. At the denouement, with Aspatia, Evadne, and Amintor all lying slain or dying, the only one Melantius can think of is Amintor. When Diphilus tries to turn his brother's attention to what he feels should be his greater grief, "your sister slain", Melantius replies:

Why, Diphilus, it is  
A thing to laugh at in respect to this.  
Here [in Amintor] was my sister, father, brother, son,  
All that I had. (5.3.266-269)

This from the one who invoked family honor to bring Evadne to repentance! It is difficult not to believe with Ornstein (177) and Shullenberger (147) that Melantius has sacrificed Evadne and used her simply as a pawn in his game.

What most diminishes Melantius, however, is the fact that by placing friendship above family, Melantius, strong, valiant, and, it had seemed, indifferent to the taboos surrounding royalty, now shows himself as much an absolutist as Amintor. For Amintor, divine right had been the absolute of absolutes. Now for Melantius it is friendship. As an absolute commitment to divine right had made a moral coward out of Amintor, now an absolute commitment to friendship shows Melantius as callous. There is, of course, great theatrical value in the conflict of absolutes, but the demonstration of that conflict suggests the inadequacy of absolutism as a moral basis; for where absolutes come into conflict, one will predominate, and that predominance seems to arise from nothing other than individual preference and bias.

Finkelpearl argues that Melantius acts on the older view that, in extreme circumstances where the monarch is a tyrant and where no other course is available, the subject has the right, even the duty, to assassinate him as Knox urged the English to assassinate the Roman Catholic Queen Mary (Finkelpearl 197). In fact, however, Melantius acts on the basis of the code of martial honor, a code which also conflicts with the doctrine of divine right, and it is that which is implicit in Melantius's call to Lysippus from the battlements:

Thy brother,  
While he was good, I call'd him king, and serv'd him...  
But since his hot pride drew him to disgrace me...  
I have flung him off with my allegiance;  
And stand here mine own justice, to revenge  
What I have suffered in him....

(5.2. 40-49).

What one detects here is not so much outrage at the King's tyranny as at the personal dishonor Melantius himself suffers. This is not an inconsequential concern, but being a private rather than a public one, lacks the appeal of personal nobility. As Bliss says, Melantius's acts and his justification of them are marked by a "disturbing egotism" (101) which undercuts any view of him as an exemplary character. His treatment of Evadne is both inhumane and unbrotherly. In fact, even though the view is not fully in accord with Melantius's character portrayal, Melantius's conduct toward Evadne lends some weight to Shullenberger's contention that even for Melantius "the king is taboo" (146). No matter how much he justifies the killing of the King as necessary and right, and that Evadne is the proper agent for it, he himself still seems afraid to take the risk of doing the deed himself. Thus it is hard to dispel the sense that, having used Evadne to do his dirty work, he abandons her to her fate so that he can escape with impunity.

The scene in which Evadne kills the King is one of the most dramatically powerful in the play. Unlike Vittoria Corombona, whom, in the power of her personality, she resembles, Evadne is a reluctant murderess. "All the gods," she tells Melantius, "forbid it" (4.1.146). When Melantius, showing that he no more respects the doctrine of divine right than she does, insists that "all the gods require it" (4.1.147), she then says that "'Tis too fearful" (4.1.148), only to have Melantius rejoin that she is "valiant in his bed" (4.1. 149). Once committed to the murder, however, she is ferocious in her execution of it, more ferocious than Vittoria has ever shown herself to be. Furthermore, also unlike Vittoria, Evadne, even though she does so partly under compulsion in a deed which she initially finds repugnant, acts, not through intermediaries, but in her own behalf. Her taking this action which Melantius avoids on highly questionable grounds, and which Amintor simply could not have taken because of his complete moral paralysis, shows Evadne as more courageous than either of the leading male characters.

Evadne had demonstrated her capacity for ruthlessness when she rejected Amintor; now, in an ironic reversal of her wedding night, she turns her ferocity on the King, whom she murders as an act of revenge both for herself and for Amintor. When she has disabused the King of his first belief that she has bound him as part of a love game, somewhat as she disabused Amintor of his idea that she refused his bed out of “the coyness of a bride”, the King asks “How’s this Evadne?” She replies:

I am not she, nor bear I in this breast  
 So much cold spirit to be call’d a woman;  
 I am a tiger; I am anything  
 That knows not pity. (5.1.63-67).

Despite her repentance, Evadne is not cowed but remains what she always had been, a woman of awesome power. As Shullenberger (149) and Brodwin (137) have noted, Evadne is as formidable after her repentance as before. Andrews says that in disclaiming womanhood, somewhat as Lady Macbeth had done, Evadne “speaks as if her transformation were more radical than is actually the case” (74). The First Gentleman, when he discovers the King’s body, finds it hard to “believe/ A woman could do this” (5.1.127). Evadne, we remember, has acted as Melantius’s agent in the role of revenger, a traditionally masculine role.

The scene, in fact, sees Evadne, a woman, wield a dagger. Though a dagger, as Freud suggests, may not always be a phallic symbol, Evadne’s dagger takes on erotic implications because she uses it on the man who had violated her lying in the same bed where the violation had occurred. This is a kind of bizarre reversal of the murder scene in *Othello* where the Moor enacts a similarly symbolic murder by strangulation of Desdemona in a bed covered by their wedding sheets. There, however, the bed has been violated only in Othello’s imagination. Each blow she strikes Evadne calls a “love trick”, and the words “die” and “kill”, used here literally, resound with ironic echoes of their sexual connotations. Neill says that “On her wedding night a maid ‘dies’ in two

senses: there is the 'death' of sexual climax and the consequent 'death' of her virgin self: in the morning she is reborn as a wife" (121). Aspatia has been denied the "death" of virginity that should have been hers. Evadne had "died" to her virginity in the King's bed, but only in name had she awakened from Amintor's as a wife. Perhaps that is Evadne's reason for calling herself "the most wrong'd of women" (5.1.111.) The bridegroom also "dies" in the marriage because for a man sexual climax was thought to shorten his life by a day and therefore was a little death, but Amintor had not died the bridegroom's "death". And now the King who had "died" a little death when he "killed" Evadne's virginity, now dies in reality at her hands. Evadne's words and deeds in this scene redound with ironic echoes and re-echoes of the bizarre actions which form the prelude to the final tragedy. Evadne's oscillation "between the desire to damn [the king's] soul and the desire to save it" (75) which Andrews notes reflects her internal struggle between the fiercely independent nonconformist she is at heart and the woman who endeavors to bring herself into conformity with society's dictates. Despite this oscillation, Evadne here shows herself the tiger she had told the King she is, and her sexual power, initiative and aggressiveness assume a new ferocity and a strange, ironic twist.

In casting Evadne in the traditionally male role of avenger, Beaumont and Fletcher show that her power and will are qualitatively akin to those normally associated with men. That combination of her feminine sexuality with male power make her a threat to the hierarchical order which rest on traditional male-female stereotypes. Thus Amintor's final rejection of her represents the traditional, masculine-oriented society's rejection of the woman who steps out of line by asserting her own authenticity. And, like Vittoria Corombona, a woman of Evadne's powerful independence is a threat to that traditional order. Neither Amintor nor his society can tolerate or contain a woman like Evadne any more than Vittoria's society could tolerate her. So not only her

society, but the play itself, says that Evadne must die. Her death is the necessary “negotiation” which enables what Finkelpearl sees as a tragedy “as menacing to the institution of kingship as any in Jacobean drama” to pass the censors (199). More than the divine right of kings, however, the play challenges the moral and religious assumptions on which social order rests.

Having been convinced by her brother that by murdering the King she will redeem herself, Evadne feels that, thus cleansed, she can give herself to Amintor as the chaste bride he had originally expected, and so win his love. She now not only professes the genuine love for Amintor which he had once desired, she has redeemed his honor by killing the man who had cuckolded him. Amintor, however, clinging still to his belief in the sacredness and inviolateness of the King’s person, sees her act as further blackening her character. A “maidenhead” once lost, cannot be restored; its loss can only be forgiven. Having already shown that he is not capable of forgiveness, Amintor refuses her appeal to be received into his bed, angrily dismissing and rejecting her as both whore and now regicide. Yet, his anger and his rejection are in part defence mechanisms against the strong emotional and sexual appeal Evadne still has for him as one whom he recognizes he had once loved. By saying “There is no end to woman’s reasoning”, he invokes the old cliché of the voluptuous woman’s wiles which can overcome the strongest man’s reason and seduce him to sin.

Mary Beth Rose’s argument that Jacobean tragedy examines the conflicts, contradictions and tensions raised by the Protestant exaltation of marriage to equal status with public duty is relevant to *The Maid’s Tragedy* as well as to plays such as *Othello* and *The Duchess of Malfi*. No matter what her crimes may be, Evadne remains Amintor’s wife whom he had promised “to have and to hold...for better, for worse...to love and to cherish.” As her husband, it is his duty to stand by her in what is bound to

be her time of trial. Again, Amintor judges her by a questionable absolutism, and the playwrights appear to raise the question of where a man's first duty lies. For Amintor it has always been to his sovereign, but the play over all, and this scene in particular, casts serious doubt on the validity of such exclusive and absolutist commitments. Earlier Amintor had acknowledged that he betrayed Aspatia in marrying Evadne at the King's command, recognizing, as noted, that the King "[had] not [his] will in keeping" (2.1.127). Now, once again, he permits his public commitments to interfere improperly with his personal ones. After belatedly trying to prevent Evadne's suicide, he discovers that the "youth" he has slain is in fact Aspatia, his former betrothed, and he now turns to her in love and remorse. The play thus powerfully implies that a man's first duty is not to the state but to the woman to whom he has committed his love. In accepting at the end the woman he ought to have married, Amintor demonstrates how he should have behaved toward the woman he did marry.

Though Amintor becomes aware of Aspatia's identity only after Evadne's death, and neither woman is ever aware of the other's presence, the bringing together in the final scene of the two women whom Amintor has loved highlights the complication in his relationships. Not having been allowed to forget his betrayal of Aspatia in taking Evadne as his wife, Amintor is unsettled by the memory of that betrayal throughout the course of the drama. The presence of the two women whom he has loved also makes clear why, ultimately, Amintor, no matter what morally he ought to have done, could never accept Evadne. Her powerful personality is simply too much for him to handle, as she would have been for any man brought up with traditional expectations of a "chaste, silent, and obedient" wife. The passive Aspatia fulfilled those requirements; Evadne rejected and overthrew them. Amintor cannot accept a woman who so magnificently flouts the fundamental conventions of social order. Though at the end Evadne seeks to become Amintor's wife in fact as well as name, her change of heart in regard to her



relationship to the King in no way changes the kind of woman she is. It is as unlikely that this “tiger” who killed the King could ever become a traditional obedient, subservient wife as it is that Amintor could ever have accepted her. Though Melantius coerces her by his sword, the only one who could subdue Evadne’s spirit is Evadne herself, and that she does when she realizes that there is no place for her in traditional society. A woman who challenges not only the accepted mores of her society but also its fundamental organizing principle, can win the forgiveness of such a society only by her death. Even then, she receives no forgiveness and, except briefly from Amintor, little compassion or understanding.

Evadne says that she strikes her last mortal blow against the King “For the most wrong’d of women!” (5.1.110-111)—herself. She had chosen to become the King’s mistress to fulfil her ambition. How then is she “the most wrong’d of women”? In making Evadne his mistress, the King tried to possess her sexual power, to make it his own, and found that, in fact, she was using him as much as he was using her. Melantius, on the other hand, by the primal method of force and the threat of death, subdues Evadne’s power to his will. However, as noted, she is quite as formidable after her repentance as she was before. The attempt to control and possess the power of her sexuality is one way in which she is “the most wrong’d of women.” As such she represents all women in a society which fears women’s sexuality and which therefore must deny them legitimate scope. On the one hand, woman is reduced to a reproductive mechanism to provide men with heirs and as Byron could still say nearly two centuries later, “to breed a nation” (*Don Juan* 14.24.7-8.) On the other hand she is trivialized and made a plaything.<sup>14</sup> The King has tried to make Evadne the latter, but finds that Evadne knows what happens to mistresses and determines to prevent its happening to her. In telling him that she will reject him for the one who usurps his throne, she tells

the King that she has assumed the male prerogative of casting off a lover who no longer pleases.

However, even as the King's mistress, Evadne is subjected to the social structures of her society. William Archer criticized the play because, as the King's mistress, Evadne appears to have no influence on the King. Archer would seem to have wanted Beaumont and Fletcher to have written a different kind of play which portrayed Evadne as the power behind the throne, a power which one imagines she might have been able to exert. However, through the bizarre triangular relationship of Evadne, Amintor and the King, the playwrights appear to have intended to challenge the doctrine of divine right by showing the tyranny of a king justifying on the authority of that doctrine his assumption of the right to own his subjects and to control their private lives. In this way, they question also the structures of a society that encourages such a doctrine and show that in such a society, women, no matter how personally strong they are, have no real power or influence.

Ultimately, however, it is in her submission to the expected social role of obedient female that Evadne is "most wrong'd". In this submission, she acts somewhat as Desdemona does when, at the end of *Othello*, in a final attempt to regain Othello's love, she becomes against her nature the submissive woman society demands. Vittoria Corombona and the Duchess of Malfi, on the other hand, although their fates are no different from Evadne's, retain their integrity of person to the end. Cleopatra at the end of a life in which she has refused to allow herself to be dominated even by the man she loves, rather than submit to force, here the force of imperial Rome, commits suicide and so retains her integrity of person. Evadne's suicide is the suicide of despair and defeat. Her submission is the archetypal submission of all women to male physical power, as Agrippa had seen when he said that "women being subdued as it were by

force of arms, are constrained to give place to men and obey their subduers" (*Treatise* Sig G verso). Evadne initially submits under a threat to her life. As Bliss says, "Melantius destroys his sister by bringing her back within the fold of the system in which her actions as a free agent condemn her as a whore" (98). Once she has made that submission, she attempts to compromise and submit to woman's traditional subordinate role. For all that she does so, like Desdemona, as an act of desperation, Evadne in fact, betrays herself.

Cohen says that *The Maid's Tragedy* "both founds and perfectly represents the form" of the pathetic tragedy, a form which he says "aims to elicit a pitying response from its audience" (370). At first glance, one would suspect that Cohen bases his claim on the fate of Aspatia, but, though initially one might not think such a powerful woman pitiful, there is something pitiable in the fate of Evadne too in that she feels she must compromise herself to try to find love and acceptance. Just as Desdemona, after her independence of mind has got her into trouble, tries to conform to the pattern of the submissive wife, so also, for the love of Amintor Evadne too attempts to play that role. It is a role totally inconsistent with her character, probably even more so than it is with Desdemona's. Her endeavor to submit herself to that role is in itself pitiable, and her inevitable rejection all the more so. Nevertheless, as the only major character who has dared to act and to risk all on the basis of her character, Evadne remains a genuinely tragic figure.

Ultimately, the proud independent Evadne is subdued, suppressed, and rejected like the passive Aspatia. Aspatia and Evadne together represent the circumstances of women in a male ordered and dominated society. Both Aspatia in her conformity and Evadne in her rebellion are destroyed by that society. Evadne violates social order, but there seems no other choice available to her, and she is some respects admirable for

her refusal of woman's conventional role. Though their cases are extreme and their characters completely opposed to one another, Aspatia and Evadne nonetheless demonstrate that woman, whatever her nature, is a chattel, a possession, and as such, disposable in whatever way the men who own her may choose. Shullenberger calls *The Maid's Tragedy*

a tragedy of maids in the generic sense, for both the central women characters are destroyed by masculine court intrigues. Aspatia and Evadne are inverse images of each other. Aspatia is the passively suffering abandoned woman who dresses like a man as if male clothing brings with it aggressive behavior. Evadne is the sexually aggressive woman who determines the fate of men, until she is brain-washed into a docile yet murderous femininity. If the idea of monarchy is the secret motive which determines the action or inaction of Melantius and Amintor, the idea of maidenhood or maidenhead is the tragic crux and driving obsession of Aspatia and Evadne (154).

The idea of maidenhead obsessed all women in Renaissance society and was the cause of much emotional and psychological suffering.

In Evadne, Beaumont and Fletcher have created a woman who is the embodiment and representation of woman's sexual power and her desire for independence from male domination. She uses her sexual power and strength of mind to attempt to escape the male-imposed restrictions and constrictions her society places on women. As with Vittoria Corombona, her sexuality is her only means to obtain the freedom she craves; and also, as with Vittoria, the only avenue open to her is an illicit one. In becoming the King's mistress she believes she has made that escape, but in fact, she has made an incongruous alliance with the bearer of the ultimate power in the society whose hypocrisy she so clearly perceives and repudiates. That there is for her no escape from the structures of society is a major cause of her tragedy. Furthermore, when Melantius discovers her liaison with the King, he destroys her illusion that her position was invulnerable. When the claims of family honor are enforced at sword point, she surrenders to social convention, and that surrender is her undoing and her death.

Within the play, men judge Evadne, as they do all the other women in all the other plays examined in this study, by the conventional standards. She herself in the end is divided between her “sexual audacity” and acceptance of the conventional role of women. By those conventional standards she has been judged a whore, and once having acquired that label, she cannot escape it. In fact, her efforts to clear herself only compound her guilt in the eyes of the ultra-conventional Amintor, the “Tory Bridegroom” (Finkelpearl 189). The play as a totality, however, does not submit her to that simplistic judgment. She is portrayed as motivated by far more than simply sexual passion or lust. She is motivated primarily by ambition, and her sexuality is the only means available to her of achieving that ambition in a society and culture that has no place for a strong and ambitious woman such as she. Nor can that society see her sexuality as anything other than a threat to male identity and authority that must be controlled by reducing her to a possession. Evadne, therefore, should not be judged by any simplistic appeal to the conventional standards of her era. There is some evidence that she was not so judged at the time when the play first appeared. The poet Robert Herrick, who was to become a priest of the Established Church, praised “her ardent vitality when she ‘swells with brave rage’ ” which, he said, “makes her comely everywhere” (Finkelpearl 205).

Far from writing, as traditional criticism would have it, a decadent, sensationalist play for the amusement of a decadent court, Beaumont and Fletcher in *The Maid's Tragedy* have created what was, for its time, the very kind of social drama which Archer advocated and championed, a compelling play which boldly challenges many of the fundamental assumptions of its society, not only the doctrine of divine right, but the whole concept of absolutism whether in politics or in morality. Rather than making a moral society, such absolutism creates irreconcilable moral conflicts such as Amintor faces, or it blinds people to other values and perverts basic human sensitivities, as with

Melantius's callous indifference to his sister Evadne's death. Even more, the play questions at the most fundamental level the society's attitudes toward and treatment of women, undermining its claim of divine sanction for women's subservience by showing instead that the prescription of their docility and chastity is, in fact, the suppression of their natures by nothing short of brute force. Beaumont and Fletcher have exposed through both Aspatia and Evadne that woman in European society is that society's victim.

## END NOTES TO CHAPTER FOUR

1. Amintor, of course, does not discover this fact until the wedding night when Evadne refuses to consummate the marriage. This use of surprise has been a basis for the charge of decadence against Beaumont and Fletcher. However, as in good detective stories, the playwrights usually provide clues which anticipate their surprise revelations. In *The Maid's Tragedy*, the irony of Evadne's greeting of Melantius—"Oh, dearest brother,/ Your presence is more joyful than this day/ Can be unto me" (1.2.109-111)—may not be immediately apparent, yet her words may be perceived as somewhat unsettling; her attitude of indifference, even annoyance as she is being prepared for her wedding night is even more unsettling, suggesting very strongly that something is amiss.
2. Bliss notes earlier that "To the action's progress Aspatia is largely irrelevant, except as another casualty, for it revolves around the discovery of and response to this situation [the marriage set up to cloak the illicit liaison of the King with Evadne] by Amintor, by his best friend Melantius, and finally by Evadne herself when, converted at sword point, on Melantius's orders she murders the king who whored her" (89). Though Aspatia is a little more than just "another casualty", Bliss is essentially correct.
3. Quotations from *The Maid's Tragedy* are taken from the Regents Renaissance Drama edition edited by Howard B. Norland.
4. Beaumont and Fletcher have often been charged with decadence because of their fascination with the extremes of feeling, on their creation of highly contrived and artificial situations and improbable and unreal worlds, and, particularly on the fact that their careers began at the time of the transition from the open-air public theatres to the indoor, so-called private theatres, which it is often said catered to an upper-class, "coterie" audience that is supposed to have attended these theatres with their effete, decadent tastes and base sexual instincts. More recently, however, Clifford Leech, John F. Danby, Lee Bliss, and Philip J. Finkelpearl and others have shown that the transition from the public to the private theatres and the split in the audience and in the types of plays written for each theatre was a gradual one. Initially, the audience of the Blackfriars, though not as broad in its representation of the London public as that of the Globe in its heyday, was quite diverse. It also seems probable that, at least at the beginning, plays were crafted for performance at both types of theatre. Though there is no evidence of its ever having been performed there, *The Maid's Tragedy* could have been performed as successfully at the Globe as at the Blackfriars. In fact, some of its crowded scenes seem almost to call for the larger stage of the Globe.

Perhaps because of Fletcher's association with the development of the romance, Beaumont and Fletcher have been charged with responsibility for what has been seen as the over-all decadence of the English Renaissance drama in its final years before the closing of the theatres in 1642. What is true of Fletcherian tragicomedy may also be said of *The Maid's Tragedy*, namely that the dismissal of these works as decadent results in an overlooking of "the fresh impulses in the plays" and a misconstruing of "their content" and a dismissal of "the curious fact of their lasting influence" (Rose 181-2). Rose notes that much Jacobean drama, such as *Troilus* and *Two Noble Kinsmen*, deflates both chivalry and courtly love.

5. According to the standards of her age, of course, Evadne is a whore, but she does not conform to stereotype in that she is not motivated to become the King's

mistress by sexual indulgence. A number of commentators have argued that Evadne's name is a composite of Eve and Adam, suggesting an association with the Garden of Eden story. In *The John Fletcher Plays: Mirrors of Morality* (Lewisburg: Bucknell U P, 1973), Pearse notes, in fact, that

There is perhaps a literary joke in this choice of names. Aspatia was the mistress of Pericles, and Evadne was the widow of Capaneus, one of the Seven Against Thebes, who threw herself on her husband's funeral pyre. Beaumont and Fletcher reverse these familiar names to make Evadne the royal mistress and Aspatia the faithful wife who chooses self-immolation (176 n26).

6. Leech notes in connection with Evadne's accusing the King of having corrupted her that "[W]e had not [prior to Evadne's repentance and her agreeing to murder the King] thought of the King as Evadne's seducer" (123). That is, perhaps, a subjective reaction, but given the play's portrayal of Evadne as a woman of strong will and individuality, Leech's reservation is understandable. It would seem a reaction which the portrayal of Evadne invites.
7. Even prior to Neill's essay, Leech had noted in his 1962 study that "the reported escape of Boreas in the masque [is] to be taken not merely as a sexual joke but as an ill omen for the marriage that is being celebrated" (122). Shullenberger also provides an excellent discussion of the relation of the masque to the rest of the action (cf 134-140).
8. Though in the play it is almost always the pagan "gods" who are invoked rather than the Christian "God", the implicit morality is the morality of Christendom. The play was produced "apparently in 1610 or 1611" (Norland, Regents ed., xi) and the Act "to Restrain Abuses of Players" preventing players from "jestingly or prophanely" speaking or using "the holy name of God or of Christ Jesus, or of the Holy Ghost" appeared in 1606. "This," says Gurr, "is one reason why the pagan gods begin to be called on with more frequency in the drama after this date" (*The Shakespearean Stage* 74. Quotations from the Act are cited from Gurr.)

On the doctrine of the inviolability of the monarch's person, James I and others had written that the king was subject only to divine justice and the subject bound in duty to obey even a wicked ruler (cf. Bowers 171-172). In *The Trew Law of Free Monarchies* (1598) James had written that the people's only resistance to a ruler was prayer "for his amendment, if he be wicked; following and obeying lawfull commands, eschewing and flying his fury in his unlawfull, without resistance, but by sobbes and tears to God" (Quoted Finkelpearl 196-197).

9. In saying that the words of Evadne's oath were "So great, that methought they did misbecome/ A woman's mouth" (3.1.174-175), the King shows his own cultural conditioning. Her oath of "fidelity in sin", a kind of mockery of the marriage oath, he seems to feel is unwomanly, almost as though he is horrified that a woman of Evadne's upbringing and social status is willing to renounce her maidenly chastity to become his mistress. Yet that is the oath he desires from her. He wants her to be his whore but seems to have been shocked that she should so readily prostitute herself to accept the role. Like many another man, the King regards as a slut the woman who bends to his wish that she sleep with him. Even in this, by showing himself no different from other men, he in fact demythologizes the concept of kingship and diminishes himself not only in Evadne's eyes but also in the eyes of the audience.



10. Finkelpearl says, "It would be difficult to imagine a more ungenerous, sanctimonious response than that which [Amintor] utters under the inhibitions of his code of conduct" (193).
11. These lines have ironic overtones in the respect that they are a response to Melantius's congratulations to her on her marriage to Amintor which, to her, is not joyful, only necessary.
12. It may be, also, that, as Professor A. B. Dawson of the Department of English, University of British Columbia, has suggested to me, that twentieth century readers and audiences expect more consistency in a fictional character than the Elizabethan and Jacobean playwrights recognized. Many character changes in the Elizabethan-Jacobean drama, in fact, are not explained. There is no clear explanation of the change that Hamlet undergoes while at sea. Nor do we ever really fully understand why Othello believes Iago rather than trust Desdemona. Perhaps Evadne's repentance falls somewhat into the same category of the inexplicable.
13. The *three* maids, in Finkelpearl's view are Aspatia, the real maid, Evadne, the supposed maid, and, metaphorically, Amintor who, like Aspatia, also dies a virgin.
14. There is also the third alternative, as discussed in the Introduction of this study, of the pedestal, the idealization of woman to such a degree that, in effect, she ceases to be real, another form of trivialization. That it is said of Evadne that she "bears the light above her" (1.1.75) and is "accompanied with graces about her" (1.1.140) and her own statement that "I was once fair,/Once I was lovely, not a blowing rose/More chastely sweet" (5.1.76-78) suggests the possibility that she too was seen in this way. Her confrontation with her brother Melantius after his discovery of her liaison with the King shows that she has been raised in accordance with the platitudes of her society. She accepts, albeit under threat of death, his accusation of having sullied the family honor. It is conceivable that her conduct in the body of the play is a deliberate rejection not only of social restriction but also of courtly idolatry.

## CHAPTER FIVE: THOMAS MIDDLETON: BIANCA CAPELLO, ISABELLA, AND BEATRICE-JOANNA

Thomas Middleton, after experimenting briefly as a satirist in prose and verse, entered the theatre as a writer of satiric comedy. By portraying his society with an unflattering realism, he exposed the hypocrisy underlying its pretensions to morality, and adopts a similar procedure in his two tragedies. Much early Middleton criticism appears to have arisen in response to T. S. Eliot's contention in his essay "Thomas Middleton" that the playwright "has no point of view...no message" but "is merely a great recorder" (*Selected Essays* 141, 148). More recent critics have seen that Middleton's realistic and essentially non-judgmental recording of his society as he found it, in fact, is his message. Dorothy M. Farr, for example, noting that "Dogmatism is rare in his plays," calls Middleton a "natural demonstrator" who "demonstrated from life in the raw" (6).

Such moral judgment as one can draw from Middleton's tragedies is complex and often equivocal. Also, as in Webster's tragedies, judgment falls no more on the protagonists than on the society that has produced them, and on those who represent its values. Margot Heinemann, for example, says that "The social pressures [on such characters as Beatrice-Joanna in *The Changeling* and Bianca and Isabella in *Women Beware Women*] help to explain and motivate their actions without in the least excusing them" (174). The latter part of her statement seems out of keeping with her recognition that Bianca and Isabella live in a world in which

fathers or guardians assume the right to dispose of daughters and wards in arranged, mercenary marriages, with tragic results. The girls, treated as chattels, lack the resources or the courage to win in open resistance, but try to satisfy their own desires by deceit or crime (191).

It is far more evident from the plays that Middleton extenuates the conduct of these women than that he blames them for their actions. Somewhat as Webster presents

Vittoria in *The White Devil*, Middleton shows his women protagonists as the products of a set of social conditions and upbringings which encourage their anti-social conduct rather than dissuade them from it. Characters representative of traditional values and institutions in the plays do indeed pronounce judgments on the women, but the moral stances of such characters are so undercut by their own conduct as to render their judgments hypocritical at worst, equivocal at best. Thus Middleton seems more concerned to show what society has made of the women than to judge them, and also to show that their conduct is not to be viewed in the light of traditional and stereotypical understandings of the nature of women, but as products of a social upbringing which claims to nurture and protect them but in fact oppresses them.

Recent critics often assert that Bianca, Isabella and Beatrice-Joanna are motivated by lust. The argument is probably based on the suddenness with which they are attracted to various men who are inappropriate according to accepted social norms. These attractions frequently cross class barriers, like the marriage of Leantio and Bianca, and later of the Duke and Bianca, or they contravene accepted morality by being either incestuous, like Hippolito's for Isabella, or adulterous, like the Duke's for Bianca. This criticism also identifies lust with sexual desire, but Middleton's purpose is to affirm that sexual desire is a major element in the love between a man and a woman and that it is ridiculous to try to deny the fact.

His affirmation of sexual desire is probably the basis for the essentially valid claim that Middleton's view of love between the sexes is an antiromantic one. These plays suggest that Middleton sees no separation between sexual love, often called the "grosser" love, and the so-called higher and purer love based on virtue and personal worth. Alsemero in *The Changeling*, for example, believes he is attracted to Beatrice-Joanna because she represents the ideal woman of the courtly tradition and cannot

recognize the strong physical element in their mutual attraction. Sara Eaton notes that Alsemero's "exalted perception" involves also "an obsessive possession" which includes the "underside of the Courtly Love tradition: the woman-as-monster" (Kastan and Stallybrass 278). Beatrice's sexuality is defined by his culture as dangerous. That dangerous element subconsciously fascinates him in spite of himself and his exalted views which cannot encompass sexual passion. Mary Beth Rose argues that in his comedies Middleton is interested in "the unruliness of sexual desire" (50). In the tragedies that unruliness comes into conflict with the traditional social mores and with courtly ideals, and that conflict is a fundamental cause of the final catastrophes. Middleton in his tragedies develops further the antiromantic view of the comedies that the force which draws men and women together is primarily sexual desire in order to show that society's efforts to suppress that elemental force are not only futile but ultimately destructive.

Stilling, in *Love and Death in Renaissance Tragedy*, is right in saying that Middleton is a critic of Elizabethan romanticism (261), but he is too prone to attribute to Middleton the views of his characters on the nature of woman and to regard him as one who accepted the cultural stereotype of woman's "frail moral character" (260). Middleton shows quite clearly that men as much as women are motivated by powerful and unruly sexual drive. In fact, in *Women Beware Women*, the initiative for illicit sexual relationships is always male. Though Middleton portrays his women as motivated by sexual desire, he does not thereby endorse the traditional stereotype of woman as wanton. His sympathetic characters in the comedies, as Holmes notes (94), are almost always women such as Mistress Low-Water in *No Wit Nor Help Like a Woman's*, Lady Agar in *A Fair Quarrel*, and Moll Cutpurse in *The Roaring Girl*. This fact undercuts any suggestion drawn from the tragedies that Middleton viewed women stereotypically as by nature prone to evil and wantonness. Holmes says that although "the scrupulous

honesty of Middleton's scrutiny of a sinful world was not compromised or obscured by considerations of chivalry", nevertheless

No writer held women in higher regard than did the author of *The Ghost of Lucrece* [an early poem in rhyme royal modeled on Shakespeare's *The Rape of Lucrece*], and his ideal of womanhood lost nothing by being defined in the same terms as his ideal of manhood.... He credited women with having equal moral responsibility with men, and he did not subscribe to the vain distinction implied in the male-invented myth of female 'frailty'(49-51).

Middleton's tragic women are certainly strongly and actively sexual, but their sexuality is not seen as evil in itself. The women are led into evil not by their sexual desire itself, but by its frustration and repression by the rules of a society which fears sexuality and denigrates women.

Middleton as a social critic, therefore, pursues many of the same issues as his contemporaries and forerunners in showing that his society and culture constrains and represses women's freedom to develop. Perhaps more subtly expressed than Webster's, Middleton's is a more far-reaching, overarching criticism, not just of his society's hypocrisy and duplicity, but of its basic and central attitudes toward, and dealings with women. Middleton's women do not produce the grand defiant gesture in their sin but are covert in their rebellion against convention. They are not as socially ambitious as Evadne, or as grand as Cleopatra whose freedom of action they do not possess. Nor are they boldly defiant like Webster's Vittoria Corombona, who is "a splendid creature, though fallen, her dignity greatest when she stands at bay" (Heinemann 174). In *The Multiple Plot*, Richard Levin says that although Beatrice-Joanna, for example, is a kind of villain-heroine in a somewhat typical retribution plot, she is not a Machiavel who seeks evil for its own sake, but one "driven to it by the 'push' of circumstances" (38). Though Bianca after her seduction by the Duke appears quite openly as the his mistress, from the moment of her seduction she sees, or believes at least, that, having lost what is called her honor, she has no other course than to behave in keeping with

her loss. Middleton's approach to tragedy, as to comedy, is more realistic than that of his predecessors; both his heroines and the situations in which they find themselves are somewhat closer to ordinary reality than those in other plays that this study has examined. Farr notes that in *Women Beware Women*, "tragic issues are made to stem directly from the complexities of character on an ordinary level in the context of ordinary everyday life" (81). Despite the relatively high social position of his characters, their feelings, their frustrations, and their failings seem in many ways like those of more ordinary people. The relative commonness of his protagonists and their problems may account for the uniquely subtle power of Middleton's social criticism in that he thus brings it closer to the situation and circumstances of his audience.

Nonetheless, like Webster with whom he is probably most in tune, Middleton shows his protagonists as products of a society whose values are hollow and corrupt. Farr says that his "intention is evidently the exposure of a general lowering of moral temperature" (76). It is a society which teaches one set of values, lives by another, but expects its members to maintain the appearance of the former. It is a society which at the level of the aristocracy lives comfortably with its own duplicity and double standard, giving thereby a very mixed message to its younger members. By overprotecting and sheltering young women from the realities of the world and restricting their activities, by its preaching of the morality of strict chastity, while its adult members simply maintain appearances, this society inadequately prepares its young people for the realities of life in the world. In particular, it gives women no firm moral and practical bases for understanding and dealing with their own sexual appetites and desires, nor with the often violent and ruthless sexual demands of the males with whom they will inevitably come in contact.

The social context of both plays is the traditional one of arranged marriages in which the husband expects to be the dominant partner. Heinemann and others have noted the pronounced commercial and mercenary element, which is very closely linked to the even more pronounced issue of social status, in the marriage arrangements made by fathers and guardians in these two tragedies. This practice is more overt and blatant in *Women Beware Women* than in *The Changeling*, but even in the latter Vermandero declares his determination to have his will in the very advantageous marriage he has arranged for Beatrice with Alonso de Piracquo:

I tell you, the gentleman's complete,  
A courtier and a gallant, enriched  
With many fair and noble ornaments;  
I would not change him for a son-in-law  
For any he in Spain, the proudest he,  
And we have great ones, that you know.  
*Alsemero.* He's much  
Bound to you, sir.  
*Vermandero.* And will be bound to me,  
As fast as tie can hold him; I'll want  
My will else. (1.1.211-220.)<sup>1</sup>

Beatrice-Joanna's aside "I shall want mine if you do it" (1.1.220), however, suggests that he has bred up a daughter as willful as he is, and the conflict in the play arises from this opposition of wills. Though Bianca in *Women Beware Women*, whose elopement had defied the will of her parents, and Isabella in *Women Beware Women* may not be as strong willed as Beatrice, the conflicts in their lives also arise from the clash between the will of parents and guardians and the desires of the young women under their tutelage.

It is against this background of commercially motivated marriage that the process of character deterioration is played out. Thus Middleton implicitly criticizes his society by showing that its mercenary attitude toward marriage encourages deceit. This criticism is particularly clear in the subplot of *Women Beware Women* where Isabella's enforced marriage to the foolish Ward mitigates whatever moral judgment may be

aroused by her adulterous relationship with Hippolito. Middleton also exposes the hypocrisy of a society and culture outwardly deeply distressed by the dangers of lust in its young women, but allowing those women to be led into illicit relationships by tolerating male sexual self-indulgence.

The corruption of the world of *Women Beware Women* is manifested in many ways, perhaps most conspicuously in Livia, the charming, agreeable, genuinely affectionate bawd who engineers Bianca's seduction by the Duke and deceives her niece Isabella about her relationship to Hippolito, thereby facilitating their incestuous liaison. Critics see her as a virtuoso who greatly enjoys her bawdry. Heinemann speaks of her "good natured immorality" and calls her, significantly, "the natural product of a situation where women have no choice, yet are tied to life-long obedience to their man" (195). Brooke says that in procuring Isabella through lies for her brother Hippolito and Bianca by subtle treachery for the Duke, she acts "with a delightful mixture of wit and bawdy delight, backed by an explicit female resistance to the prevailing male domination" (*Horrid Laughter* 101). She is a widow with both freedom and time on her hands and a woman of considerable wit, and she uses her freedom and her wit "to trap other women into sexual relationships" (Leggatt 149). She sees herself, however, as helping the young women she "traps"; she holds out to women, she says, the opportunity to "lick a finger then, sometimes" (1.2. 44), that is, find a little relief from an unwanted marriage and so gain woman's traditional revenge on men. Her efforts in the end, however, lead to the total discomfiture of the women. Moreover, it should be noted, she arranges these affairs largely for the benefit of men, her brother Hippolito and the Duke. "But while she takes pride in her 'craft t'undo a maidenhead' [2.1.178], she becomes a helpless victim of her own desires" (Leggatt 149), ironically becoming overwhelmed by lust for Leantio whose marriage she has been so instrumental in ruining. And as she pandered women to men so that the latter may use them for their



purposes, so Livia is herself used by Leantio for his purposes (cf. Wigler 19). Having bought into the corruption of her society, she is, like her own victims, finally destroyed by that corruption.

Yet to see Livia merely as the villain of the piece is to oversimplify her complex character. Her figure is given substance by her many choric comments on the condition and situation of women in her society. Her bawdry itself is a comment on and a reaction to that society and its treatment of women. Since women are so frequently prevented from entering the relationships to which their desire draws them, the services of a bawd sometimes are the only means of realizing that desire. Her bawdry on behalf of her brother in fact makes possible the relationship that Isabella herself really desires, and provides her with some relief from a grotesquely inappropriate marriage. Even her role in facilitating the Duke's seduction of Bianca ultimately introduces that young woman to what is at least a more materially rewarding relationship than her marriage to Leantio. Her comment on Bianca's isolation, "I heard you were alone, and 't had appeared/ An ill condition to me" (2.2.247-248), while undoubtedly part of her endeavor to pander Bianca to the Duke, nonetheless accords with Bianca's own feelings, for she herself was finding her isolation irksome. Thus Livia's bawdry is a kind of ironic comment on the marital practices of Renaissance society: pandering at least sometimes results in relationships preferable to some marriages.

The Duke of Florence<sup>2</sup> as head of Florentine society exemplifies its corruption. Heinemann's view that this is a domestic tragedy, rather than a tragedy of state is valid, for the Duke is not "shown primarily as ruler of a state, but merely as using his power to satisfy his personal lusts and pleasures—a grandee with a city mistress rather than God's deputy on earth" (180), simply, as Gill says, "the conventional royal lecher of Italianate tragedy" (xxi). Yet, as Heinemann acknowledges, the play takes on a public

dimension when the Cardinal reminds the Duke that “a great man who sins in public carries the additional guilt of setting a bad example to ordinary people” (181):

But 'tis example proves the great man's bane.  
The sins of mean men lie like scattered parcels  
Of an unperfect bill; but when such fall,  
Then comes example, and that sums up all. (4.1.215-219)

This Cardinal is often seen as a kind of morality play figure pronouncing divine judgment on the characters and their actions. However, as Holmes points out in a footnote, he is an equivocal character himself:

Although the Cardinal points out the speciousness of the [Duke's] plan [to make his relationship to Bianca acceptable...by marrying her], he has a weakness of character that renders him incompetent to deal with the Duke's hardened corruption:...he displays...a tractable shallowness, by making 'peace' and expressing content with the debauchees [5.2.14]; and he continues to call the Duke 'noble' brother (171 n28).

Yet, though the Cardinal is himself somewhat less than exemplary, his comments are valid in themselves, like the *teaching* of the Pharisees who sit in Moses' seat (Matthew 23.2).<sup>3</sup> Thus the Cardinal's comments are part of a complex judgment. They are a judgment on the Duke, but they also tend to recoil on or have repercussions against the Cardinal himself. Thus, they do not indicate the play's affirmation of conventional morality.

The Duke's corruption sets the tone for the society over which he rules. R. B. Parker affirms that in such a corrupt society, presided over by a Duke who abuses his power for his own self-gratification, Bianca's and Isabella's “weaknesses leave [them] at the mercy of their degenerate environment” (192). Further, the “weaknesses” of the women are themselves products of their environment—though this is probably something of a chicken-and-egg situation: weakness causes corruption; corruption causes further weakness. In seducing Bianca the Duke abuses his power, for, unlike

other members of his society, he need not act in secret. Thus, he can freely flaunt his relationship with Bianca and use his aristocratic privilege to override ordinary morality.

There is no duchess in evidence, and so it may be that the Duke himself, in following his own passion rather than the expectations and demands of his own class, is, like Bianca, in rebellion against the sexual mores of his culture. Rather than arranging a marriage designed merely to establish a political alliance to increase his power and wealth he follows his desire and his will. So, just as Livia is not a conventional bawd, the Duke may not be simply a conventional royal lecher in his motivation, but he certainly is one in his actions.

Sexual desire, Middleton demonstrates, will draw men and women together willy-nilly. The sexual element in romantic love had always been recognized, but the tendency was to reject such sexual attraction as a basis for marriage. Critics have dismissed Leantio's feelings for Bianca at the beginning of the play as mere lust, but Middleton shows Leantio's love for Bianca as a complex blend of motives. Both a desire for status and sexual desire for the beautiful Bianca motivate Leantio to elope with a woman of higher social class than himself, but that is not to say that Leantio is not in love with her. That he expresses his love in commercial imagery does not indicate that he sees Bianca merely as a possession, as many have argued. It cannot be denied that he does, if for no other reason than that his society taught him to think of wives as possessions, but as a member of the commercial class, such imagery is natural to him. He rejoices in Bianca's "beauty able to content a conqueror,/ Whom earth could scarce content, keeps me in compass," which he says will keep him from being "bent sinfully/ To this man's sister, or to that man's wife" (1.1.26-29). Love for and marriage to Bianca, he says, will control his lust—sexual desire misdirected—in accord with the affirmation

of *Book of Common Prayer* that marriage was ordained as “a remedy for sin.” The tribute to Bianca is rather backhanded, but a tribute nonetheless.

When shortly after his bringing Bianca to his mother’s home, he must reluctantly part from her to earn the living necessary to support her in something of the style to which she has been used, the pleasures of the marriage bed tempt him to remain behind: “’Tis even second hell to part from pleasure/ When man has got a smack of them” (1.3.5-6). The lines suggest that at this stage at least in their relationship, Leantio’s pleasure in Bianca is primarily an appetitive one for her body rather than an appreciation of her as a person. However, Middleton may be showing that love between man and woman, whatever else it may be will always be physical and that overly spiritualized concepts of love will founder on that fact. On his return a week later, his greatest anticipation is what he expects will be Bianca’s abstention-heightened sexual desire:

After five days’ fast  
She’ll be greedy now, and cling about me,  
I take care how I shall be rid of her (3.1.106-108)

His words reflect the view that woman is primarily a creature of insatiable appetite, but he revels in rather than condemns it.

The Mother admonishes Leantio on his arrival in Florence with his new bride that as a daughter of the merchant patriciate, Bianca will not in the long run be happy with the rather meager life he can provide her. Leantio appears to recognize the danger and says he will work hard to provide for her the life to which she has been accustomed. He can have only a forlorn hope of that, but his emphasis on her sexual appetite suggests that he believes that, given woman’s “nature”, to keep Bianca sexually satisfied will be enough to compensate for the lowering of her economic circumstances. Seeing wives as possessions, Leantio believes Bianca will be happy to be possessed.

Yet in his way, he loves her. When in the Banquet Scene he realizes he has lost her forever, he expresses his grief in words whose simplicity indicate that they are genuine: “Oh, hast thou left me then, Bianca, utterly” (3.2.243). His later rage at her in scene 1 of Act 4 when they confront each other for the last time, the threat he issues that costs him his life is the rage of a man who feels his love betrayed. His acceptance, crass though it may be, of Livia’s offer of wealth in exchange for sexual favors is a natural kind of response to such betrayal. His hatred of Bianca as “that glistening whore” (4.2.20) is the obverse of his love.

In the beginning Bianca is also in love with Leantio, and for her, too, sexual desire has been her primary motive for renouncing her social position to marry him. She shows the primacy of sexuality in love when she demands Leantio’s kisses and eagerly returns them. She believes that she will be happy and that Leantio will satisfy her desires:

Heaven send a quiet peace with this man’s love,  
And I am as rich, as virtue can be poor—  
Which were enough, after the rate of mind,  
To erect temples for content placed here. (1.1.127-130.)

At this point she does not seem to realize that she will miss the almost princely life to which she had been accustomed as the daughter of a Venetian merchant prince.

That loss of status and wealth helps to explain, though only in part, Bianca’s almost immediate *volte face* after her seduction by the Duke. This sudden change has troubled critics, several of whom have suggested that Bianca simply seized the Duke’s proffered opportunity to gain a life even *better* than she had known before her elopement. Ribner, for example, says that “The virtue that [the Mother] has been charged to guard has been as non-existent as her ability to protect it” (141), and that when Bianca is “faced with her choice between poverty as a faithful wife and luxury as the Duke’s mistress, it is the Duke she chooses” (144). Bianca indeed has reason to be

discontent with her life “as a faithful wife”. Leantio, in spite of his adventurousness in eloping with Bianca, or in some ways, *because* of it, acts as a typical jealous husband. He wishes to lock away his beautiful young wife not only from lustful male eyes but also from ideas that might teach her the rebelliousness, shrewishness and unreasonable demands to which the traditional lore of his culture says that women are prone. When his mother admonishes him that he will find it difficult to provide Bianca with the “maintenance befitting her birth and virtues,/ Which every woman of necessity looks for,/ And most to go above it” (1.1.66-68), Leantio’s response reflects the accusations against women in the pamphlet literature of the *querelle des dames* familiar to many in Middleton’s audience:

Speak low sweet mother; you are able to spoil as many  
 As come within the hearing; if it be not  
 Your fortune to mar all, I have much marvel.  
 I pray do not teach her to rebel,  
 When she’s a good way to obedience;  
 To rise with other women in commotion  
 Against their husbands, for six gowns a year  
 And so maintain her cause, when they are once up  
 In all things else that require cost enough. (1.1.71-79)

His remark later in the same speech that “A woman’s belly is got up in a trice” (1.1.82), reflects the stereotypical belief in woman’s natural wantonness which must be restrained. Leantio thus shows that, despite his defiance of convention in eloping with Bianca, he still holds much of the conventional mindset regarding women.

Bianca, however, appears sincere in asserting that she will be happy and content with the humble life as Leantio’s wife, believing that with him she “does enjoy all her desires,” and that her mind can “erect temples for content” in the “quiet peace” she believes Heaven will send “with this man’s love” (1.1.125-130). However, her comment probably reflects an over-confidence in her ability to adapt to the deprivations of her new life, her inexperience in society and the world, and her ignorance of the kinds of assault that could be made both on her fidelity to Leantio and on her chastity. Perhaps,

in fact, even though she is sincere, she “doth protest too much”; she would inevitably have become discontent, and her good intentions would tend to make her discontent all the more pronounced. Thus, after her seduction and the glimpse of the life the Duke can offer her, Leantio’s home becomes “the strangest house/ For all defects, as ever gentlewoman/ made shift withal, to pass her love in!” (3.1.16-18). Suddenly she seems very conscious that she is a gentlewoman who is not living a gentlewoman’s life. Unacknowledged class expectations, play subtly and subconsciously their part in Bianca’s change. Though her primary and conscious motives are not mercenary, it is likely she realizes others will judge them so. When her plan to kill the Cardinal backfires, killing the Duke instead, part of Bianca’s reason for suicide may well be that she knows the “strangers” among whom she finds herself will judge her as an opportunist.

That her inexperience is a major factor in her seduction is suggested by her heavily ironic comment afterwards to the Mother: “Faith, I have seen that I little thought to see/ I’t’h morning when I rose” (2.2.457-458). Holmes comments that “it is not through ‘lack of Sence’ that Bianca becomes a victim of the Duke, but through lack of knowledge of the world” (162). Farr speaks of the outwitting of her “innocence and simplicity” (90).

It is not, therefore, as Ribner and others have argued, that she yields to the Duke primarily or essentially for the promise of a restoration of her old life of luxury. In her innocence Bianca believed that Leantio, with his ardent love for her, would treat her much better than he did, or at least that he would spend more time with her. As a young woman newly aroused sexually, she is naturally disappointed when, under pressure of economic necessity, Leantio parts from her so very soon after their arrival at his home. Unused to such considerations, she is dismayed that such mundane concerns as earning

a living could take precedence to her desire for Leantio's love. As Leantio departs from her, she calls to him from above:

I perceive, sir,  
Y'are not gone yet; I have good hope you'll stay now.  
*Leantio.* Farewell, I must not.  
*Bianca.* Come, come; pray return.  
Tomorrow, adding but a little care more,  
Will dispatch all as well—believe me sir, 'twill. (1.3.35-39)

Given the newness of their love and considering what she has given up to be his wife, Bianca's feelings are understandable. Leantio himself would like to do as she wishes, but he is far more aware than she of the need to earn a living:

I could well wish myself where you would have me;  
But love that's wanton must be ruled awhile  
By that that's careful, or all goes to ruin.  
As fitting is a government in love  
As in a kingdom; where 'tis all mere lust  
'Tis like an insurrection in the people  
That, raised in self-will, wars against all reason. (1.3.40-44)

When she pleads for "But this one night", he replies:

Alas, I'm in for twenty if I stay,  
And then for forty, I have such luck to flesh:  
I never bought a horse, but he bore double.  
If I stay any longer, I shall turn  
An everlasting spendthrift.... (1.3.50-54)

His responses contain an element of almost adolescent boasting in his sexual prowess as well as some of the stereotypical attitudes of his time about sexuality. They also reflect the social pressures to which his unorthodox marriage will be subjected. The effect is to make Bianca feel neglected so that her hopes of a full and happy sexual relationship begin to founder under the pressure of economic necessity.

Feeling neglected, Bianca understandably desires diversion in watching the ducal cortege pass by, and she is pleased by the possibility that the Duke might have looked at her. Nevertheless, she does not then entertain ideas of rebellion, and she resists valiantly the Duke's seduction of her, which, because of his threat of force, is in effect, a



rape, as Heinemann argues (183). The Duke indeed intersperses his threats with a pretended respect for her:

Prithee tremble not.  
I feel thy breast shake like a turtle panting  
Under a loving hand that makes much on't.  
Why art so fearful? as I'm friend to brightness,  
There's nothing but respect and honour near thee. (2.2.321-325)

However, by stressing his ability to use force, he shows that he is not to be dissuaded. He says "I am not here in vain", and "I should be sorry the least force should lay/ An unkind touch upon thee" (2.2.336, 345-346). It would please him were she to yield voluntarily, but he will not refrain from forces if she will not:

I affect  
A passionate pleading above an easy yielding—  
But never pitied any: they deserve none  
That will not pity me. I can command:  
Think upon that. (2.2.360-364)

He promises wealth and comfort, but as Heinemann notes, only after his threats (183). Bianca's so-called "willingness" in yielding that some critics find is really a collapse of her resistance before a force to which her strength is unequal. As Farr says, the Duke takes advantage of her "helplessness" (80). Her helplessness, rather than "the essential falseness of Bianca's protestation of chastity" as Ribner affirms, is the significance Bianca's identification with the pawn in the chess game played in the foreground on the main stage while Bianca's seduction occurs in the simultaneous action on the balcony.

As a result of her seduction, Bianca's feelings are mixed. She returns from the Duke a bitter, angry, disillusioned woman. Recognizing his motives as simple lechery, she naturally feels anger against her seducer: "Infectious mists and mildews hang at's eyes,/ The weather of doomsday dwells upon him" (2.2.423-424). She is angry also as much with those who have tricked her. Livia she denounces as a "damned bawd" for her "smooth-browed treachery", and the "courteous gentleman" Guardiano as "base villain" and "slave" (3.2.466, 453, 443, 445).

At the same time, having betrayed Leantio, albeit under threat of violent rape, she feels contaminated: “sin and I’m acquainted,/ No couple greater” (2.2.441-442). Her upbringing tells her that there are but two kinds of woman: the chaste virgin-faithful wife, and the whore. By her seduction and betrayal, she is now in the eyes of her society and culture a whore. That even the court society henceforth regards her as a whore is attested by her recognition, on the death of the Duke, that she is among strangers.

It is that sense of being irreversibly contaminated that explains her sudden change of character from the demure innocent to the woman of the world. She sees that it is pointless to pretend to a virtue which her society will deny her: “Yet since mine honour’s leprous, why should I/ Preserve that fair that caused the leprosy?” (2.2.425-426). Farr calls Bianca’s “hardening” and her “coarsening of speech” “the expression of her plight, which in turn leads her to the cynical conclusion that she may as well consider herself lost: ‘Come poison all at once.’ [2.2.427]” (80). Ornstein says that “Her overwhelming agony of shame on the gallery has bred an indifference to future defilement” (194). “Since Bianca’s honor is leprous (since it is known she has submitted to the Duke)”, he says, “then there is no longer any point in fidelity to Leantio” (195).

Her words “that fair” probably have the double meaning of her physical beauty—which no doubt she will preserve—but also the appearance of honor that such beauty is supposed to represent. To Leantio’s bitter accusation “Y’are a whore” after her public appearance as the Duke’s mistress, she replies “Fear nothing, sir” (4.1.60-61), as though recognizing that she will be seen so and that denials will gain her nothing. Believing herself lost, she accepts the consolations of material comfort and the social prestige of being the Duke’s mistress. As J. R. Mulryne says “She falls to the Duke, and then adapts to his way of thinking, not so much because of moral shallowness, but because of the pressure exercised upon her by social circumstances and

personalities stronger—not necessarily by nature but certainly by position and experience—than her own” (Revels Plays edition, Introduction lxx).

Bianca’s change is no doubt facilitated by the fact that, once he has achieved his desire, the Duke treats her well. Bianca, therefore, quickly and easily transfers the love she had initially given Leantio to her seducer. Here again, Middleton challenges stereotypes by making the Duke the only person in the play who shows any regard for Bianca. No one else befriends her or cares about her comfort, and the Duke’s brother the Cardinal can only pronounce a traditionally moralistic judgment on them both.

Bianca’s isolation also explains her change after her seduction. She now recognizes the nature of the society in which she lives and realizes that her only choice is to brazen it out in a world which, despite the protection and love of a powerful duke, will continue to be hostile to her. Her worldly-wise sophistication throughout the remainder of the play is, therefore, a condition of survival if she is to live the public life of a ducal mistress.

Rather than showing her a simple wanton, Bianca’s conduct shows her as a woman of intelligence by which she quickly understands her circumstances and how to survive in them. Livia, as Ricks notes (243), had recognized when Bianca accuses her of bawdry that “’tis but want of use” (2.2.471) that makes Bianca initially so bitter, and she correctly predicts that she will soon adapt. Mulryne says “She has been initiated into this devious society and quickly shows her command of its practices” (lxx). She shows how well she has adapted when Leantio, unplaced by Livia’s favor for his loss of Bianca, and now simply an annoying inconvenience to her, threatens revenge. Having reported his threat and his affair with Livia to the Duke in full knowledge that he will act, she shows by saying “I love peace, sir” (4.1.124) that she knows what action he will

take. She realizes that in a cut-throat world, one must become a cutthroat to survive. The murder also serves the Duke's own ends, for it enables him to marry her and so, by making her an "honest woman" and himself an "honest man", to placate the Cardinal.

Bianca's decision to murder the Cardinal is complexly motivated. She resents his attack on the Duke whom she now loves, and though he kisses her at their marriage as a sign of reconciliation, Bianca does not really trust him to remain placated:

...this shall not blind me.  
He that begins so early to reprove,  
Quickly rid him, or look for little love. (5.2.17-19)

Bianca depends so completely on the Duke's protection that a threat to him is a threat to herself. Because she is isolated in a hostile environment, when the Duke accidentally drinks the poisoned cup she prepared for the Cardinal, she knows that she must die with him. Not only does she die for love, but also from the knowledge that without the Duke's support she is an outcast and a pariah:

What make I here? these are all strangers to me,  
Not known but by their malice now th'art gone,  
Nor do I seek their pities. (5.2.204-206)

As well, she probably knows that as the discovered murderess of a person of royal blood she would likely be publicly burned alive.<sup>4</sup> The Duke has given her the security she needed as a stranger to Florentine society (Mulryne lxx) whereas in Leantio's home she had never been made to feel completely welcome. Now that security has evaporated.

Bianca also dies with some recognition of her guilt: "Leantio, now I feel the breach of marriage/ At my heart breaking" (5.2.208-209). Though able at the last minute to pity her former husband, Bianca has done more than simply make a virtue of necessity; she has given her love to the Duke who had seduced her away from her husband and given her, if not the affection she had craved, at least a life of material comfort and physical security and some appreciation: "Yet this my gladness is, that I

remove,/ Tasting the same death in a cup of love” (5.2.218-219). Once again, traditional views are called into question, for such relationships as that of Bianca and the Duke were usually regarded as merely the indulgence of lust without love.

Bianca shows insight not only into herself, but also into the folly of her society in trying to make women moral through restraint. Her soliloquy following her first public appearance as the Duke’s mistress and just before her encounter with Leantio, newly exalted as Livia’s lover, is worth quoting in its entirety, for in it she reflects on her fortune and what she sees as its social implications:

How strangely woman’s fortune turns about!  
 This was the farthest way to come to me,  
 All would have judged, that knew me born in Venice  
 And there with many jealous eyes brought up,  
 That never thought they had me sure enough  
 But when they were upon me; yet my hap  
 To meet it here, so far from my birthplace,  
 My friends or kindred. ’Tis not good, in sadness,  
 To keep a maid so strict in her young days.  
 Restraint breeds wand’ring thoughts, as many fasting days  
 A great desire to see flesh stirring again.  
 I’ll never use any girl of mine so strictly;  
 Howev’r they’re kept, their fortunes find ’emout—  
 I see’t in me. If they be got in court  
 I’ll never forbid ’em the country; not the court  
 Though they be born i’t’h’country. They will come to’t,  
 And fetch their falls a thousand miles about,  
 Where one would little think on’t. (4.2.23-40)

The importance of this speech appears in its length, its careful thought, its position in the play, and its relevance to so much of the dramatic action. Though some dismiss it as of little significance, it clearly is meant as a serious reflection on the play’s events.<sup>5</sup> Bianca here reflects on the folly of thinking that restrictions on women will control and restrain their natural sexual desires, but are more likely to intensify them. She implies that it is inevitable that woman’s “nature will out” in immoral behavior whether or not it is confined and constrained as traditionally it has been by Medieval and Renaissance

society, and that she, therefore, would not raise a daughter under such ineffectual and destructive strictures.

Though Bianca speaks in the bitterness of experience, Middleton through this speech challenges his society's long held notion that sexual morality can be guaranteed by external restraints and constraints. Intended to control and repress lust, such constraints tend only to intensify sexual desire, the pleasure of circumventing the restraints and the resulting illicit satisfaction lead in turn to other, often more serious, moral perversions. Holmes, writing of the Duchess in *More Dissemblers Besides Women*, and the "passive young innocents" of *Michaelmas Term*, indicates that throughout Middleton's work runs the idea "that virtue can only be real and effective when it has been tempered by experience" (76). In fact, Middleton seems to say that the kind of sexual morality demanded by his society is difficult, if not impossible, to achieve at all.

Women's ability to reflect on their circumstances, as Heinemann states (194-196), is a notable feature of this play. Like Bianca, Isabella too demonstrates this ability. She is well aware that her father treats her as a commodity to be traded:

Oh the heartbreakings  
Of miserable maids where love's enforced!  
The best condition is but bad enough:  
When women have their choices, commonly  
They do but buy their thraldoms, and bring great portions  
To men to keep 'em in subjection:  
As if a fearful prisoner should bribe  
The keeper to be good to him, yet lies in still,  
And glad for a good usage, a good look  
Sometimes. By'r Lady, no misery surmounts a woman's!  
Men buy their slaves, but women buy their masters. (1.2.168-178)<sup>6</sup>

Isabella's initial situation is quite pitiable, and Middleton presents her in a sympathetic light.<sup>7</sup> Faced with the unpleasant prospect of marriage to the idiotic Ward, she complains bitterly to Livia:

How can I, being born with that obedience  
 That must submit unto a father's will?  
 If he command, I must of force obey.

(2.1.86-88)

She is desperate, but knows that she can be forced into a marriage she does not want and that the social conditions of her life give her no legitimate release or relief. At the same time, Isabella's remarks are conditioned by the fact of her as yet unrecognized love for her uncle, Hippolito. That unrecognized illicit love, however, is itself indicative of the futility of trying to control sexual passion by external curbs.

Isabella's entrance is preceded by Fabritio's, Guardiano's and Livia's fairly lengthy discussion which reflects the Renaissance debate over whether marriage ought to be by parental arrangement or by the free choice of the partners. Fabritio takes the traditional view. His response to Guardiano's question whether or not Isabella has yet seen the Ward is "No matter—she shall love him" (1.2.2). He says to Isabella on her appearance, "See what you mean to like—nay, and I charge you,/ Like what you see" (1.2.76-77). Guardiano, on the other hand, appears to hold the moderate position that the children should have some say but not marry contrary to their parents' (or guardian's) wishes. Nonetheless, he seeks to arrange an advantageous match for his ward. In the light of his later pandering Bianca to the Duke, with Livia's help, for "much worth in wealth and favour", his scruples with regard to Isabella sound hollow. Livia, whose pandering functions as a counterpart to the marital customs of her culture and gives her a choric authority, argues for the more liberal view of marriage. However, Isabella's comments that women who have their choices frequently buy their thraldoms shows that she recognizes marriage, under any circumstances, as an institution of fundamental inequality, and it this inequality that Middleton suggests is the real problem with which his society must deal.

Isabella's circumstances make her ripe for rebellion, as Farr notes (88), but she is no Vittoria Corombona who can rebel openly and defiantly. Livia's false information that she is the illegitimate daughter of the Marquess of Coria and, so, not really Hippolito's niece, opens to her the opportunity to follow what she quickly realizes is her own desire. Hippolito's protestation of love for her "dearlier than an uncle can", and that "as a man loves his wife, so love I thee" (1.3.213, 219) had shocked and horrified her. At that point she did not realize she loves Hippolito dearlier than a niece can and that as a woman loves her husband, so does she love him. Holmes says she has a "defective understanding of herself" (164), but in almost any society and certainly not Isabella's, few would want to admit to an incestuous love.

The play prepares us well for Isabella's apparent *volte face* when she receives Livia's "information". It is, in fact, no *volte face* at all. Her father Fabritio notes, without apparently any perception of the real situation:

Look out her uncle, and y'are sure of her,  
Those two are never asunder; they've been heard  
In argument at midnight, moonshine nights  
Are noondays with them; they walk out their sleeps—  
Or rather at those hours appear like those  
That walk in 'em, for so they did to me. (1.2.62-67)

Isabella's world provides women only very limited opportunity to meet men, and so it is very likely that almost the only men she knows are her father, the Ward, and her uncle. Hippolito treats her with kindness, deference and consideration, so that between him and the Ward there is no contest. Brooke says that "Hippolito and the Ward are in total contrast, and Isabella has no rational choice to make. The idea that she should marry this clod is absurd, as Livia tells Fabritio; he sees [that this is so], but still commands the marriage" (94). In showing kindness and affection toward his niece, Hippolito has aroused not only his own sexual desire for her, but Isabella's initially unrecognized answering desire. Livia's lies allow her to make the admission that, because her



relationship to Hippolito is within the forbidden degrees, she initially cannot make to herself. As Norman A. Brittin notes, "Once the dread of incest is removed, the girl's passion for Hippolito springs forth; and she sees the marriage as a convenient concealment for an affair." Livia's comment "I told you I should start your blood" (2.1. 134) has the double meaning of "give a tremendous surprise" and "rouse the passions" (121).<sup>8</sup>

Probably because it is defined as incestuous, critics argue that Isabella's feeling for Hippolito is primarily lust. Ricks, following M. C. Bradbrook, says that her lust is shown by her imagery of feeding and of service (with its courtly and sexual overtones) in describing to Hippolito what their relationship will be like (244):

She that comes once to be a housekeeper  
Must not look every day to fare well, sir,  
Like a young waiting woman in service,  
For she feeds commonly as her lady does,  
No good bit passes her but she gets a taste of it. (2.1.217-221)

However, given the circumstances in which she must carry on her relationship with Hippolito, her words reflect the realities of an all too common social situation where the sexual desire that Middleton sees as fundamental to the growth of affection between men and women is not accepted as a basis on which to contract marriages. As the worldly wise Livia, says, using similar imagery, women are not to be blamed if, like "your best cooks" they "lick a finger" in the "many sundry dishes" men taste all the time (1.2.40-45). Men are free to follow their sexual desires; women are not. Bianca's later sympathetic comment at Isabella's betrothal reflects what is simply common practice in a society in which women are commodities and marriages commercial transactions to gain or maintain social status. In consequence, a double standard is in effect. Bianca says:

'Las, poor gentlewoman,  
She's ill bestead, unless sh'as dealt the wiselier  
And laid in some provision for her youth:  
Fools will not keep in summer. (3.2.118-121)

That this “provision” should be her uncle is, as noted above, a condition of the limited opportunities women have for meaningful social contacts—the very condition Bianca criticizes in her soliloquy.

Given the initial sympathy generated for Isabella, her sudden hardening, like Bianca’s, seems at first glance difficult to understand. It is, however, the hardening of a woman who has chosen to live a life of duplicity in the immoral but hypocritical climate of the society in which her illicit love is both condemned and encouraged to find its outlet. In her unhappy circumstances, she easily lapses into the immorality of her world. As with Bianca, this hardening and adaptation to the ways of the world are conditions of survival, for Isabella knows that her world will judge her adversely for following its ways. Raised in a society whose values are becoming increasingly commercialized by a father who regards her primarily as property to be sold at the best price, it is not surprising that she sacrifices her integrity to the pleasures of an adulterous bed. Middleton shows his society that its hypocritical practice encourages actions like Isabella’s.

Through Isabella Middleton points out the inadequacies of women’s moral education and preparation for life. Placing his daughter on display for her prospective husband and father-in-law, Isabella’s father comments:

She has the full qualities of a gentlewoman;  
I have brought her up to music, dancing, what not,  
That may commend her sex and stir her husband. (3.2.111-113)

He says nothing about moral instruction and guidance. As Holmes notes, she has but a superficial refinement (165), having acquired only those accomplishments that make her attractive in the marriage market, a salable commodity. Her education is merely the packaging of the product for the market. Ironically, the Ward cannot appreciate even the packaging. As well as the strength of her desire, her desperation at her upcoming

marriage to the stupid Ward and her need for some kind of freedom and some measure of control over her own life impel her to enter the liaison with Hippolito to which, although she does not explicitly direct Isabella to enter it, Livia opens the door. Isabella herself proposes the relationship to Hippolito who is her only real friend. Incest is abhorrent to her, but secret adultery, her society tells her, is quite acceptable. Holmes says that Isabella's "irate outburst" when Livia, in her anguish over the murder of her lover Leantio, reveals that she has lied to her niece about her consanguinity with Hippolito shows her moral "dimsightedness" and her "defective concept of 'honor' and 'shame' "(164). In the light, however, of Middleton's unflattering portrait of Isabella's society, her "irate outburst" becomes more a protest against that society for the way it has failed and misled her. Moral "dimsightedness" and defectiveness are more appropriate descriptions of the culture of which Isabella is the child. In that culture, deception and duplicity are acceptable and the only sin is to be caught at them, as Livia tells her:

Oh, my wench,  
 Nothing overthrows our sex but indiscretion!  
 We might do well else of a brittle people  
 As any under a great canopy. (2.1.163-166)<sup>9</sup>

R. B. Parker says, "The standards which society sets up to guide its members...are shown to be completely inadequate and easily perverted to serve the very vices they are designed to combat" (193). Isabella's conduct, therefore, is shown to have been influenced by a combination of factors: her lack of self-awareness, her lack of a deeply implanted and developed moral sense, and the corruption endemic to the aristocratic society in which she lives, a society which demands exemplary conduct of women but provides them neither with adequate preparation for life nor wholesome examples of conduct.

Isabella's circumstances in *Women Beware Women* speak to the Jacobean audience about the "tyranny of enforced marriage," but the circumstances of all Middleton's women tragic protagonists speak, as well, of the dangers involved in marriage by free choice. The dilemma of Bianca and Isabella in *Women Beware Women* and Beatrice-Joanna in *The Changeling* is that they are products of the "Janus-headed" world of the early seventeenth century, hearing its conflicting voices, one saying women must be obedient to the will of their fathers, others telling them they should be free to make their own choices of marriage partners, and still others telling them, rather illogically, that they should do both.

Bianca chooses to elope with a man of a lower social class because he infatuates her, and she thinks she loves him deeply enough to be able to accept the economic and social deprivation her elopement will involve. She finds that her free choice has made her "stolen goods," and so must lead a life of confinement and restriction which in part makes her willing to accept the role of mistress after her seduction by the Duke. Isabella, understandably unhappy at the prospect of marriage to the idiot her father's mercenary motives select for her, once she believes the impediment of consanguinity is removed between Hippolito and herself, is only too eager to enter into an adulterous relationship with him because he is the man that she loves. In *The Changeling* Beatrice-Joanna, indulged and isolated in her father's fortress, rejects her father's choice of husband for the more gallant Alsemero and commits murder to gain her will, only to find that she becomes enslaved to the strong, inflexible will of her accomplice. Through these women Middleton seems to show that freedom of choice of itself is no remedy to the plight in which women often find themselves. He proposes no solutions but takes as his task the exposure of his society's inadequacies and hypocrisies.

Like *Women Beware Women*, *The Changeling* examines the same issues of the frustration of sexual desire by arranged marriage and the often disastrous effects of women's sheltered upbringing.<sup>10</sup> The conflict here, as Heinemann notes, centres on the contrasting views of marriage as "business and property transactions arranged by parents" and of "marriage as a freely chosen partnership based primarily on affection" (189). Middleton shows here that, as Bianca argues in *Women Beware Women*, a restrictive environment does not restrain the natural passions of the flesh or adequately prepare women for the problems those passions will raise for them in the world and society in which they must live.

Beatrice-Joanna in *The Changeling*, as Farr says, is a woman who seeks freedom from her father's choice of husband for her, but chooses means which result in her enslavement (53). Vermandero is determined to have his will in the matter of his daughter's marriage. Critics argue that Beatrice's rebellion, unlike that of Isabella in *Women Beware Women*, is indefensible. Farr, for example, says that Beatrice's attraction to Alsemero and her consequent desertion of Alonso de Piracquo for her new attraction, is neither romantic nor justifiable (52). But there is little, if any, indication that Beatrice felt anything for Piracquo, despite Brooke's assertion that her aside "Sure, mine eyes were mistaken,/ This was the man meant for me!" (1.1. 84-85) indicates that she had initially found Piracquo appealing. Although Heinemann says Piracquo is a "brilliant match" (175) for her, and socially no doubt he is a perfectly worthy husband, he seems otherwise rather stodgy, mundane and commonplace. She was probably willing enough to accept Piracquo until she met the more gallant Alsemero who stirred in her passions she had never before experienced. By portraying her as the wilful daughter of a self-willed father and as determined as he to follow her own wishes and desires, Middleton makes her actions understandable in terms of the conditions in and the attitudes with which she has been reared.

Beatrice-Joanna's feelings for Alsemero are real and powerful; and Middleton raises the question of what, in a society where marriages are parentally arranged with little regard for the daughter's consent, a woman should do if she loves a man other than the one chosen for her. Most, no doubt, endured their circumstances. Others, as Isabella does in *Women Beware Women*, took a lover and carried on a secret liaison. A few resorted to murder as Beatrice-Joanna does here and as Vittoria Corombona does in *The White Devil*. Beatrice-Joanna, however, at this point is not yet married, and it may be asked why she does not confront her father about her new choice. The play gives no clear answer. Her aside, "I'll want mine [ie., 'my will'] if you do it", suggests she acts simply out of her own wilfulness, rebellion virtually for its own sake. Young people also tend to anticipate dire consequences where perhaps none will follow—"Daddy will kill me!" On the other hand, Vermandero shows himself a wilful man, and Beatrice may think it pointless to oppose him. Even though Juliet had "just cause and impediment," she probably feared to tell her father that she was married to a Montague. Also, as old Capulet's response to her refusal to marry Paris indicates, it was an era when fathers had the right and the power to disown a recalcitrant daughter who then had little recourse but to turn to prostitution.

Critics affirm that a major theme of the play is that of superficial judgment based on appearance. They accuse Beatrice of judging Alsemero too much on the basis of outward appearance. Similarly, they take Alsemero and Piracquo to task for being overly impressed by Beatrice-Joanna's outward attractiveness. They condemn Beatrice for believing that she is acting with mature judgment in transferring her allegiance from Piracquo to Alsemero when she finds him more sexually desirable: "Methinks I love him now with eyes of judgment" (2.1.13). Engelberg says, "The main action of *The Changeling* ensues from Beatrice's defective sight, her impulsive responses to the world which she can see but never visualize" ("Tragic Blindness", 21-22). Levin says that

Beatrice's own values are essentially "aesthetic" and that therefore she substitutes aesthetic sense for morality (40). Brooke argues that Beatrice-Joanna "sees each man as he appears as more lovely than the last" (72). In fact, however, she has seen only two whom she might conceivably marry, and falling in love, moreover, is an irrational act of which sight is a major element. Outward appearance is a major stimulant of the sexual desire which is such a powerful element in the attraction between men and women. Furthermore, sexual desire, as Rose notes, is unruly and does not respect human social conventions. Again Middleton calls into question the effectiveness of social constraints intended to govern the passions.

These constraints and the restrictive and secluded upbringing of young women is symbolized in *The Changeling* by Vermandero's Castle or Fortress which is Beatrice's home, and indeed, her whole world. Though much coming and going happens within the Castle, it is, nevertheless, isolated, secluded, and insulated. Critics have noted the courtly and Petrarchan significance of the Castle. Berger says that in courtly poetry the castle or fortress is often a metaphor or conceit for the mistress herself and for her chastity which the lover must besiege until she yields her heart (37). Of Beatrice's assertion to her father that Alsemero is "much desirous/ To see your castle" (1.1.159-160), Berger asks, "Whose castle does Alsemero really want to see, Vermandero's or Beatrice-Joanna's?" (38-39). Beatrice, he affirms, has become the Castle. Certainly the castle of her chastity is under siege, first by Piracquo, and then by Alsemero, but most continuously and most urgently by De Flores. The Castle, however, is also symbolic of the restriction, confinement and seclusion of Beatrice-Joanna's life. The outside world touches her only as it comes into the castle, and such contacts tend to be perfunctory and superficial.

As the effective chatelaine, Beatrice-Joanna is at the centre of the Castle's life, and, in the apparent absence of a wife, she is at the centre of her father's affection, his "best love" as "He was wont/ To call [her]" (1.1.171-172). She has come to feel, therefore, that she is the centre of the universe, that she can have whatever she wants, and that others exist primarily to do her bidding. She understands almost nothing of human nature, and she has been imbued with her father's code of honor wherein chastity is the woman's honor and her highest virtue. The preservation of her virginity, or when it is lost, the preservation of the appearance of virginity, takes precedence over everything else. The exaltation of chastity above all else has the effect of blinding Beatrice to almost every other aspect of morality, so that murder becomes in her eyes a less serious sin than loss of virginity. "Honour," says Heinemann, "in the sense of her worldly reputation for chastity, she understands and will kill for" (178). In this way, Middleton holds before the aristocratic world the inadequacies of its values, particularly its exaltation of the preservation of virginity as the *summum bonum* of female morality.<sup>11</sup>

Alsemero loves Beatrice-Joanna after seeing her once in the Temple. He thinks location sanctifies his desire for her, but the sequel shows this another example of the unruliness of sexual desire. Because of the sacredness of the place of his first seeing her, Alsemero sees Beatrice almost as the prelapsarian Eve and his love like the holy love of Adam and Eve in the Garden, or in Sara Eaton's view, Alsemero sees Beatrice "as the ideal lady in a Courtly Love scheme in which he wants to believe" (Kastan and Stallybrass 277-278):

I love her beauties to the holy purpose,  
And that, me thinks, admits comparison  
With man's first creation, the place blest,  
And is his right home back, if he achieve it.

(1.1.6-9)



In fact, he loves with his eyes, and, through them, the irrational force of sexual passion has entered. Because she is betrothed to Piracquo, Beatrice herself warns Alsemero against the too quick and easy judgment of the eyes:

Be better advised, sir:  
Our eyes are sentinels unto our judgments,  
And should give certain judgment what they see;  
But they are rash sometimes, and tell us wonders  
Of common things, which when our judgments find,  
They can then check the eyes, and call them blind. (1.1.71-76)

Beatrice probably speaks this conventional wisdom with sincerity. Ironically, however, before the scene is over, she feels within herself a “giddy turning” and fears she “shall change [her] saint” (1.1.155-156), and that solely on the judgment of her eyes. The question is whether or not, apart from platitudes and shibboleths, Beatrice has been given anything else on which to make judgments. Middleton appears to imply here that moral precepts are incapable of overcoming the powerful effect of desire which is in large part nurtured by sight, and do not provide a sufficient defence against the passions and the will.

Blinded by an upbringing which has made her believe she is the centre of the universe and given her an inadequate perception of the real nature either of morality, human nature, herself, or the world, Beatrice does not understand her own humanity or that of others. The long process of coming to understand her own passionate nature begins with her employment of De Flores to murder Alonso de Piracquo so that Alsemero will not risk his life and their relationship by challenging Piracquo to a duel. In dissuading him from that dangerous course, Beatrice says that “Bloodguiltiness becomes a fouler visage” (2.2.40), and thinks immediately of De Flores. She had judged De Flores as “unwholesome” and a very “basilisk” (1.1.113, 115) as she had judged Alsemero worthy on the judgment of her eyes.

Beatrice hates De Flores's physical appearance, his ugliness. Yet she admits to Alsemero that her dislike is an "infirmity" for which she can no "other reason render" (1.1.109-110). Alsemero, tells her that her feelings for De Flores are of the same nature as his dislike for cherries, implying that taste in people, like taste in fruit, is not within the control of one's will. A number of commentators argue that she hates De Flores because he is the image of the darkness in her own nature, her passionate sexual desire. De Flores, like Beatrice, possesses a powerful sexual appetite which Beatrice awakens in him and which he feels only she can assuage, but Middleton sees that appetite as natural and, therefore, not in itself "dark" or evil. Apart from its irrationality, Beatrice's hatred of De Flores is complex. As Farr notes, she in her way is as obsessed with De Flores as he is with her, and "De Flores...is quick to exploit" her obsession to his own advantage (56).

In two scenes, Act 2, scene 2, and Act 3, scene 4, among the most brilliantly written in the whole corpus of Jacobean drama, which have been so well analysed that to do so at length here seems superfluous, De Flores destroys Beatrice's aristocratic belief that she can rid herself of both the unwanted Piracquo and the perhaps even more unwanted De Flores himself by employing the latter to murder the former and then pay him handsomely to leave the country. Though she is shocked at the price De Flores demands for ridding her of Piracquo, she cannot have been totally without some sense of his erotic interest. The intensity of her loathing for him suggests as much, as does her effort to play upon his feelings, using such seemingly endearing expressions as "Oh my De Flores" (2.2.98) in her interview with him. Also, though De Flores is not of the lower orders but a gentleman fallen on hard times, like Flamineo in *The White Devil*, he is still socially beneath her, and Beatrice tries to exploit his social inferiority.<sup>12</sup> By example, certainly, and likely also by precept, she has been taught to think, as Patricia Thomas notes, "that it is her privilege to manipulate others like puppets" (xiv)

and to ignore the humanity of those she sees as her social inferiors or the possibility that their human feelings and desires might be as deep and intense as her own. Farr notes that Beatrice “in disgust at his physical appearance” has ignored De Flores’s “human needs”, his “physical and emotional neediness, his lust, his elation, his pain, his determination to have satisfaction at all costs” (57). Beatrice is horrified that he should believe that he should have taken seriously her seductive flattery and that he should demand the reward and payment which he thinks she has promised and has come to expect.

Through Beatrice-Joanna’s struggles to satisfy her desire while at the same time preserving her reputation for honor, Middleton shows the shallowness and total inadequacy of a morality which places a woman’s physical chastity above all else. The mere preservation of physical virginity is not, for Middleton, of itself a sign of unimpeachable morality, nor its loss necessarily a sign of evil. In his comedies he does not condemn premarital sexual relations, though, on the other hand, he appears to respect a woman like Mistress Low-Water who uses great ingenuity to preserve her marriage and her virtue. Nevertheless, in contrast to the general attitude of his culture, he did not regard women who yielded up their virginity before marriage as having committed the unforgivable sin. As Holmes notes, he “lays more stress on [the] worth” of Jane, pregnant by the man she loves and hopes to marry, in *A Fair Quarrel* and Witgood’s mistress in *A Trick to Catch the Old One*, who is otherwise not promiscuous, than on their deviations from the social norm. Beatrice-Joanna’s desire, then, should not of itself be seen as the cause of her crimes.

As a child of her social class, Beatrice has been led to believe that one can simply “dispose” of those who oppose one’s interests. Kirsch says that Beatrice is like the Duke in *Women Beware Women* in believing that “murder is no dishonor, though fornication

is" (84). Murder seems to her merely "a commodity like anything else one buys" (Heinemann 174), just as she herself is a commodity. Schoenbaum says, "There is...no indication that Beatrice regards herself as having embarked on a criminal career; it never seems to occur to her that murder is immoral, or even that it is socially unacceptable" (141). It is, at most, as Levin says, "distasteful" (40). When De Flores shows her Piracquo's severed finger, she is horrified, not by the immorality, but by "the physical ugliness of murder" (Farr 54), not having "anticipated that murder might involve the shedding of blood" (Schoenbaum 143). She, therefore, feels horror that De Flores would be "so wicked,/ Or shelter such a cunning cruelty,/ To make [Piracquo's] death the murderer of [her] honour!" (3. 4.120-122). Despite De Flores's trenchant rejoinder, "Push, you forget yourself! / A woman dipp'd in blood, and talk of modesty?" (3.4.125-126), she still sees no incongruity in pleading with him, "Let me go into my [marriage] bed with honour,/ And I am rich in all things" (3.4.158-159). De Flores, however, will not listen to her pleas, but incisively exposes to her the superficiality of her vaunted honor. Because she "chang'd from [her] first love", she is "a whore in [her] affection" (3.4.142-143). Appeals to her honor and to her superior social rank carry no weight with De Flores once she has stooped to criminality. She is a "fair murd'ress" (4.3.141) and, if she were to "Look but in her conscience," she will "find [him] there [her] equal" (3.4.132-133). De Flores's "blunt grammar" (Morrison 232) deflates her sense of social superiority by demonstrating to her that her desires are no different from those common to all humanity, and that by instigating the murder of Piracquo she is no less guilty of the crime than he, De Flores, who has carried it out. He punctures Beatrice's aristocratic indifference, showing her that the mere possession of virginity does not make a woman virtuous.

Several critics have noted that of all the characters in the play, De Flores is the most honest about himself and the only one who shows any sign of conscience which

appears in his confrontations with Tomaso de Piracquo. Stilling says, “Beside De Flores, Alsemero—with his faulty chemical tests, and masochistic fantasies—comes off much the second best, despite his being the injured party and the man with convention on his side” (256). In fact, Alsemero’s tests seem to work, but they do make him seem repulsively self-righteous. De Flores’s honesty and complete lack of self-righteousness may even, subconsciously, appeal to Beatrice, brought up to hypocrisy but striving to escape its consequences. To some degree her perhaps subconscious recognition of these qualities in De Flores put Beatrice’s love for him in a better light than is usually granted it.

Though Beatrice-Joanna’s concept of honor is, as Levin notes, superficial (41), in practice merely external conformity to a code, that external conformity is very important to her. As Tomlinson says, “honour is not merely a word to Beatrice and to others in this context”, and when De Flores demands that she yield her honor to him as the payment for his “service”<sup>13</sup> to her, “her protests are, in fact, perfectly sincere”. Beatrice’s protests, more than just for “a fair name”, embody her “deeply felt concern for the virtues rather stupidly espoused by her father” (201-202). Beatrice, therefore, still takes the outward appearance of honor for the thing itself. Therefore when Diaphanta her maidservant, whom she makes her surrogate in the marriage bed to avoid Alsemero’s discovering her loss of virginity, enjoys herself too much and stays too long, Beatrice makes the same mistake as she made with De Flores. She fails to recognize human nature, never thinking that Diaphanta might enjoy too much her “work”. Diaphanta having thereby almost jeopardized Beatrice’s now perjured “honor”, Beatrice once again turns to murder. As before, Beatrice is the instigator, De Flores the agent.

At this moment Beatrice realizes that she loves De Flores. She says she loves him for his care for her, and we should not doubt her word, but the basis for her love lies deeper, a basis which Beatrice at this moment does not understand or recognize, namely that sexually she is more like De Flores than Alsemero. Farr notes the “sexual affinity...underlying the growing kinship between the two conspirators” (56). Some critics argue that this affinity is oneness in an immorality signified by De Flores’s ugliness. Although his ugliness initially makes him repulsive to Beatrice, De Flores himself knows that ugly men have been loved. It is his lower social status that makes it impossible, in the normal course of events, for him ever to win her. Both his ugliness and his social station as a fallen gentleman intensify the anguish De Flores endures over Beatrice. Therefore, when chance opens an opportunity for him, he seizes it eagerly and vehemently. The vehemence of his desire is little different from the vehemence of Beatrice’s original desire for Alsemero. It is in this intensity of desire that Beatrice and De Flores are akin. This affinity lies partly in their natures, but it develops as they are drawn closer together both by their shared experience and because by that experience they together become outlaws from their society and its norms.

Beatrice seems to recognize her affinity with De Flores when, as she is dying, she says,

Beneath the stars, upon yon meteor  
Hung my fate, 'mongst things corruptible;  
I ne'er could pluck it from him: my loathing  
Was prophet to the rest, but ne'er believ'd... (5.3.154-157).

That recognition becomes explicit only after she suffers the final shock of Alsemero’s rejection when he discovers her adultery with De Flores. Anxious still to maintain the appearance of chastity and honor, Beatrice denies the charge. Denounced as a whore, she responds “What a horrid sound it hath!” (5.3.31). In her mind whoredom is still the most serious offence a woman can commit. Horrified to hear her adultery named,

Beatrice confesses, not to adultery and fornication, but to murder, believing that because she has committed it for love of Alsemero, he will excuse it. Calling De Flores “That thing of hate” (5.3.67), she names him as her accomplice. This, perhaps, indicates how shallow is her love for him, a love which, after all, she said was based on his serviceability to her. However, she is also motivated by the desire for self-preservation, and a man of De Flores’s social class is easily sacrificed. When she is again in Alsemero’s presence, she recognizes that she is still a member of the aristocracy and that socially, if not sexually, her place is with him and not with De Flores. Indeed, she still tries to cling to her status and reputation as a lady. Dame Helen Gardner says that Beatrice-Joanna “sins against her nature, when she accepts the thing [de Flores] her nature most loathes as the instrument of her will...” (57). If by Beatrice-Joanna’s “nature” Dame Helen means her modesty, her chastity, her honor, and her sophistication and cultivation as a lady, then her contention is correct, for certainly the passionate element in her nature is inimical to all that. Peter Morrison says that “For sexually charged Beatrice, De Flores is truly the ‘ultimate other,’ an ambiguous, monstrous manifestation of her secret self her social world has at once engendered and then forbidden her to explore” (232). The implication here is that De Flores whom he sees as the changeling—the “cangoun”<sup>14</sup>—represents the irrational and often disorderly forces which lurk below the surface of our civilized veneer, the id always urging the ego to rebel against the cultural super-ego.

On hearing of her accusation against him, De Flores names her a whore, confirming Alsemero’s suspicion, and Beatrice’s vehement denial now falls on deaf ears. Thrown with her into Alsemero’s closet, De Flores, as Heinemann says, “takes no chances that he will be left to torture and execution while she, as a great lady, gets off with lighter punishment; he stabs her and then himself” (178).<sup>15</sup> Heinemann adds that “it is De Flores, not the law, that puts her to death in the end” (179), and that

completes the identification of Beatrice with her tool villain and accomplice. De Flores's murder of Beatrice-Joanna is, in fact, a kind of bizarre re-enactment of the original consummation of his desire for her, his stabbing her to death being replete with sexual implications. Gardner notes that "In the end she recognizes her link with him and what she has become and sees herself as defiled and defiling" (58). To her father she says

O come not near me, sir, I shall defile you:  
 I am that of your blood was taken from you  
 For your better health; look no more upon't,  
 But cast it to the ground regardlessly:  
 Let the common sewer take it from distinction. (5.3.149-153)

Beatrice knows that in following her own heart and trying to find the kind of sexual and emotional fulfilment her heart demands, she has broken the conventions and mores of her society and culture. She blames herself, unable to recognize either that she is the child of her father's wilfulness as much as the child of his blood, or that she is the child of her culture which failed to educate her in understanding either of herself or human nature. As a female in a culture that tries to deal with its fear of female sexuality by repression, she has received no adequate basis either to understand or to acknowledge her own sexual desire or to recognize and appreciate the existence of the same desire in others. Her wrongs are the wrongs of a society that has taught her to think that those of lower orders than herself do not share in the same human nature as herself and exist primarily to serve her in any capacity, no matter how demeaning to themselves. Her blind struggle for personal fulfilment in this arid world having failed, she submits in defeat to its judgment of her, unable to perceive that her conduct has been a kind of judgment on the society.

Alsemero is often held up as an exemplary character. Gardner, for example, says he is "absolutely innocent of any complicity" (58) and, strictly speaking that is true. Farr sees him as projecting "an absolute standard of morals and rationality which grows in



impressiveness as the action develops" (59). Thus to some, he is, in Gardner's words, "a standard by which we see what has happened to Beatrice-Joanna" (58). These views are contradicted by several aspects of Alsemero's character. First, he challenges Piracquo on insufficient grounds. Noblemen considered it their privilege "greatly to find quarrel in a straw/ When honor is at the stake" (*Hamlet* 4.4.55-56). Philip Sidney, for example, challenged a lord for calling him "puppy" on the tennis court but was refused the right of duel because of inequality of rank. Elizabeth sought to curb the practice, and James to suppress it altogether. Some who would allow the duel limited it to severely circumscribed situations. Vincentio Saviolo's much read and highly influential *Of Honor and Honorable Quarrels* maintained that the duel must always be a last resort and taken up only in cases where death would be the normal punishment for a crime, and that its purpose was not revenge. He writes:

I judge it not meet that a man should hazard himself in the peril of death but for such a cause as deserveth it, so as if a man be accused of such a defect as deserve [sic] to be punished with death, in this case combat might be granted.... [U]pon such a quarrel my pinion is that he is not to be denied to justify himself by weapons, provided always that he be not able by law to clear himself. (Sig. a2 2v—a2 3r. Spelling and punctuation modernized.)

The cause, therefore, must be just and the duel taken up only where all other means of redress have failed. "Leaving the civil proof and taking the arms," Saviolo indicates is, in ordinary circumstances, leaving "that which is convenient for men to have recourse to that which is belonging to beasts" (Sig. x1r). Though the Englishman Sir William Segar in *The Booke of Honor and Armes* (1580) allows some exceptions which Saviolo did not countenance, his basic view was similar: "The cause of all quarrel is injury, but the matter of content is justice and honor" (Sig a2r. Spelling modernized). Alsemero, motivated as he is by selfish desire, would in the views of Saviolo and Segar, be engaging in a duel for an unjust cause, and not even a cause of honor or injury, but, rather like those who combat "not in respect to justice and equity, but either for hatred, or for desire for revenge, or for some other particular affection" (Saviolo Sig y4r), to rid

himself of a rival in love. *The Fair Quarrel* suggests very strongly that Middleton was aware of these issues, and many in his audience would also have been. It is possible that Middleton implies that had Alsemero killed Piracquo in a duel, that would have been no less a murder than De Flores's act, except that his would have been committed under the guise of a so-called honorable quarrel.<sup>16</sup>

Alsemero is, in fact, moralistic rather than moral. Holmes calls him "pharisaical" (182) and finds him morally blind and superficial in his judgments (179-180). Ornstein speaks of "his colorless platitudes" (182). Morrison says that his Chaldean virginity test symbolizes his "pathological preoccupation with purity" (229). His possession and use of these love filters also suggests that, though Beatrice's beauty temporarily overpowered him, Alsemero is basically distrustful of women. His attitudes, in fact, are stereotypical.

Before seeing Beatrice, he had been a stoic, rejecting the "snares of beauty" (1.1.38) set before him, the strong implication of Jasperino's comments in the opening scene being that he had regarded women as distractions from his course of learning. He seems at the beginning to be a young scholar recently embarked on the Grand Tour. Initially, he had justified his infatuation as blessed and propitious because he had seen and fallen in love with Beatrice in the temple and had easily and quickly dismissed the "omen" (1.1.2.) that had immediately followed upon his infatuation. Now, her crime exposed, he admits that he had always had misgivings:

Oh, the place itself e'er since  
Has been crying for vengeance, the temple  
Where blood and beauty first unlawfully  
Fir'd their devotion, and quenched the right one;  
'Twas in my fears at first, 'twill have it now... (5.3.72-76.)

Beatrice's virtue seems now a "black mask" and a "visor", not just appearance of a virtue she did not possess, but a disguise for lechery. Beatrice's virtue and sense of

honor may indeed be shallow, but nothing indicates that she had initially tried to entice him in the temple. At that time, in fact, she had been innocent even of the intention of enticing him. He had taken the initiative with his kiss and dismissed her warning against the judgment of the eyes, thereby encouraging her to act on her own infatuation, just as his intention to challenge Piracquo later suggests to her the idea of murder. That he is morally shallow is further suggested by the ease with which he renounces the duel and leaves matters to Beatrice without inquiring what it was she intended, and by his singular lack of curiosity about the convenient disappearance of his rival. Thus, he has set up the circumstances which lead to the tragedy.

Only perhaps at the very end does Alsemero show any sign of growth when he recognizes that he, Vermandero and Tomaso Piracquo are bonded together in suffering. Otherwise, for most of the play, Alsemero seems to be little more than a self-righteous prig who imposes absolute moral standards on others. McAlindon says that “Alsemero’s development in the last two acts into a model of judgment and justice is unexpected” and his last-scene “attitude of unsullied justice and righteous indignation seems unwarranted” and “much less attractive than the dying candor of Beatrice and even the unrepentant pride of De Flores” (*English Renaissance Tragedy*, 207). The aura of self-righteous hypocrisy that clings to Alsemero is hard to dispel. McAlindon adds that Beatrice “asks forgiveness from all, perceives the relationship between past, present and future, and sees the fitness of her untimely death: “Tis time to die, when ’tis shame to live’ [5.3.179]” (205). Though this is not a religious play, its implied moral context is Christian and, as McAlindon notes further, no one, including Alsemero to whom it is addressed, heeds her plea for forgiveness. Even her father appears indifferent to her fate and far more concerned for his own reputation: “Oh, my name is enter’d now in that record/ Where till this fatal hour ’twas never read” (5.3.180-181).

A number of critics, taking their cue from Alsemero, have damned Beatrice, but McAlindon says that “it hardly seems Christian to damn someone who has confessed her sin and asked forgiveness” (205). A Christian is taught to forgive others their trespasses as he or she would have his or her own forgiven, and in this regard Beatrice acts far more like a Christian than Alsemero who has been as guilty of “a giddy turning” as she and was prepared to issue a challenge to Piracquo on morally flimsy grounds to achieve his desire for her. One need not, however, be a Christian to see the sharp contradiction between Alsemero’s harsh judgment on Beatrice and his inability to recognize his own share in the responsibility for the whole course of events that have led to it. In this regard Beatrice-Joanna shows herself Alsemero’s moral superior. Middleton’s presentation of this unheeding and unforgiving attitude of the male characters comments critically on the legalistic rigidity and hypocrisy of a male-dominated culture which claimed to be Christian, and on its double standard, symbolized in Alsemero, regarding the conduct of men and women.

Middleton is less interested in judgment, however, than that his audience see Beatrice-Joanna in the light of her upbringing which has failed to prepare her either to understand her own nature and the nature of others, or to understand and resist the temptations of her own flesh and those from outside her. Certainly, he shows that her conduct is conditioned by her world. As is the case with Bianca and Isabella in *Women Beware Women*, her immorality is the immorality of her society. Because she is a woman, however, she is punished for it, whereas Alsemero, who shares in her guilt, because he is a high-born male, remains unpunished. Though as guilty as Beatrice of letting his sexual desires get the better of him, the society blames Beatrice because woman in such circumstance is always regarded as the enticer, and fails to see that she is simply a human being engaged in humanity’s constant struggle to achieve an only

dimly perceived and often obscured vision of civilization. Morrison is fundamentally right in saying:

Beatrice must struggle with her beauty, her status, her sex, each of which is a powerful enemy that strongly interferes with any desire or opportunity she may have for genuine growth or self-realization. Because she is young, and the daughter of a lord, Beatrice is vain, chaste, coy, arrogant, inconsistent, and wholly insecure and unhappy. Emotionally powerful, Beatrice is effectively powerless; and it is her lack of power that consigns her to her unhappy destiny. She is a member of a society whose elaborate fictions can account neither for her feelings nor her being. (226).

Middleton seems very modern in his recognition that social conditioning and pressures from within and without exert a powerful influence on conduct. His two tragedies imply a fundamental criticism of his society. He understands the pressures his characters experience and which motivate their conduct, and though his final judgment seems to be that such pressures must be resisted, at the same time he warns his society that the constraints it places on the expression and satisfaction of women's natural emotional needs make such resistance beyond the capacities of most humans.

A seeming illustration of human ability to resist sexual temptation is, in the view of some critics, to be found in Isabella, the young, beautiful wife of the old and jealous asylum-keeper Alibius, whom Rowley, working it is generally acknowledged very closely with Middleton,<sup>17</sup> presents in the comic subplot of *The Changeling*. Although this subplot is in many ways unsatisfactory, Isabella rises above its silliness to emerge as a character of strength. Many critics, therefore, see her as a "self-possessed and competent woman" who exemplifies "the woman who, knowing the world and herself, is proof against 'a giddy turning' and capable of keeping faith with 'him she makes a husband' " (Holmes 181-182), and so a foil to the "unstable and erratic" Beatrice-Joanna of the main plot. On the other hand, it may also be true that this subplot, showing "virtue triumphant" involves what Stephen Greenblatt calls "negotiation" with the prevailing orthodoxies in order to sugar-coat the bitter pill the main plot asks its

audience to swallow, or more precisely, to make palatable a play which presents a telling and for many, very probably, a discomfiting challenge to accepted moral standards. That Isabella is the heroine of a comic subplot where events are expected to turn out favorably for the protagonist does not necessarily undercut her portrayal as a strong virtuous woman, but that fact may imply that her struggle is not to be compared too closely with the far more “real-life” struggle of Beatrice-Joanna.

Because hers is a “January-May” marriage with an unworthy husband, Isabella might be said to have reason, if not excuse, for betrayal. Alibius, keeper of the asylum, keeps her locked away and guarded somewhat as Leantio tries to do with Bianca in *Women Beware Women*. “She resents this treatment, and one might expect her to retaliate upon her husband by having her ‘will’ and cuckolding him” (Brittin 141). Alibius, in fact, treats Isabella almost as one of the inmates of his asylum.

Lollo makes the point that madness is not confined to the asylum, but is endemic in the world and that not even the supposedly sane keepers of the asylum can escape the disease:

*Isabella.* Why, here’s none but fools and madmen.  
*Lollo.* Very well: and where will you find any other, if you should go  
 abroad? There’s my master and I to boot, too. (3.3.14-16)

Even Isabella herself, Lollo says, is “half mad” (3.3.19). That it is “*A Mad World My Masters*” seems to be a major emphasis of the subplot and its commentary on the main plot.

Madness is not necessarily a clinical condition. The term may also be applied to the conduct of the apparently sane when it is based on a one-sided view of reality or on one aspect of personality to the exclusion of all others, the “humorous” behavior which Jonson made the subject of his satiric comedy and which Middleton emulated. That

may be the point of Isabella's masquerade as a madwoman and then her self-disclosure before Antonio, a kind of reverse psychology to show that his behavior, his feigned madness, is all too much like the real thing. So too, the emphasis in the real world on woman's chastity as the essence of her virtue and on seclusion and restriction as the means of maintaining chastity and engendering virtue is shown to be madness.

Berger says that Alibius is as concerned to preserve the fortress of Isabella's chastity as Vermandero in the main plot is to protect the security of his real fortress (44). His point is that the weakness of Beatrice's honor is an inner one just as the weakness of the outwardly impregnable fortress is the willfulness, the moral weakness, of its denizens. Isabella herself says:

Here the restrained current might make breach,  
 Spite of the watchful bankers; would a woman stray,  
 She need not gad abroad to seek her sin,  
 It would be brought home one way or other:  
 The needle's point will to the fixed north;  
 Such drawing arctics women's beauties are. (3.3.213-217)

She makes a double point here: women's own potential for sin remains, and their seclusion is an inadequate protection against the outside world which will seek them out, as Antonio and Franciscus have sought her out by entering the asylum disguised as a fool and a madman, and as, in the main plot, Alsemero finds out Beatrice-Joanna and becomes a stimulus for her sexual desire. There is perhaps a hint here of Angelo's insight in *Measure for Measure* that women's fashion of wearing masks in public, often at the demand of jealous husbands, is as much an enticement as a protection. Despite Alibius's elaborate attempts to keep sin from Isabella and Isabella from sin, sin finds her out. Isabella's ability to resist temptation appears to arise from a knowledge of both herself and of human nature generally. If she remains sane in the midst of a mad world, it is because she knows something of the nature and the source of its madness, though how she gained that knowledge is not made clear. In Act 4 scene 1, she appears in the

dumb show presentation of Beatrice's wedding, so that she would seem to be a gentlewoman, but her marriage to Alibius seems out of keeping with that status. Like Vittoria Corombona, she may be a bought wife who having been sold to the elderly Alibius has learned, like Bianca, to adapt to a hard situation.

Isabella appears to believe that the marriage bond is unbreakable even if her husband is jealous, suspicious, distrustful and inattentive. His name Alibius, which means always somewhere else, is significant. There seems, however, an element of ambiguity in Isabella's conduct, as well as an element of irony in the play's overall treatment of her. She tells Lollio that, should she yield, if he were not "silent, mute,/ Mute as a statue", Antonio's "injunction/ For me enjoying, shall be to cut your throat" (3.3.240-242). Later, however, she appears to promise him that "The first place is thine, believe it Lollio;/ If I do fall..." (4.3.37-38).<sup>18</sup> Tomlinson believes that Isabella is willing to grant Lollio his "share" in her, and even that she had approached Antonio (in the guise of a madwoman) half-intending to yield to him. It may be that she is attracted to one or both of her two admirers. In her circumstances, it seems at least possible that she would be. Levin, however, comments that Isabella here "seems to recognize that if she succumbed to [Antonio's] temptations she would be vulnerable to the chaotic impulse of subrational nature" (46). In that case, her comment indicates a knowledge of the strong force of physical desire in her own nature. Isabella recognizes that her participation in human nature makes her vulnerable to temptation. She may, in fact, simply be prudent. Lollio knows she has received letters from and been paid court by Antonio and Franciscus and could turn such information against her. Her earlier threat to Lollio shows that she is worldly-wise enough to know that such a threat, which could very well be carried out, is more effective with the likes of Lollio than appeals such as Beatrice's in the main plot to De Flores to respect her honor.



Isabella, then, appears to possess knowledge of herself, the world, and human nature which enable her to resist temptation and preserve her honor and integrity. Yet one is left to ask if such honor and integrity are not wasted on the likes of Alibius. Alibius promises to reform, but Isabella seems nevertheless to be locked in a “loveless marriage” to a “jealous coxcomb” (Thomson xxvii). Sara Eaton notes that, in fact, Alibius “interprets Isabella’s actions as a reason ‘never to keep/ Scholars wiser than myself’ [5.3. 214-215], not as reason enough to free her from the madhouse” (Kastan and Stallybrass 285). Middleton’s and Rowley’s point may be, in part, that many husbands do not deserve the wives they have and that the fidelity they expect of their wives is often given at great cost and with little return, as some of the women speaking in their own defence affirmed in the pamphlet literature and as Emilia suggests in *Othello*. The authors’ presentation of Isabella’s circumstances thus throws an ironic light on the conventional marriage doctrine. The resolution of the comic conflict is quite equivocal, for Isabella’s loyalty to the jealous, suspicious and foolish Alibius, if not maintained in a waste of shame, does seem a rather meaningless and futile expense of spirit. What keeps Isabella faithful may be no more than her realization that in her society and culture, marriage is very often a matter of making the best of a bad job and that to try to find relief through an extra-marital liaison is to invite an even worse fate. If she is a foil to Beatrice-Joanna, as many maintain, she is so, not as the “good girl” in contrast to the “bad girl,” but in the somewhat ironic sense of showing comically what the main plot presents tragically, that marriage as the current society arranges and orders it is more conducive to unhappiness and frustration than to happiness and fulfilment. The equivocal, ambiguous conclusion of the comic subplot undercuts any kind of one-on-one direct contrast between Isabella and Beatrice-Joanna. There is nothing romantic in Isabella’s fidelity. Perhaps, as Lollio says, she is a bit mad to stay with Alibius, but in a mad world, anything else would likely be greater madness. The

resolution of the comic plot is rather bleak and not much more reassuring than that of the tragic plot.

In Middleton's comedies, romantic relationships tend to receive rather short shrift, and many of the concluding marriages are very ambiguous and equivocal affairs. The young protagonist of *A Trick to Catch the Old One*, for example, who, having gulled his uncle, gulls himself by marrying his uncle's whore, whom, ironically, he had earlier impersonated, in the firm belief that she is a gentlewoman of virtue. The romantic plot of *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* is sidelined in favor of the various intrigues of the main plot, and the chaste maid of the title appears hardly at all. Middleton, and presumably Rowley, seem to have recognized that marriage in the circumstances of the age was likely, in most instances, to be at best a kind of pragmatic compromise. Isabella's situation in *The Changeling*, like that of her namesake in *Women Beware Women*, was not, in her time, an uncommon one. Like most of her real-life sisters, Isabella in *The Changeling* chooses simply to endure her circumstances. Thus, while the orthodox, and perhaps the authorities of church and state might see Isabella in *The Changeling* as a foil to Beatrice-Joanna, as a triumphantly virtuous woman who maintains order, decorum and degree and who serves, therefore, as a reproach to the wicked woman who breaches them, the triumph of her virtue is presented so equivocally as also possibly to have caused unease among the thoughtful and sensitive.

Holmes states that "Middleton did not set himself against the system, but against the false values and sham within the system; and when he took exception to a religious group or social class or profession, it was because of some hypocrisy or notorious abuse attributable to it" (48). However, the plays discussed here suggest that in fact his criticism was often quite fundamental. In portraying the adulteries of Bianca and Isabella in *Women Beware Women* and of Beatrice-Joanna in *The Changeling*,

Middleton represents the pressures placed upon them by their hypocritical and astringent societies. There is no splendor in the rebellion of Middleton's heroines against their circumstances. If, as critics maintain, their rebellions are seen as ultimately sordid and unhealthy, that sordidness and unhealthiness reflect the sordidness and unhealthiness in their society and culture. Because society frustrates the natural expression of woman's sexual desire, that desire often manifests itself in antisocial and destructive conduct. Through characters like Bianca and Isabella in *Women Beware Women* and Beatrice-Joanna in *The Changeling*, Middleton shows the dangers of such frustration, and that female sexual desire must be recognized as a powerful, but also normal and natural, force in their relationships with men who are also creatures of powerful sexual desire which often manifests itself in ruthlessness and violence. Any effective moral education must not hide the facts of human sexual desire, but take them into account.

Unlike some of his predecessors, Middleton creates no tragic heroines of exemplary virtue, like Desdemona and the Duchess of Malfi, who are martyred either for their virtue or their natural desire. Nor does he create heroines like Vittoria Corombona and Evadne who rebel against the conditions of their society with a kind of magnificent defiance, nor a Cleopatra, who as a queen escapes traditional roles and so possesses a wonderful self-acceptance and confidence and sees no conflict between love and affairs of state. His tragic heroines, Bianca perhaps excepted, act secretly in contravention of social dictates to gain the fulfilment of their sexual desires. In emphasizing that sexual desire is a natural and arational component in the attraction between men and women, he deidealizes and deromanticizes the relations between men and women. The kind of ideal love implied in the Courtly-Petrarchan tradition would seem to him to be not only impossible but false and destructive. Furthermore, he proposes no remedy for this condition: sexual desire is simply part of human nature. It

is senseless to deny it and futile to try to repress it, especially in women, by social constraints. In that regard, he implies that women are neither more nor less sexually motivated than men, and so the attempt to restrain women but not men is not only tyrannical but totally unrealistic. He seems to imply that women ought to have the same right as men to make their own mistakes. With the exception of Shakespeare's portrait of Cleopatra, all the women discussed in this study suggest that their creators may not have been able to see any other role for woman than the traditional one of wife and mother. Middleton is no exception, but by showing what is wrong rather than by hinting at what is right, he implies, like Shakespeare, that women, as complex rather than simple beings who must be seen in their complexity as having personal needs which must be satisfied, are repressed, constricted and victimized by the structures and mores of the contemporary society.

## END NOTES TO CHAPTER FIVE

1. Citations of *The Changeling* are from N. W. Bawcutt's edition in The Revels Plays series, 1958: Manchester: Manchester U P, 1978. Those from *Women Beware Women* are from Roma Gill's edition in The New Mermaid series, London: Ernest Benn, 1968.
2. This Duke and his brother the Cardinal, as many critics have noted, are the same historically as the Duke of Florence and his Cardinal brother in Webster's *The White Devil*. Bianca Capello (1584-1587) is thus a slightly older contemporary of Vittoria Accoramboni (1557-1585), Webster's Vittoria Corombona. Bianca's comment on the fifty-five year old Duke, "That's no great age in a man; he's at his best/ For wisdom and judgment" (1.3. 93-94), has been seen by some as Middleton's compliment to James I who was fifty-five at the probable time of the writing and first performance of the play and who liked to think himself a man of great sagacity. Given the ambiguity of the Duke's portrayal in the play, however, it may be questioned that such a compliment was intended. The Duke presides over a corrupt court, and James's court was notorious for its moral laxity. The play's setting is Italy, but as is frequently the case, a comment on the English, rather than the moral corruption widely believed to be true of Italian courts, is implied.
3. I am grateful to Professor Anthony B. Dawson of the University of British Columbia for reminding me of this Scriptural reference which ought to have occurred to me unbidden.
4. I am grateful to Professor Katherine Sirluck, Department of English, University of British Columbia for directing my attention to this fact. On this matter, it is worth noting that Alice Arden was publicly burned in 1551 for her instigation of the murder of her husband, a gentleman only. Such a crime was seen as one against divinely established order, since marriage was seen as a paradigm of the state, the husband's position being analogous to that of the monarch. The murder of a husband becomes almost a form of blasphemy. As Catherine Belsey notes in "Alice Arden's Crime", the murder of Arden of Faversham became a *cause celebre* and was written up by Holinshed and the other chroniclers. Belsey adds, "This 'horribleness,' which identifies Alice Arden's domestic crime as belonging to the public arena of history, is not...a matter of the physical details of the murder, or even the degree of premeditation involved. On the contrary, the scandal lies in Alice Arden's challenge to the institution of marriage, itself publicly in crisis in the period" (Kastan and Stallybrass 133). Belsey notes further that "Alice Arden, held in the chain of bondage which is marriage, in a period when liberty is glimpsed but not authorized, is caught up in a struggle larger than her chroniclers recognize" (144). That struggle is part of the background of the drama considered here. The play *Arden of Faversham*, Belsey says, "is one of the documents in that struggle, perhaps a relatively complex analysis, but by no means an isolated instance of the attempt to make sense of insurrection" (147). Alice's crime was in fact only one of several similar crimes over the next several years, all of which became celebrated in literature of one form or another—some of it quite sympathetic to the women. The play, as Belsey notes, takes a somewhat ambivalent position, showing Arden himself as less than admirable so that there is some sympathy for Alice.
5. Christopher McCullough's view of soliloquies is worth quoting. McCullough, now Lecturer at Exeter University, played Hamlet in the 1982 University College Swansea production of the Q1 text of *Hamlet* and says, *inter alia* that

“To be, or not to be, I there’s the *point*” actually only made sense if I said it *to the audience*. In fact I was using the soliloquy as a way of putting an argument to the audience as to what was going on in the narrative; and I think in that sense the First Quarto is giving clues about the much more open-ended nature of Elizabethan theater. It is interesting that...the process of turning the play into a literary object, and refining the poetry, has been one of removing it from that open-ended theater practice in which it must have had dangerous potentialities—the danger of genuinely putting ideas to an audience, rather than showing them a man playing with ideas. (Bryan Loughry. “Q1 in Recent Performance: An Interview” in Thomas Clayton, ed., *The Hamlet First Published (Q1, 1603): Origin, Form, Intertextualities*. Newark: U of Delaware P; London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1992, 126. Original emphasis.)

Bianca may also be “putting ideas to the audience” in her soliloquy.

6. Christopher Ricks’s much praised article “Word-Play in *Women Beware Women*” (*Review of English Studies* n.s. XII (1961), 238-250) provides an excellent analysis of the use of commercial imagery in *Women Beware Women*, showing how it is related to the theme of the corruption of morality by commercialism.
7. Schoenbaum, in *Middleton’s Tragedies: A Critical Study*, overstates the case when he says of Middleton that “never does he regard his personages with anything but pitiless detachment and irony” (102).
8. One might ask why Hippolito and Isabella do not think of marrying. Conceivably because Hippolito, an apparently suitable husband, if there were no consanguinity, might still not be acceptable to Fabritio. Livia does not reveal the “truth”, of course, to protect her sister’s, Isabella’s mother’s, reputation. She perhaps also recognizes the possibility that she would not be believed.
9. In this regard, Hippolito’s murder of Leantio is paradigmatic. His objection is not that his sister is having an affair, or even greatly that her affair is with a man of lower social class, but that Leantio publicly boasts about his relationship with Livia:

Put case one must be vicious—as I know myself  
 Monstrously guilty—there’s a blind time made for’t;  
 He might use only that, t’were conscionable;  
 Art, silence, closeness, subtlety and darkness  
 Are fit for such business: but there’s no pity  
 To be bestowed on an apparent sinner,  
 An impudent daylight lecher! (4.2.4-10)

Middleton presents in this play an aristocratic society riddled with such hypocrisy and corruption.

10. Though a few, like Ornstein (190), think *Women Beware Women* an immature play and place it much earlier than *The Changeling*, most contemporary critics consider *Women Beware Women* the later of the two tragedies; but because it was not published until 1657, long after it would have been acted, if indeed it ever was acted, no record of a performance date having come down to us, its precise dating is problematic. I deal with *The Changeling* after *Women Beware Women* solely for my own purposes, not to make a claim for its later dating.

11. A number of critics have noted a possible parallel between Beatrice and “the notorious Countess of Essex” who after her “remarriage to the Earl of Somerset had been permitted on the strength of a bogus test [of her virginity in order to procure an annulment on the grounds of non-consummation of her first marriage]...behaved very much like Beatrice-Joanna, in getting her husband’s client Overbury, who knew too much, murdered by accomplices in the Tower” (Heinemann 178-179). Diaphanta’s lines, “She will not search me, will she,/ Like the forewoman of a female jury” (4.1.100-101), are seen as an allusion to the virginity test which the Countess was rumored to have taken and “passed”, as Heinemann notes, “on the supposition that another woman, veiled [the countess, like Beatrice to Alsemero on her wedding night, feigning modesty] had been substituted for the Countess” (178). The Countess seems to have acted as one who considered herself above the law—a not uncommon aristocratic attitude—and it may be that Middleton suggests that Beatrice too has acquired a very similar attitude and implies thereby a general criticism of the inadequacy of the values imparted to women by the limited education and upbringing they receive in a patriarchal and hierarchical society which values women as commodities and bargaining counters more than as human beings.  
  
It would seem that some critics base their own condemnation of Beatrice-Joanna on this similarity. As noted in the text, however, whatever Middleton may have thought of the Countess of Essex, his point in the play is that if Beatrice is to realize her passion for Alsemero, either she must marry Piracquo and become Alsemero’s mistress—a course which neither she nor Alsemero even consider—or remove Piracquo from the scene. Like Webster in *The White Devil* with Vittoria Corombona, Middleton seems to imply that because his society gives women so little freedom of choice, an evil course, on occasion, may appear the only one available.
12. One of the significant changes that Middleton has made to his source, John Reynolds, *The Triumph of God’s Revenge against...Murther* (1621) as more than one commentator has noted, is not only making De Flores ugly but also reducing him in rank from “Gallant young Gentleman” to mere retainer (cf., eg., Bawcutt xxxi-xxxviii).
13. See Christopher Ricks, in “The Moral and Poetic Structure of *The Changeling*” (*Essays in Criticism* 10 [1960], 290-306) on the *double entendres* of words like “service” which have at least two meanings, one of which, through its associations with the courtly tradition, is sexual.
14. Morris sees De Flores as analogous to the witch child substituted for the natural child in folk lore.
15. As Heinemann points out, the Countess of Essex “because of her rank and eminence...did not, though found guilty, suffer execution like the tool villains she had hired, but was kept in the Tower with her husband for a time, and later allowed to retire into private life with him. Such protection of her rank may well seem normal to Beatrice. She does not really expect to have to suffer the full punishment for her crimes...” (179).
16. Interestingly, Tomazo de Piracquo, who by the standards of Saviola and Segar has just cause for a duel, is denied the opportunity to fight one and “acknowledges a superior power that will punish the evil-doers far more severely than he can” (Bawcutt, Intro.lx.), saying:

Sir, I am satisfied, my injuries  
 Lie dead before me; I can exact no more,  
 Unless my soul were loose, and could o'ertake  
 Those black fugitives that are fled from thence,  
 To take a second vengeance; but there are wraths  
 Deeper than mine, 'tis to be feared, about 'em. (5.3.190-195)

Tomazo de Piracquo, if anyone, is the exemplary character in this play. Even he, however, appears not to have heard Beatrice's acknowledgement of guilt and plea for forgiveness.

Another interesting side issue is that Saviolo argued that in a properly motivated duel, God would be on the side of the agent of truth. As Napoleon came to realize that in war, God is on the side of the biggest battalions, so, in dissuading Alsemero from his challenge, Beatrice appears to recognize that in the duel, God is on the side of the better swordsman who, conceivably, Alsemero might not have been.

17. William Empson, in *Some Versions of Pastoral*, sees a strong link between the madness in the subplot and the role of De Flores in the main plot. He writes that "however disagreeable the comic part may be it is of no use to ignore it; it is woven into the tragic part very thoroughly. Not that this interferes with the accepted view that the comic part is by Rowley and most of the tragic part by Middleton; the sort of unity required depends on the order of the scenes, which they would presumably draw up together, and on ironies which they could work out separately" (48-49). Ribner believes that in writing *The Changeling* the collaboration between Middleton and Rowley was "so close that the comic subplot, which seems to have been Rowley's principal contribution, was subsumed into the thematic unity of the whole. That Middleton's was the guiding spirit of the work there can be little doubt" (124). Some might not go quite so far as the latter part of Ribner's statement, but most recent criticism is in general agreement with him. Brooke's comment in *Horrid Laughter* should perhaps be noted however: "It is usual to assign the 'main plot' to Middleton and the 'sub-plot' to Rowley, but the stylistic tests adduced can only really demonstrate the difference of language between tragedy and comedy, which any single author, especially one brought up on Elizabethan linguistic theories would make" (70). Bawcutt, in his Introduction (xxxix-xliv), however, presents quite strong stylistic arguments for the traditional division of labor. Brooke's argument tends, nonetheless, to reinforce the view that the collaboration was close. An interesting sidelight on the issue of collaboration is that Muriel C. Bradbrook offers in *Themes and Conventions*. Contrary to the usually accepted view that Rowley contributed most of the first and final scenes, she denies that Rowley could have had any part in writing the *main plot*, saying that though "Rowley's name appears on the title-page of *The Changeling*, it is difficult to see the possibility of his sharing in the main plot, for its unity is of a kind which not even the most sympathetic collaboration could achieve" (206). For all that the subplot remains unsatisfactory. Thomson, in her introduction, perhaps states reader dissatisfaction as well as any when she says that it is not so much "irrelevance as lack of interest" that is the most "serious charge" against this plot which "gives the impression...of being primarily a vehicle for clowning" (xxvi).
18. Thomson in her edition punctuates these lines more lightly:

The first place is thine, believe it Lollio,  
 If I do fall—....



The comma, rather than Bawcutt's semicolon, after "Lollo" makes her unfinished remark seem even more like a promise.

## **CHAPTER SIX. JOHN FORD AND THE CLOSING OF THE DEBATE. CONCLUSION**

The Jacobean era is a rare moment in the history of English drama. It is rare for the high quality of so much of the drama written and produced in those years, but it is rare also in the probing social criticism offered by so many of the plays. Jacobean drama had inherited a tradition of didactic interaction with the society for which it was performed, but earlier Elizabethan drama was geared more to reinforcing values to which the society at least gave lip service. The development of the secular public stage, however, saw a progressive shift toward criticism of those values, a shift which becomes pronounced, despite much ambiguity, in the plays of Christopher Marlowe. That development reaches its highest pitch in the Jacobean era. Social criticism does not return to the theatre in any marked degree until the late nineteenth century when the influence of Ibsen reached Britain particularly in the plays of Bernard Shaw.

The plays of John Ford, though they demonstrate a concern for many of the same issues as those of his predecessors, appear to be on the cusp of a change in drama's emphases and interests. He wrote at the beginning of the Caroline era, and his tragedies are regarded as the culmination of the great era of English Renaissance tragedy which began with Marlowe. He has also been seen as marking the transition from the Jacobean to the Caroline theatres. The performance dates of his independent dramas are unknown, but they were printed in the Caroline era and are generally assumed to have been written then. Unlike most of his predecessors, Ford produced his independent work exclusively for the indoor, or private, theatres. These theatres, Cohen notes, "in later years...replaced the public theatres as the centers of London dramatic activity" (266) and were "the center of dramatic innovation" (275). The smaller indoor

stages seem to have permitted, even required, a more intimate kind of presentation, and that is what we tend to find in Ford's dramatic works.

Clifford Leech sees John Ford's *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* as a successful attempt "to bring the spirit of Jacobean tragedy into the Caroline theatre" (121). For Leech the Jacobean characteristic of this play lies in its complex characterization. Giovanni is "hero and villain, arousing at once sympathy and revulsion," one whom we regard "as we regard Macbeth or Webster's Vittoria Corombona" for whom "our admiration is seasoned with horror, our horror with a sense of kinship" (11). Somewhat similarly, Barton regards "the star-crossed love of Giovanni and Annabella [as] something that it is impossible either to endorse or condemn" (74). Leech also recognizes, however, that *'Tis Pity* is not the most "characteristic" of Ford's works (11).

By Ford's time, the audiences of private theatres and those of the open-air public theatres were becoming more distinct and separate, and plays tended more and more to be produced exclusively for one or the other. The public theatres, both Cohen and Butler note, produced popular and old-fashioned plays, often of a patriotic nature somewhat in the tradition of *The Famous Victories of Henry V*. However, according to both Butler and Heinemann, the audiences of the private theatres did not constitute an exclusively aristocratic and courtly coterie, nor was Puritan opposition to the theatre so widespread and monolithic as frequently has been contended. Considerable prestige, however, was attached to playing at court (cf. Gurr, *The Shakespearean Stage* 23), and the playwrights who wrote for the indoor theatres seem to have had one eye on the possibility of court performance, and so may have tailored their plays with the court audience in mind. Cohen suggests the possibility that the increasing bifurcation of the audiences in the Caroline period tended to result in an abandonment of their traditional audiences by the actors (275); but Gurr notes that "There is room for

disagreement over how much Court fashions might have influenced what the players and their poets offered on the common stages" (25).<sup>1</sup> Butler, who argues that the court had become a kind of third level or type of theatre (183), says also that "It is by no means clear that the court looked to the playhouses as little islands of sympathetic elegance in the city, nor that the players were ever content to be docile puppets of a wayward and intolerant royal master" (140). The theatres remained "places where free association and interaction might take place, and which were much more open to radically opposed points of view than is usually allowed" (134). Nor was the court audience, Butler suggests, totally uncritical of the policies of the monarch.

Therefore if Ford was a courtly playwright, as has often been said, that does not necessarily preclude him from being a critic of his society and culture. His plays demonstrate a concern for some of the same issues as his predecessors, and in *The Broken Heart*, in which the sufferings of those unwillingly forced into an undesired marriage is the major theme, he seriously questions his society's practice of enforced marriage, and he appears to advocate free choice. In *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* he also appears, like Middleton, to recognize the unruliness and unpredictability of sexual desire and attraction. That play, particularly at the beginning, evokes sympathy for the incestuous love of Giovanni and Annabella. As in the sub-plot of *Women Beware Women*, the play suggests that, as with Isabella and Hippolito, were there no impediment of consanguinity, the relationship with her brother would be a more suitable one for Annabella than that with Soranzo, her father's choice for her. Although Annabella's repentance appears to reinforce the traditional morality, she still remains loyal to Giovanni, refusing to identify him as the father of her child, and continuing to regard him as a "noble creature...in every part...angel-like" (4.2.36-37).<sup>2</sup> Her murder by Giovanni, while it appears the act of a deranged egotist, an action which dissipates much of the initial sympathy created for her brother, nevertheless must be set against

the horrid ends of Putana and Hippolita at the hands of Soranzo's servant Vasques and the similar end plotted for Annabella herself. On the other hand, Annabella may be seen as having simply capitulated under stress, but even so the play exhibits the kind of ambiguity characteristic of Jacobean tragedy.

Elsewhere, however, while continuing to show compassion for those unhappily married, Ford shies away from the adulterous solutions adopted by Annabella and Giovanni and by such characters as Webster's Vittoria and Middleton's Isabella and Beatrice-Joanna. In *Love's Sacrifice*, the passion of Fernando and Biancha issues, not in an adultery, but, perhaps with an eye to flattering Henrietta Maria, in a courtly-Platonic relationship, an attenuated version of which cult Charles's queen was encouraging at court. In *The Broken Heart*, sympathy is undoubtedly directed toward Penthea and Orgilus whose betrothal has been violated by Penthea's brother Ithocles's unilateral and arbitrary decision that she marry Bassanes. However, Ithocles is not presented in an unsympathetic light. Furthermore, the advocates of traditional morality, unlike those in the dramas of Webster and Middleton, are estimable characters and not moral hypocrites. Ford treats his subject with ambiguity, but his is not quite the sceptical, iconoclastic ambiguity of his Jacobean predecessors.

The tragedy in *The Broken Heart* arises from Ithocles's forcing his sister Penthea to marry the old and jealous Bassanes in violation of her prior betrothal to Orgilus. As Blayney notes, "Ford in this play was obviously thinking seriously about the doubtful moral right of parents or others to enforce children's marriages" (161). As he himself comes to recognize, Ithocles is certainly morally and probably legally at fault in forcing the marriage.<sup>3</sup> The enforced marriage, nevertheless, is legal, and, despite the view of some critics that Bassanes is impotent, several of Penthea's own comments suggest that the marriage has been consummated, and is therefore valid. Because Penthea herself

accepts the marriage as valid, she refuses, despite her misery and frustration, to allow Orgilus to possess her as his wife on the basis of their prior betrothal. By her acceptance of the marriage, Penthea herself becomes partly responsible for her own frustration and misery.

Penthea's response to her circumstances, then, is quite unlike the responses of Vittoria, Beatrice-Joanna and the Isabella of *Women Beware Women* to similar circumstances. That Ford might have written a play which presented Penthea sympathetically for finding release in adultery is suggested by his attitude to Penelope Devereux, Lady Mountjoy, formerly Lady Rich, in *Fames Memoriall* of 1606. An early commentator, Stuart P. Sherman, in fact, believed "that the frustrated love between Sidney and Penelope [of which Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella* is generally believed to be the poetic account] provided Ford with germinal idea for...*The Broken Heart*" (Anderson, *John Ford* 18). In this early poem, Ford commemorates Charles Blount, Lord Mountjoy, Earl of Devonshire, the subduer of Ireland. The poem is dedicated to Lady Penelope, now Mountjoy's widow. As Penelope Devereux she had been loved by Philip Sidney but was forced against her will to marry Lord Rich. As Lady Rich, she later became Mountjoy's mistress, and after her divorce from Rich, by a marriage whose validity was challenged, his wife. Ford's attitude to her in the poem is sympathetic and non-condemnatory. As Anderson points out, Ford was not the only one to praise Lord Mountjoy (17) and so, by implication, to sympathize with Lady Penelope. Many today would regard Penthea as quite justified had she yielded to Orgilus, and it seems possible that many in Ford's audience would have been sympathetic had Ford chosen to write a tragedy in which she had done so. Perhaps recognizing, however, that in most instances, women in such enforced marriages had simply to endure their circumstances, Ford demonstrates how the ensuing frustration can lead to emotional and mental illness with unlooked for calamitous results.

Pentheia's reaction to her circumstances is rather like that of Aspatia to hers in *The Maid's Tragedy*. Like Aspatia, Pentheia becomes morbid and entertains a death wish. Furthermore, as Aspatia's desire to die at Amintor's hands may be seen as a perverse desire for revenge, Pentheia's dwelling on her grief and unrelenting blaming of Ithocles, despite his penitence and request for forgiveness, constitutes a much more open demand for revenge which Orgilus, who also broods resentfully on his wrongs, eventually carries out. In fact she seems to cultivate her grief in a way that Calantha, who is sympathetic to Pentheia's woes, regards as excessive, and in such a way as to make them appear as justification for revenge.

Ford ensures that Ithocles's wrongful act remains central to the play's action by providing sharp contrasts to it in the attitudes of Amyclas and Nearchus and to some degree in that of Orgilus himself. Amyclas would have preferred Nearchus, Prince of Argos, as the husband of the Princess Calantha, his daughter and heir to his throne. However, unlike Fabritio in *Women Beware Women* and Vermandero in *The Changeling* who are determined that their daughters must submit to their wills and accept their choice of husbands, Amyclas believes that Calantha should have free choice. Nearchus recognizes that in granting Calantha this freedom Amyclas speaks "the nature of a right just father" and tells the king that he himself comes "not hither roughly to demand/ My cousin's thralldom" (3.3.13-15). That he holds this liberal view sincerely is shown when, after a brief quarrel with Ithocles, the Prince accepts Calantha's choice of the young Spartan general.

Orgilus's attitude is somewhat ambivalent. Before his supposed departure for Athens, he imposes on his sister Euphranea the condition that she not marry without their father Crotolon's approval and his own. Some have found his action hypocritical.

However, Orgilus propounds the view of many of the Protestant writers who tried to reconcile traditional and more liberal attitudes. He says:

Dear Euphranea,  
Mistake me not; far, far 'tis from my thought  
As far from any wish of mine, to hinder  
Preferment to an honorable bed  
Or fitting fortune. Thou art young and handsome;  
And 'twere injustice—more a tyranny—  
Not to advance thy merit. Trust me, sister,  
It shall be my first care to see thee matched  
As may become thy choice and our contents. (1.1.101-108)

The play provides no overt recognition of Mary Beth Rose's point that the two types of marriage are in conflict, but the potential for conflict is present. Orgilus may be motivated in this instance by the fact that his sister has chosen Ithocles's friend Prophilus; and his eventual consent at his father's urging to their marriage seems a grudging submission to King Amyclas's support of the match which he appears to regard as an unjust exercise of arbitrary and unchallengeable royal power:

*Crotolon.* The king hath spoke his mind.  
*Orgilus.* His will he hath;  
But were it lawful to hold plea against  
The power of greatness, not the reason, haply  
Such under-shrubs as subjects might  
Borrow of nature justice, to inform  
That licence sovereignty holds without check  
Over a meek obedience. (3.4.1-7)

Orgilus's words are almost subversive in their import; but he may resent the king's support of the match as an overruling of his own opposition to it because of his unrelenting malice toward Prophilus's friend Ithocles. Even though he acknowledges Prophilus's merit and that he "never touched on any wrong that maliced/ The honour of our house", he reminds his father:

Yet, with your favour, let me not forget  
Under whose wing he gathers warmth and comfort,  
Whose creature he is bound, made, and must live so. (3.4.16-18)

Crotolon responds

Son, son, I find in thee a harsh condition;  
No courtesy can win it; 'tis too rancorous. (3.4.19-20)



Orgilus's grudging acceptance of his sister's choice at least suggests the inconsistency of what is, after all, a compromise position, an attempt to reconcile attitudes that are not in principle but are often in practice unreconcilable.

Grudging or not, Orgilus does give his consent, and even after achieving his revenge against Ithocles, he still blesses his sister's union. Blayney, therefore, is correct in seeing Orgilus as a foil to Ithocles on the issue of consent in marriage (5b). In contrast to Isabella and Beatrice-Joanna, and probably also Bianca, who are forced to defy parental authority in desperate attempts to find happiness but who meet tragedy instead, Prophilus and Euphranea appear to be embarked on a course to happiness. Their marriage represents what should be the norm.

On the basis of this strongly drawn contrast between freedom of choice and enforcement in marriage, criticism has divided sharply over whether Ford in this tragedy is a rebel or a traditionalist.<sup>4</sup> Sensabaugh says that Ford "speaks in tones familiar to modern man" (174) and exalts the fulfilment of personal desire over the observance of social propriety and so turns "the existing order...upside down" so that "right becomes wrong and wrong becomes right" (180). On the other hand, Stavig, basing his views on Ford's early nondramatic writing, in particular *The Golden Mean*, sees Ford as an upholder of the traditional morality, here represented by the Spartan code, and that the tragedy arises from Penthea's and Orgilus's failure to follow the mean (cf., eg., 164-165). More recent critics, however, tend to reject such antitheses. Harriet Hawkins states that "critical castigations of Ford's characters in terms of their obvious failures to observe the mean, finally seem irrelevant, if not inimical, to the primary emotional and aesthetic responses elicited by *The Broken Heart*" (Neill 144). In Hawkins's view the play asks the questions:

(a) *Should* human passions, *can* human passions, be effectively buried alive? Or (b) is it simply a fact of life that, regardless of whether they ought to or not, certain emotions 'will have their vent' [4.1.116]? If the true answers to these questions are (a) 'No' and (b) 'Yes', then Ford's tragedy can be interpreted as a critical indictment of an abstract idealism so at odds with human nature as to demand that living men and women sacrifice any 'real, visible, material happiness' [4.1.50]...on the altar of a tyrannical fiction-believed-to-be-true that had grown so powerful as to force its most virtuous proponents to become their own executioners (Neill 131. Original emphasis.).

Ford raises some of the same issues that Shakespeare, Webster, Beaumont, and Middleton have raised in their tragedies, namely whether accepted attitudes always provide an adequate basis for conduct and for judgment, or whether the precepts of traditional morality are too narrowly formulated to embrace the complexity of human life and human sexuality. Yet Ford raises these issues with a difference. Unlike his predecessors, Ford appears to find his society in ordinary circumstances fundamentally sound.

In the context of *The Broken Heart* the "fiction-believed-to-be-true" is the Spartan code of restraint and self-control, of stoicism in the face of suffering, a code which, by repressing natural feeling, causes such inner grief and tensions as may result in sickness and death. R. J. Kaufmann sees the Spartan setting as an "enclosing—and constricting—image" (177). This enclosing and constricting setting is a paradigm of Ford's own society's repressions of natural emotion. In this, Ford shows some similarity with Shakespeare, Webster, Middleton and Beaumont, all of whom, with varying degrees of ambivalence, have shown how social orthodoxies can have debilitating and destructive effects on people's lives, particularly on those of women. Penthea and Calantha suffer because of the inflexible rules and mores of their society as Desdemona, Vittoria, the Duchess of Malfi, Aspatia and Evadne, Bianca and Isabella, and Beatrice-Joanna, and, ultimately, even Cleopatra, suffer from similar rigidities.

Nevertheless, all critics note that Penthea regards herself as a “spotted whore” (3.2.70) because she has been forced to marry Bassanes in contravention of her pledge to Orgilus. But because she regards herself as legally bound by the marriage, she also believes she cannot in fact be what in her heart she feels herself, Orgilus’s wife, so that unlike some of the women tragic protagonists in other plays, she does not rebel. Orgilus, believing that he and Penthea are lawfully husband and wife, comes to claim her as such: “I would possess my wife; the equity/ Of every reason bids me” (2.3.71-72). To his amazement and consternation, she rejects him because her forced marriage has made her a whore, and so unworthy of him, and therefore, by implication, were she to yield to him, she would defile him:

*Orgilus.* Penthea is the wife of Orgilus,  
And ever shall be.

*Penthea.* Never shall be.

*Orgilus.* How!

*Penthea.* Hear me; in a word I’ll tell thee why.  
The virgin-dowry which my birth bestowed  
Is ravished by another; my true love  
Abhors to think that Orgilus deserved  
No better favors than a second bed.

(2.3.96-102)

Penthea’s reluctant belief that she is bound in duty to satisfy Bassanes’s demands and remain loyal to the marriage is the partial cause of Bassanes’s “Vexation”, for he realizes that Penthea, on whom he dotes, takes no pleasure in him. Hamilton says that in her interview with Bassanes Penthea demonstrates an “indifference sugar-coated with wifely obedience” which gives Bassanes “nothing—not even a means of self-defense” (Anderson, 175). Morris says that once Penthea “has established the paradox [that “in honoring her marriage she is ‘a spotted whore’” (xiii)], her logic is remorseless. Whores must be punished, and since no one else believes her to be a whore she must punish herself” (xiv). However, punishment of Ithocles also becomes more and more consciously and deliberately a factor in her conduct.

Pentheia undoubtedly lives with an abhorrent emotional and spiritual burden and in almost unbearable distress. Yet a number of recent commentators have discovered a strain of perversity in her attitude and behavior. Her first reason for denying Orgilus's wish is related not to him but to herself: his very presence endangers her honor, her "fame":

Rash man! Thou layest  
A blemish on mine honour, with the hazard  
Of my too desperate life. (2.3.51-53)

She admits that she still loves Orgilus, but tells him that she will respect him only if he will cease thinking about her, leave her alone, and not tempt her to sully her honor which, as the wife of Bassanes, she will lose if she yields herself:

...I find  
The constant preservation of thy merit  
By thy not daring to attempt my fame  
With injury of any loose conceit  
Which might give deeper wounds to discontents. (2.3.82-85)

Perhaps it is Orgilus's discontent as much as her own that she considers here, but when Orgilus continues to press her, saying "Come, sweet, thou art mine" (2.3.109), she vehemently calls him both "uncivil" and "unworthy", saying that if he continues to importune her, she will "call [his] former protestations lust,/ And curse [her] stars for forfeit of [her] judgement" (2.3.115-116). Her response seems unnecessarily harsh, and after Orgilus has left her, she herself wonders if her protests were not excessive.

Pentheia's desire to preserve the appearance of honor is comparable to Beatrice-Joanna's. Both women have been raised in societies where a woman's honor, equated with premarital chastity and marital fidelity is all-in-all, so that to lose it is the ultimate disgrace by which a woman becomes both an outcast and a pariah. In their cultures neither Penthea's nor Beatrice's concern is idle. Beatrice, having lost hers, and Penthea believing she has lost hers, are desperately concerned to maintain the appearance of honor, even though Penthea's circumstances are such that some at least in the first

audiences would have sympathized with her had she given herself to Orgilus. Through the almost paranoid concern of their heroines, both playwrights imply that woman's honor, which is their society's requirement of chastity, is woman's prison.

Motivated essentially by concern for her honor, she acts contrary to her nature and her desire. As Hamilton notes, her "fidelity to the marriage bond itself is against nature" (Anderson 133). Kelly speaks of her "excessive and ultimately self-destructive concern for reputation" (156). At the same time, whether intentionally or not, she intensifies Orgilus's frustrated desire for revenge on Ithocles. Acting against her own nature and desire causes frustration which in turn becomes perverted into a passion for revenge against her brother, the cause of her unhappiness.

Ithocles repents of his action, recognizing that it was a rash act motivated by youthful pride. However, once it has been done, nothing he can do will alter his sister's circumstances, and she seems determined to make the most of that fact. Her constant brooding generates a desire to punish Ithocles, as the cause of her whoredom. Hamilton says that "Pentheia is 'locked' into a loveless marriage by the strongest of bonds: her own conviction of duty. The price of maintaining that bond is not only the one of self-annihilating depression...but a fixed resentment toward the brother who has forged her shackles" (Anderson, *Concord*, 176). Unlike Vittoria Corombona, whose determination to be free of an unfulfilling marriage instigates the murders of Isabella and Camillo in order that she may marry Brachiano, Pentheia's perverse acceptance of her thralldom instigates revenge against the forger of her shackles rather than the one to whom she is shackled and a morbid desire to seek her own escape in death.

Pentheia shows her resentment by ringing the changes on Ithocles's guilt. In her interview with her brother, Ithocles admits his guilt, expresses his deep remorse, and apologizes as best he can:

Sad Penthea,  
Thou canst not be too cruel; my rash spleen  
Hath with a violent hand plucked from thy bosom  
A love-blest heart, to grind it into dust,  
For which mine's now a-breaking. (3.2.42-46.)

Pentheia, however, in accusing him of having made her a spotted whore and constantly stressing her unhappy circumstances, appears determined that he shall suffer not only the pangs of remorse but also the sorrow and grief that she has suffered. Relentlessly she presses home Ithocles's guilt and her own despair:

Not yet, heaven,  
I do beseech thee. First let some wild fires  
Scorch, not consume it. May the heat be cherished  
With desires infinite but hopes impossible.  
*Ithocles.* Wronged soul, thy prayers are heard.  
*Pentheia.* Here, lo, I breathe,  
A miserable creature, led to ruin  
By an unnatural brother. (3.2.47-53.)

This episode demonstrates what Hamilton calls her "bitter determination to point the finger of blame" and her conviction "that any possibility of happiness was destroyed by Ithocles's selfish decree" (Anderson, *Concord*, 176, 180). As with Bassanes's desire to please her, so here Penthea yields nothing to Ithocles's genuine desire for reconciliation. Hamilton says that "Mercy is not in Penthea's nature", and she notes that even "Pentheia's last words, reported by her maids, restate her bitter resentment of her brother and her pity for her spurned lover: 'O cruel Ithocles and injur'd Orgilus' [4.4.9]" (186). Though Penthea's circumstances elicit sympathy for her, that sympathy is diminished by her obduracy toward a brother who has acknowledged his fault and seeks forgiveness. However, at the same time Ford demonstrates that such convoluted thinking and perversion of desire as Penthea's may result from enforced marriage.

Toward the end of her interview with her brother, Penthea does say that “We are reconciled,” and promises to speak on his behalf to the Princess Calantha whom Ithocles loves and desires to marry despite his social inferiority to her which prevents him from approaching her directly. In the circumstances, Ithocles may seem insensitive in asking his sister for such support, but he may also be naive. Having confessed his guilt and expressed his sorrow, he assumes that he and Penthea are genuinely reconciled, just as he assumes that he and Orgilus are also genuinely reconciled after he has apologized to him, proffered his friendship and promoted his interests with the Prince Nearchus.

Penthea believes that she has forgiven Ithocles, but her subsequent conduct shows that her resentments run deep and are, ironically, rearoused by her actions on Ithocles’s behalf. In pleading her brother’s cause with Calantha she reignites her own griefs so that she wants Calantha also to know that Ithocles has wronged her:

But remember  
I am a sister, though to me this brother  
Hath been, you know, unkind; oh, most unkind. (3.5.104-106)

Calantha recognizes that Penthea has “no little cause” for grief, but her dwelling on her sorrow prompts the Princess to comment that “You feed too much your melancholy” (3.5.107). Because Calantha is shown to be neither moralistic nor hypocritical her comment carries some weight, perhaps a suggestion that Penthea ought to be more open to Bassanes.

Because Calantha’s decorum and sense of rank will not permit her to express her true feelings toward Ithocles, Penthea does not know at the end of her interview with the Princess whether or not she has succeeded in her brother’s cause. In her mad scene, however, Penthea seems to know that Ithocles’s “heart/ Is crept into the cabinet of the princess” (4.2.117-118). Twice she points accusingly at Ithocles saying “but that is he”

and “That’s he, and still ’tis he” (4.2.116, 122). Farr, noting that “like so much of the text, the words are ambiguous” (93), denies that “Penthea is deliberately inciting [Orgilus] to revenge” (92). She thinks Penthea is “singling out Ithocles as one who has suffered and may suffer more for the wrongs he has done” (96). Orgilus, she says, “characteristically misunderstands” (93) when he takes her accusation as a direction to translate his hatred of Ithocles into active revenge: “She has tutored me;/ Some powerful inspiration checks my laziness” (4.2.124-125). But did he misunderstand? Farr argues subtly, but Penthea’s obsession with her wrongs and her strategies to intensify Orgilus’s resentment support those critics who see Penthea as directing Orgilus to act. Hamilton regards her as the real instigator of revenge against Ithocles: “Orgilus is the agent of the revenge tragedy...but its motivating force is Penthea” (173) in whose desire for martyrdom there is a “vindictive potential” (174). Huebert says that even in her most pathetic moments, Penthea is

encouraging Orgilus to carry out his revenge; her action of pointing to Ithocles suggests that the ‘Oracle’ (IV.ii.1940) of madness is singling out the guilty person just for the avenger’s benefit. Penthea is not so passive as she appears to be; her obsession with love frustrated by marriage to Bassanes and by her own rigid virtue, turns into an obsession with revenge (66).

Penthea is a woman frustrated not only by being forced into a repugnant marriage but also by her own too rigid adherence to the restrictive Spartan moral code. The combination of enforced marriage and a restrictive code causes Penthea’s pathological distress. Her constrained grief becomes unhealthy and perverted into a desire for revenge instead of a desire for freedom.

Penthea’s frustration and vengefulness have wide social consequences. Although freedom of choice in marriage is advocated in Sparta, as it was by many in Ford’s England, the law still permits, as in England, the male head of the family to dispose daughters and sisters in marriage according to his own whim. Like his predecessors,



Ford explores in *The Broken Heart* the social and psychological implications of that authority to frustrate personal desire and of women's legal status as chattels. Blayney says that Orgilus takes a revenge on Ithocles that "parallels exactly the breaking of Penthea's heart by Ithocles when he took Orgilus from her after their betrothal and forced her to marry another" (8ab) and so "by a carefully contrived plot [Penthea] ironically brings tragedy on the love of Ithocles and Calantha" (*MP* LVI, 5b-6a). Orgilus's revenge on Ithocles has more than just individual, personal consequences: it robs Sparta of both its potential rulers, Calantha and Ithocles her intended consort. Thus, as in *Hamlet*, and as had occurred in England on the death of Elizabeth, the kingdom passes to a foreigner, albeit, in this instance, an able and noble one. Despite Calantha's disclaimer that as a woman she is unfit to govern Sparta, her actions from the moment she becomes Queen show that she, like the fondly remembered Elizabeth who governed more ably than her successors, is perfectly capable of ruling and may constitute a critique of the ultramasculine values of Sparta.

Calantha is presented as a regal, virtuous, self-assured, yet compassionate and sympathetic woman, an ideal princess and potential ruler. From the beginning she shows her love for Ithocles when she asks his friend Prophilus who has brought news of the Spartan victory:

—but, pray, sir, tell me,  
How doth the youthful general demean  
His actions in these fortunes? (1.2.31-33)

On Ithocles's return from battle, she personally presents to him, albeit with appropriate regal reserve, the "provincial garland" which she herself has made. Like Desdemona and the Duchess of Malfi, she takes the initiative in the courtship. Like the Duchess, her rank gives her the authority to do so; unlike both the Duchess and Desdemona, she can act freely because her father approves of freedom of choice in marriage. Critics

have censured Ithocles for aspiring to a station above his birth, but his ambition so to rise is partly inspired by Calantha's favor and encouragement.

In gracefully maintaining decorum, Calantha represents Sparta and the Spartan virtues. Although the Sparta of *The Broken Heart* resembles the Sparta of Sidney's *Arcadia* more than the Sparta of history, to the English Renaissance audience even Sidney's Sparta was the paradigm of a reasoned, ordered, disciplined and austere state where the passions are kept under firm control. That maintenance of order, discipline and decorum is very much at the root of the tragedy of *The Broken Heart*. Kaufman says that in both Sidney's Sparta and the historical Sparta "sanctioned human emotion has been radically circumscribed and individual desires subordinated to communal ends" and "an unremitting preoccupation with public virtues", so that "there is a strong undercurrent which threatens to upset the delicate balance of restraints imposed from within and without." He finds "a deep fissure between public standards and individual needs" in a "society [which] allows too few constructive outlets for the passions" so that "these are transformed into destructive energy" (178). Penthea's agonized frustrations epitomize the "fissure between public standards and individual needs," but so at least equally, if not more so, does the fate of Calantha.

As Calantha's dance climaxes the tragedy, it exposes the inadequacy of the Spartan code. Dancing in celebration of the marriage of Prophilus and Euphranea, she receives in rapid succession word of the deaths of her father, of Penthea, and most grievous of all, of her newly betrothed Ithocles. However, she dances on, admonishing those who interrupt the dance to bring the news that

'tis, methinks, a rare presumption  
In any who prefer our lawful pleasures  
Before their own sour censure, to interrupt  
The custom of this ceremony bluntly.

(5.2.24-27.)

Whereupon she takes charge of her kingdom, sentences Orgilus to death for murdering Ithocles, and prepares for her coronation. All who stand by are amazed at her composure and apparent callousness:

*Armotes.* 'Tis strange these tragedies should never touch on  
Her female pity.  
*Bassanes.* She has a masculine spirit.... (5.2.93-95)<sup>5</sup>

Bassanes comment reflects the stereotype that women, unlike men, are normally creatures of passion. But maintaining what turns out to be only an appearance of Spartan composure destroys her. When she reappears soon afterwards leading in Ithocles's hearse and having first, like the dying Hamlet, settled the succession of her kingdom, she says:

Oh, my lords,  
I but deceived your eyes with antic gesture,  
When one news straight came huddling on another  
Of death, and death, and death. Still I danced forward;  
But it struck home, and here, and in an instant.  
Be such mere women, who with shrieks and outcries  
Can vow a present end to all their sorrows,  
Yet live to vow new pleasures, and outlive them.  
They are the silent griefs which cut the heartstrings.... (5.3.67-75)

Placing her last kiss on Ithocles's cold lips, she cries "Crack, crack!" to betoken the breaking of her heart under the strain of maintaining Spartan composure instead of giving way to her intense grief. We hear an echo of Horatio's words at Hamlet's death: "Now cracks a noble heart" (5.2.364). These words suggest that Hamlet's too was a heart that had borne too much under too many constraints, for as Hamlet himself had said as he mused on his circumstance in Claudius's corrupt court where his genuine grief is made to seem out of place, "But break, my heart, for I must hold my tongue" (*Hamlet* 1.2.159. Arden). If Ford expected his contemporary audience to hear these echoes of Shakespeare's tragedy, he makes a very strong assertion both of female tragic potential and of the depth and magnitude of Calantha's personal tragedy, and this would strengthen the case of those critics who argue that, even though Ford's

presentation may not be wholly successful, Calantha, rather than Penthea, is the true tragic protagonist of *The Broken Heart*.

This has been a play of too many silent griefs, of feelings not allowed or not permitted their natural outlet. Though speaking ironically, Orgilus suggests what the play is about when he says "Griefs will have their vent" (4.1.116). Griefs and other natural emotions must have their vent, but Spartan stoicism does not allow them legitimate and salutary expression. Repressing her natural desire, Penthea self-destructively nurses her bitterness and broods on her revenge. Because of the frustration of his natural desires, Orgilus becomes, in Hamilton's words, "a hater" who "can find no vent for his malice" until Penthea, "similarly afflicted [spreads] the contagion" (Anderson, *Concord*, 183), so that he takes out his hatred on the genuinely penitent Ithocles.<sup>6</sup> Ithocles himself cannot, because of his inequality of rank, express his love for Calantha and suffers a kind of wastage similar to his sister's until the Princess gives him an opening to express his love. Finally Calantha, the epitome of Spartan self-discipline and stoicism, dies of a broken heart because social decorum will not permit her to express her heartache. The Spartan world, Hamilton says, is one "of spiritual starvation, the healthy appearance merely an illusion created by a skillful magician...It is an embalmer's trick" (Anderson, *Concord*, 190).

Calantha, says Kaufmann, "is the only character who dies with a full recognition of what it is that destroys her, [but] even she does not question the basic premises which cause the fatal division in her nature, a division which is literalized in the controlling image of the broken heart" (184). Hamilton says:

The tragedy results not from the main characters' rebellion against but from their too fervent adherence to their society's mores. As usual with Ford, what we are being shown differs significantly from what we are being told: for all its exaltation, the Spartan creed encourages a stoicism that is both sterile and hollow (171).

Here Ford differs both from his own approach in *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* and from that of his predecessors Webster, Beaumont and Middleton who show women protagonists in rebellion against their society's restrictions. Ford appears to imply, rather as Shakespeare does through Ophelia, that conformity to society's codes and mores may be as inimical to personal happiness and fulfilment as rebellion against them, and so to call the codes themselves into question.

Yet those critics who see Ford as an advocate of the social order and the "golden mean" are probably closer to the truth than those for whom he is a modernist and a libertarian. Some have seen the Friar of *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* as an exemplary character representing the play's ethical centre. It may be argued that his moral position is the correct one, but his harshly moralistic inflexibility and lack of understanding of and compassion for the emotional and moral stress suffered by Giovanni and Annabella undermines his position, shifting sympathy to the transgressing protagonists. In *The Broken Heart*, on the other hand, though Tecnicus is at times rather tediously sententious, he and the other advocates of the mean, unlike the Friar in *'Tis Pity*, are not unsympathetic or inestimable characters, so that their views on proper behavior are not to be dismissed. Yet their moral attitudes, like those of the Friar, do not take into account the feelings aroused in such characters as Orgilus by extreme and inordinately stressful circumstances. The doctrine of the mean is not repudiated in this play, nor in *'Tis Pity*; rather, it is shown in certain extreme circumstances to be an inadequate help. Wrestling with his ambition Ithocles says:

Morality, applied  
 To timely practice, keeps the soul in tune,  
 At whose sweet music all our actions dance.  
 But this is form of books, and social tradition;  
 It physics not the sickness of the mind  
 Broken with griefs: strong fevers are not eased  
 With counsel, but with best receipts and means. (2.2.8-14)

For the principal characters of this play, the practice is not timely. The dance is a traditional Renaissance symbol of balance, order and decorum, and Calantha's dance has something of that significance. The breaking of her heart under the stress of maintaining that decorum strongly suggests that Ford tempers his belief in the social norms and mores by a realization that under extreme circumstances society must also provide some kind of outlet for the "the mind broken with griefs". The lack of such recognition and the failure to provide such outlet cause the multiple tragedies of *The Broken Heart*.

With Ford's work the dramatic treatment of issues concerning woman both culminates and begins to turn to other concerns.<sup>7</sup> In *The Broken Heart*, however, Ford still is able to examine the sufferings of women under society's codes and rules, particularly the tyranny of enforced marriage. There can be little doubt of Ford's opposition to the custom. Though over the course of the action Penthea becomes unsympathetic, her distorted character is shown to result from her enforced marriage. Calantha's death as the direct result of Orgilus's revenge against Ithocles makes her also a victim of male pride. An implicit factor in the tragedies of Calantha and Penthea is the greater freedom of action granted to men, and Ford, like his Jacobean predecessors, through the action of the play questions his society's granting dominance to males over the lives of women.

That denial of freedom to women by Renaissance society has been a major theme of this study. The five playwrights whose work has been examined have made women central figures in their tragedies. They wrote against a background of intellectual speculation and cultural ferment over the nature and role of women and at a time when women themselves were beginning to express desires for greater freedom from the male-oriented mores of their society. Something of the uncertainty of their era about women's nature and social role is present in their plays, but they appear to recognize that women and women's concerns must be taken more seriously into account by their

society, that the traditional understanding of women is inadequate, and that their society's long-established constraints on women may be more harmful than beneficial both to women and to the society. Humanists argued that women were men's equals, and both humanists and reformers urged that marriages ought to be contracted by the free choice of the partners. Though that view was beginning to find a degree of social acceptance, the older view that parents and guardians had the right to dispose of their children, and elder brothers who were heads of families their sisters, in marriage still held sway and was supported by law. The tragedies of the women protagonists are in many ways the results of the conflicts between women who seek equality and sexual freedom, and men who maintain the older views that women are their inferiors and their chattels and so must be submissive and subservient.

In the words of Constance Jordan, "Renaissance feminists sought to establish the truth that men and women were first and most importantly human beings; for the most part, they saw little meaning in sexual—that is, physiological—difference" (*Renaissance Feminism* 8). That essentially is the view of the playwrights whose work has been examined in this study. They were profoundly aware of the injustices done to women by the restrictions placed on their freedom of action by the male-dominated, male-oriented society of their times. Essentially, these restrictions, they demonstrated dramatically, inhibited and even prevented women's full development as human beings. Shakespeare recognized that traditional male attitudes thwarted the self-fulfilment of women such as Desdemona and Cleopatra who possessed talent, intelligence, and strength of character in combination with a healthy understanding of human sexuality. Several, Webster, Beaumont, and Middleton in particular, recognized and demonstrated that such restrictions often forced other such strongminded, sexually unashamed women, such as Vittoria Corombona, Evadne, Bianca Capello, Isabella and Beatrice-Joanna, into rebellions whose consequences were destructive not only for

themselves but for others around them. Webster's *Duchess* is a woman of virtue who must resort to deviousness in her attempt to find personal and sexual fulfilment with a man whom she loves but who is beneath her social station. Finally, Ford shows in *Penthea* and *Calantha* the self-destructiveness of rigid adherence to strict moral codes.

These eight very different plays share at least one theme, namely that the mores and the ideology of English Renaissance society limit and distort women's lives. The five playwrights appear to share with Agrippa the belief that "Between man and woman by substance of soul, one hath no higher pre-eminence of nobility than the other, but both of them have equal dignity and worthiness." They were also deeply aware that, although women's equality was a much debated topic, society had hardly changed at all in its attitudes toward them. Renaissance English society by and large had rejected the message of the advocates of a better life for women and continued to keep women as chattels and to demand their subservience. Though freedom of choice in marriage was advocated and sometimes practised, parents continued to hold the legal right to enforce marriages. Webster, Middleton and Ford in particular demonstrate the destructiveness of that provision.

However, the fundamental cause of tyranny over the lives of women, the authors indicate over and over again, lay in the received ideas of the society regarding women which men still held and by which in the plays they habitually judge the women protagonists. These plays challenge the conventional virgin-whore polarization by portraying their tragic heroines as rich and complex personalities. Even when they transgress, these heroines do not fit the traditional mould. The playwrights imply that the stereotype should be abandoned and a new paradigm developed, one that will recognize woman's intelligence and her right both to education and freedom of choice, and in a far more positive manner, her sexuality.



## END NOTES TO CHAPTER SIX

1. Cohen says that after 1620

The center of dramatic innovation shifted to the private stages, which catered to an increasingly aristocratic, even courtly, coterie. These changes occurred not...because the audience abandoned the actors, but because the actors abandoned their audience. The move of the King's Men to Blackfriars is in retrospect paradigmatic. As the success of *A Game at Chess* reveals, the public theater audience survived, at least potentially. But the companies were either unwilling or unable to appeal to it as effectively as they once had done (275).

Cohen's basic thesis, which seems a reasonable one, is that the uniquely public nature of the theatres of England and Spain resulted from "a relative social and cultural homogeneity that transcended class barriers" and from "religious uniformity" (121). As this consensus broke down, so too did the audiences divide and the universality of the theatres' appeal diminished. Ford appears to be on the cusp of this development.

2. The citation is from *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*, ed. N. W. Bawcutt. Lincoln, Neb.: U of Nebraska P, 1966. Regents Renaissance Drama edition. Quotations from *The Broken Heart* are taken from the New Mermaids edition edited by Brian Morris, London: Ernest Benn, 1965.
3. Stavig believes that "There is some question as to how binding the betrothal of Penthea and Orgilus was...whether their contract is intended to be taken as *de futuro* and therefore no more or not much more binding than a modern engagement, or *de praesenti* and therefore a legal marriage lacking only the blessing of the church...If we judge by the views expressed in the play, their case falls somewhat between the two types" and that "marriage to someone else is not technically immoral or illegal" (213 n2). Morris, in his "Introduction" to the New Mermaids edition, notes, however, that the contract appears to have been made before their fathers, so that their vows "were vows of betrothal, and [Penthea's] subsequent enforced marriage to Bassanes would have been thought adulterous" (xxi). Blaney says, "Convention and law demanded faith to betrothal vows just as strongly as they insisted upon faith in marriage. Penthea, then, in the conventional moral view, would have been considered an adulteress, a term she applies to herself, because she was compelled to break her betrothal vows to Orgilus" ("Enforcement", 462 n8). Stavig admits that, if not strictly speaking legally so, Ithocles is morally at fault for forcing the marriage, a point which Ithocles himself has come to recognize.
4. Divergences of view regarding Ford's drama can be traced back at least as far as Lamb and Hazlitt during the nineteenth-century Romantic movement. Traditional criticism has tended to see Ford as either perhaps morally confused because he is "a profound and objective analyst of human behavior who portrays a higher morality that stresses the elevating effect of love and the nobility of endurance in time of adversity", or as "a decadent romantic" in "revolt against the established moral order" (Stavig xv). Harriet Hawkins writes that "As Inga-Steena Ewbank has noted, an outstanding characteristic of scholarly and critical discussions of Ford is the tendency toward antithetical positions: 'On the same library shelf, Ford the modernist is next to Ford the traditional moralist,'" (Neill 132. Ewbank is quoted

from *English Drama (Excluding Shakespeare): Select Bibliographical Guides*, ed. Stanley Wells (Oxford: Oxford U P, 1975), 113.)

5. Roger Warren notes in "Ford in Performance" that in modern performances of *The Broken Heart*, the episode of Calantha's dance "made no impact" in the 1962 Chichester Festival presentation directed by Laurence Olivier (who also played Bassanes), or "went very flat" in a 1904 production witnessed and reviewed by Bertram Lloyd. Warren, though recognizing the danger of generalizing from so few performances, speculates that "perhaps a scene which seems so striking on the page doesn't work in practice, possibly because it creates a *frisson* which then has to be laboriously explained." (See Neill 19-21.)
6. Hamilton notes that in contrast to that of Orgilus, "Ithocles's anger is open and soon dissipated", and she notes further that "[Ithocles's] is the true bereavement; for Orgilus, Penthea's death is only the calculated means of distracting his powerful enemy long enough that he may be trapped" (Anderson, *Concord*, 183, 187).
7. Butler in *Theatre in Crisis* implies that the concern expressed in the plays of the last decade before the closing of the theatres was the political one of trying to influence King Charles I to be more conciliatory toward parliament and the various social interests it represented.

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