

THE DUCHESS'S "NEW WORLD": MARRIAGE AND ITS CONSEQUENCES IN
THE DUCHESS OF MALFI

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	iii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	iv
DEDICATION	v
INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER ONE: SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC CONVENTIONS	8
Land Ownership and Class Stratification	8
Shifting Economic and Political Atmosphere	15
The Duchess's Entrepreneurial Discourse	21
Ferdinand's Aristocratic Discourse	24
CHAPTER TWO: THE IRREGULAR MARRIAGE	31
Marriage as a Religious Institution	31
The Duchess's Appropriation of Religious Authority	34
Consequences of Denying Social Authority	42
Widowhood and the Politics of Remarriage	45
CHAPTER THREE: A DESTABILIZED SOCIETY	52
Marriage's Role in Social Stability	52
Antonio's Role as Husband and Servant	54
Distortion of Social Authority and Revenge	59
CONCLUSION	70
NOTES	72
WORKS CITED	73

ABSTRACT

John Webster's The Duchess of Malfi is a dramatization of the unsanctioned marriage and disappearance of an Italian Duchess approximately one hundred years before the play's 1613 performance in England. Although Webster had numerous sources for his production, he made significant modifications in his version of the story that are reflective of anxieties surrounding the cultural, economic, and political changes in seventeenth-century England. In particular, the playwright augmented the marriage scene between the Duchess and her steward – Antonio – which had been overlooked in other accounts of the Duchess's life. Through Webster's treatment, the Duchess and Antonio invoke growing trends in Protestant philosophy that emphasize companionate marriage over the arrangement of financially motivated nuptials. Furthermore, the loosening of restrictions for gaining entrance into the gentry because of King James's lenient view of preferment led to aristocratic anxiety regarding position. The relaxed standards for preferment combined with the changing perspectives on marriage are reflected in the play, particularly by the Duchess's bold marriage to her steward and her subversion of both her family and the church's authority over her. The consequences of the Duchess's independence and her violation of cultural taboos are brought about by her brothers' vengeful punishment and execution of her. While the historical record does not recount the Duchess's fate, Webster's presentation of the highly ceremonialized emotional torture of the Duchess prior to her murder underscores the social instability brought about by the irregular marriage. Finally, the fact that the son of Antonio and the Duchess ascends to the duchy at the conclusion of the play is another significant alteration by Webster as it reflects the new order that the social changes have established.

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DEDICATION

For Sean, whose patience and love have meant the world to me.

INTRODUCTION

John Webster's The Duchess of Malfi continues to resonate among modern audiences because of the Duchess's enterprising attempt at denying the authority of social conventions and norms over her will to choose a spouse for love. The play initially appears to resemble a plot familiar to contemporary audiences that is reminiscent of the romance genre: a wealthy individual falls in love with a person from the other side of the tracks and despite the challenges faced by inter-class relationships, the couple marries and maintains their love for each other. However, the story of the Duchess and her steward, Antonio, ends tragically with their murders as punishment for violating social norms. While the source of The Duchess of Malfi is an historical account of an Italian Duchess, the social implications of the plot correlate with the cultural context of Webster's England.

There have been numerous portrayals of the Duchess's story in both Italian and English literature. An examination of the historical facts surrounding the Duchess explains the fascination regarding her fate. According to Italian records, the three siblings are based upon wealthy, aristocratic historical figures. They were the children of Enrico d'Aragona, who was the half brother of King Federico. Cardinal Lodovico and Duke Carlo are the older brothers of the historical Duchess, Giovanna d'Aragona. She was married to Alfonso Piccolomini at the age of twelve in 1490 through an arranged marriage facilitated by her family. By 1498, she was widowed and she governed the duchy for her son – also named Alfonso – until she disappeared in 1513 after secretly marrying Antonio Bologna – the former master of her household. The historical record confirms that the play's inter-class marriage between Antonio and the Duchess is an

accurate portrayal and that Webster's account of their deaths is something like what actually befell their prototypes. Additionally, very little is known about her execution; thus, the story is intriguing because of its mysterious elements. Boklund indicates "there is almost nothing in contemporary chronicles and diaries to connect Cardinal Lodovico and his brother [Carlo] to these events" (3). However, Antonio and two of his children with the Duchess were murdered as well, which indicates someone's displeasure with her unsanctioned marriage. Furthermore, the Duchess made her way to Ancona to be with Antonio under the pretext of a religious pilgrimage when her brother – Cardinal Lodovico – "was fighting the enemies of the pope near Bologna and thus hardly in a position to take immediate action against an erring sister one hundred and fifty miles away" (Boklund 3). This fact, however subtle, is the only evidence that Duchess Giovanna feared her brothers' condemnation of her marriage. After her disappearance and presumed execution, Giovanna's son with Duke Piccolomini ascended the duchy (Boklund 1-3).

While Giovanna's life and disappearance are an interesting mystery, it hardly explains why a Protestant English dramatist would find the tale of an all but forgotten and inconsequential Italian-Catholic Duchess and her marriage to her treasurer compelling enough to dramatize. In fact, her marriage and murder occurred approximately one hundred years prior to the play's completion and performance in 1613. In part, Webster's interest could be rooted in the fact that the playwrights of the English Renaissance frequently used foreign settings in their plays, and Italy was often the setting of choice for dramatists interested in portraying corruption. English stereotypes encouraged the conclusion that the Italian court was a symbol of viciousness and moral sickness, and the

British populace had strong associations linking Italy with Machiavellian principles as well as political schemes, poisonings, sensational murders, and revenge-lust that combines both scheming and violence (Jones 254-261). Essentially, the British transformed Italy into what it represented to them – corruption and depravity. While Renaissance dramatists tapped into widespread Italian stereotypes, a closer analysis suggests that Italy had been “developed into a metaphor for the world” (Jones 266). Thus, Italy conveniently allows an examination of universal issues pertinent to England without facing the penalties of criticizing the English monarchy or aristocracy.

Webster’s use of the Italian backdrop of the Duchess’s story is consistent with the broader view of Italy’s symbolic position as representative of the world and issues that cross cultural boundaries. In spite of its Italian setting, there are many aspects of the play that suggest its particular relevance to a British context. Webster’s use of imagery is an indicator of the very un-Italian world of The Duchess of Malfi. For example, Antonio’s description of “the ruins of an ancient abbey” (5.3.2)¹ which says “We never tread upon them but we set / Our foot upon some reverend history” (5.3.10-11) is clearly not an Italian phenomenon. Abandoned abbeys and the secular buildings that were built among them is a distinctly English situation; after King Henry VIII renounced his ties to the Roman Catholic Church, many Catholic abbeys and monasteries in England were deserted and left to fall into disrepair (Jones 264) primarily because Protestantism did not require celibacy of its priests and nuns as Catholicism did. Furthermore, the Duchess’s and Antonio’s marriage invokes the Protestant trend of companionate marriages, which were emerging in English Puritan philosophy. The wedding ceremony itself parallels the

scripted ceremony of the Anglican Church outlined by The First and Second Prayer Books of Edward VI.

In fact, even Webster's literary sources for the play come from English contemporaries. Bandello's account of the Duchess of Amalfi is the first literary portrayal of the story; however, Webster likely did not use Bandello's Italian novella as his main source. Rather, the most obvious starting point for Webster's dramatization is Painter's English translation (Boklund 5-11). Webster's reliance on Painter's translation emphasizes the un-Italian disposition of the play; for example, the "disillusioned attitude to crime and violence [which] is characteristic of Bandello's novella" (Boklund 5) and other Italian works of the time, is not maintained in Painter's English translation of the text (Boklund 6). Furthermore, Webster's consistent borrowing of phrases and situations found in Arcadia, a romance by his fellow countryman, Sir Philip Sidney (Boklund 25), highlights the British artistic style of the play.

An analysis of Webster's sources not only suggests the universal interest in the themes of the Italian Duchess's story but also the significant changes Webster made to the plot in his dramatization. Most notably, Webster is one of the few authors who depicts the lovers in a positive light; a secondary source – Cinthio – is clearly on the side of Antonio and the Duchess while Bandello is neutral and Goulart, Belleforest, and Painter "see only lust and ambition as the motivating sources behind their actions" (Boklund 85). Often Webster's Duchess comes close to confirming stereotypes regarding lusty women and widows, and yet these labels are undermined by Webster's positive portrayal of the Duchess (Haslem 440). Another Webster augmentation of the narrative is the couple's wedding ceremony (Boklund 16). Unlike his predecessors, Webster

infused the ceremonial dialogue into the text in addition to the sponsalia per verba de praesenti, which is a legally binding verbal agreement to marriage at the exact moment that the words are spoken. Webster's modifications to his sources for The Duchess of Malfi suggest a cultural commentary that is broader than British condescension towards Italian corruption. The marriage ceremony's primacy in the play's narrative underscores Webster's attention to social and economic transformations in Jacobean society.

The Duchess's marriage to Antonio is at the epicenter of the play, as it contradicts the established practices and wishes of the insular and patriarchal aristocracy. She navigates the feudalistic aspects of aristocratic society by following her own desires privately while publicly pretending to obediently follow her brothers' wishes, as in the play's first scene when she claims to her brothers that she will not marry. The Aragonian brothers are both figures of society's authority: the Cardinal is a high ranking official in the Roman Catholic Church and Ferdinand is a Duke and an established member of the aristocracy. The Duchess's irregular marriage challenges both aspects of society represented by her brothers. Furthermore, her union with Antonio is reminiscent of the Protestant notion of the "companionate marriage," which is "a relatively modern concept of marriage as a partnership of love and mutual helpfulness" (Jankowski 87). Thus, the union more closely resembles emerging English ideals about the nature of marriage than the more feudalistic quality of Italian-Catholics' arranged marriages. Marrying Antonio represents the Duchess's attempt to authorize her divergence from her brothers' orders and the traditional ideology that they employ.

Additionally, the secretive nature of the ceremony and its imitation of the scripted ceremony of the Anglican Church serves to further accentuate economic, religious, and

political changes in Webster's England. The Duchess's marriage to an employee underscores anxiety regarding the consequences of the rising status of middle class upstarts in Jacobean England. The ceremony serves to simultaneously defy the authority of her brothers and establish her supremacy over the church to dictate her own behavior. The scene begins with the Duchess ordering Cariola to hide behind the curtain as a witness and, upon Antonio's entrance, she orders him to write her will; the legal aspect of the scene, then, positions the action in a secularized context. The Duchess officiates her own ceremony by dominating the direction of the conversation with Antonio. The Anglican Prayer Book, undoubtedly familiar to Webster, sheds further light on the scene. The common Prayer Book, which provides a script for every event in a Christian's life in England, indicates that the bridegroom does most of the speaking, particularly during the exchange of rings. In fact, the ceremony calls for the groom to place a ring on the bride's finger but does not indicate that the bride must do the same for her groom. In an inversion of this ritual, the Duchess does most of the speaking as she places her ring on Antonio's finger while she, in effect, claims him for herself. Webster appears to have enhanced the prominence of the wedding ceremony in order to suggest the similarity between the historical Duchess's bold marriage to a subordinate and the emerging Protestant ideology surrounding companionate marriages that rejected the practice of marrying for financial and political motives.

Finally, rather than augment previous dramatizations of the play, Webster chose to alter the conclusion of the story in his version. Webster posits the oldest son of Antonio and the Duchess as the successor of the Malfi duchy. The implication is two-fold; first, it suggests that inheritance of political position can be attained through the

maternal line. Also, the fact that the son of a middle class steward is able to ascend to a ruling position among the aristocracy is certainly a bold ending for the play as it suggests the establishment of a new world order. Webster's ending conflicts with previous treatments of the account as well as the historical chronicle, which suggests that the duchy was inherited by the Duchess's son with her first husband (Boklund 3). Webster's radically different ending suggests the new possibilities prevalent in the shifting landscape of Jacobean society.

It is clear that Webster has modified the story of an Italian Duchess to reflect on and provide a commentary about Jacobean society. The Duchess's marriage and wedding ceremony, then, represent the opportunities and dangers prevalent in a destabilized society that is grappling with religious, political, and economic change.

CHAPTER ONE: SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC CONVENTIONS

Land Ownership and Class Stratification

Webster's The Duchess of Malfi is set in early sixteenth-century Catholic Italy and yet it serves as a commentary on the social conditions prevalent in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries in Protestant England. The play focuses on two triangulated relationships; one includes the Duchess and her two aristocratic brothers, while the other exists between the Duchess and two of her stewards, Antonio and Bosola. The contrast of the two triangulated relationships, with the Duchess at the center of both, raises issues of class and gender politics in Elizabethan and Jacobean England, which Webster carefully situates through the lens of sixteenth century Italy. Webster began writing the play nine years after King James I ascended the English throne (Peterson 37); James ascended the throne during a time of economic and cultural evolutions in which the prospering middle class sought to advance their social rank along with their wealth. Thus, James's stance regarding governing, the aristocracy, and economic transformations in England had a significant impact on the cultural context of Webster's world (Peterson 38).

In the late sixteenth century, approximately 94 percent of the English population worked in agriculture (Lowry 74). Therefore, to a great extent, the economy and class status in early modern England were based on land cultivation and ownership; in a reflection of the situation, Webster includes the fact that Julia obtains Antonio's landholdings from Pescara after his banishment through the Cardinal's pressure: "He entreats for you / The citadel of Saint Bennet, that belonged / To the banished Bologna" (5.1.29-31). The inclusion of this episode demonstrates the important role that land

ownership and acquisition played in Jacobean England. Thus, a brief history of land ownership in England is necessary to understanding the cultural context of Webster's England. In 1066, William the Conqueror established a basic feudal system in England in which the land was divided into over 60,000 "Knight's Fees," intended to provide both military and economic support for the crown. In essence, the Knight's Fees were an expression of the military economy of feudalism under which the king or dominant feudal authority organized the land, which was the basis of the economy, into units designed to support military service. Eventually, the military aspect of British land ownership evolved into a manorial economy in which the royal domain was property of the Crown that was allocated to the English aristocracy – dukes, earls, and barons – who held the land in an hierarchical structure with the Knight's Fee as the underlying unit (Lowry 77).

While the military component of land ownership developed into the establishment of the aristocratic landowner, the historical foundations were not far from memory as illustrated in Webster's play; in the second scene of The Duchess of Malfi, Ferdinand is surrounded by courtiers after the conclusion of the courtly contests that effectively mimic war games. Silvio establishes that Antonio has won the sport of riding at the ring, at which point Ferdinand demands to know, "When shall we leave this sportive action, and fall to action indeed?" (1.2.10-11). Castruchio admonishes Ferdinand for his desire to fight in battle and explains that he should assign a deputy to fight for him because "It is fitting a soldier arise to be a prince, but not necessary a prince descend to be a captain" (1.2.15-16). The exchange between Ferdinand and the courtiers illustrates the militaristic foundations of landownership, and simultaneously indicates that by Webster's time the

aristocracy had progressed beyond the military, as Castruchio suggests by his argument that a nobleman like Ferdinand would be descending in rank by fighting himself rather than sending a subordinate in his stead. In fact, in early modern England, the landed aristocracy had amassed a degree of influence beyond its militaristic origins.

The English aristocracy influenced centers of activity in England; specifically, the nobility had power within the central government through their ability to sit on The House of Lords and their prominent presence in the courts of the reigning monarchs (Hart Tudor Times 12). Additionally, the aristocracy demonstrated their ability to influence daily life in England through sponsorship of projects in business, school, law, and entertainment (Hexter 24). The power to affect the lives of the lower class is perhaps the clearest demonstration of the aristocracy's authority within Elizabethan and Jacobean society. The significance of land ownership as a symbol of aristocratic position and power is accentuated by Pescara's decision to award Julia the land that has been stripped from Antonio's possession as a result of his surreptitious marriage. When Antonio's friend, Delio, attempts to obtain the land for himself in order to protect it for Antonio, Pescara denies him:

It was Antonio's land, not forfeited
By course of law, but ravished from his throat
By the Cardinal's entreaty. It were not fit
I should bestow so main a piece of wrong
Upon my friend (5.1.44-48).

According to Pescara, it would reflect poorly on Delio's reputation to acquire Antonio's property under such unfavorable circumstances; therefore, it is far more appropriate to

give the acreage to Julia because “’tis a gratification / Only due to a strumpet, for it is injustice” (5.1.48-49). Thus, the manner in which the aristocracy acquired and managed their land during Webster’s era influenced their reputation and, by extension, their ability to impact society.

During the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, the aristocracy’s management of their land and tenures began to shift significantly, which highlighted inter-class conflict. The relationship between aristocratic landowners and peasants is traced back to the feudal economic system in which the peasant farmed the land, while the noble landowner acted as a ruler over his land tenure; thus, feudal society maintained the idea that there were a number of small governments within the nation. Before the late sixteenth century, land tenures, which were heritable stewardships, underscored civic responsibility within the aristocratic class (Berg 209 - 210). Landowners were responsible for the care and well being of the peasantry dwelling on the land. Prior to the mid-sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, English peasants farmed land under low rent while landholders made extra money by opening free land to sheep raising, which was a lucrative endeavor (Lowry 78). However, a shifting self-image among the aristocracy (Hexter 24) led to a change in outlook in agrarian thought from moral to rational (Lowry 78). The “clerically endorsed idealization of paternalistic stewardship over the land” (Lowry 79) that elicited feelings of civic duty among the aristocracy was replaced by a production-focused attitude (Lowry 80). This transition also became possible with the legalization of personal wills, which allowed large land holders to bequeath land according to their own desires. After the authorization of personal wills took effect, land tenures came more increasingly to resemble absolute power rights over

the peasantry and the devastating consequences of private land tenure without social or civic responsibility becomes apparent (Berg 209 - 213). Expectations of the integrity of the aristocracy and the dissatisfaction with their greed and corruption is evident in Webster's The Duchess of Malfi as the Aragonian brothers are depicted as corrupt and greedy.

At the beginning of the play, Antonio relates the importance of a ruler's court being just and reputable through his experiences at the French monarchy's court: "And what is't makes this blessed government / But a most provident council, who dare freely / Inform him the corruption of the times" (1.1.16-18). On the contrary, Antonio bemoans the "flatt'ring sycophants, of dissolute / And infamous persons" (1.1.8-9) who, as courtiers and advisors, pollute the monarch and cause corruption to spread: "Some cursed example poison't near the head, / Death and diseases through the whole land spread" (1.1.14-15). Ferdinand and the Cardinal are depicted by Antonio as the type of corrupt and greedy land-owning aristocrats who feel no responsibility for those in their stewardship as evidenced by Antonio's assessment of the Cardinal's ambition and avarice: "Where he is jealous of any man, he lays worse plots for them than ever was imposed on Hercules, for he strews in his way flatterers, panders, intelligencers, atheists, and a thousand such political monsters" (1.1.160-163). Furthermore, Antonio's appraisal of Ferdinand's character is not any more generous as he points out Ferdinand's imbalanced behavior as a judge:

He speaks with others' tongues and hears men's suits

With others' ears; will seem to sleep o'th'bench

Only to trap offenders in their answers;

Dooms men to death by information,
Rewards hearsay (1.1.173-177).

Thus, the iniquity of Ferdinand's justice and the Cardinal's greed is not behavior consistent with the idealized view of paternal stewardship of the aristocracy. As a judge, Ferdinand has a responsibility to be just with his constituents whereas the Cardinal's position as a man of the church involves his care and responsibility to his parishioners. However, the corruption of both brothers underscores the dangers of extreme self-interest among such a powerful aristocracy. Greed among the landholding aristocracy of sixteenth and seventeenth-century England led to a great deal of suffering among the lower classes.

The emergent focus on the standards of a market culture was based on the economic needs of landholders, as inflation in the sixteenth century caused all of the classes to suffer (Hart Tudor Times 20). The price increases caused the landowners to reconsider the use of their land; inevitably, this led landowners to engage in a number of tactics to increase profit margins. For example, landholders participated in enclosures, rent increases, and manipulation of grain prices for profit (Berg 213). Enclosures were the result of the formation of permanent hedges that enclosed land for the purposes of sheep raising or improved farming techniques. Enclosing land was a practice that, until the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, had occurred for hundreds of years with few problems. However, during the Elizabethan and Jacobean age, the practice intensified due to noblemen who were anxious to increase profit and protect their land stakes; many landowners had little compunction about eliminating smaller or weaker peasant tenants from their lands. Clearly, the peasant tenants suffered the most as homelessness and starvation were often a result of this increasing practice (Hart Tudor Times 18-20).

While the peasantry suffered at the hands of the aristocracy's budding market driven practices, the middle class on the whole seemed to prosper. The "yeoman" class were independent farmers who were able to come into great wealth through hard work (Hart Seventeenth Century 24). Further, yeoman farmers appear to have spearheaded improved farming techniques that emphasized making better use of the farmland (Lowry 74). In effect, the yeomen were nascent agricultural capitalists who helped to revolutionize farming practices (Lowry 88) while earning enough profit either to send their sons to university or bequeath enough land to allow them to avoid manual labor (Hart Seventeenth Century 24).

Significantly, in The Duchess of Malfi Webster has situated two prominent characters in the social class of sons of either yeomen or merchants who are seeking an improved class status. However, these economic doubles have quite divergent strategies. Webster's fictional Bosola is the combination of two historical figures in the original Italian account of the story. Historically, there were two would-be assassins; one assassin was hired by the Aragonian brothers and instead of murdering Antonio, warned him of the plot against him. However, in October 1513, Antonio was stabbed on the roadside by four men led by a military captain – Daniel de Bozolo (Ranald John Webster 49). Thus, the foregrounding of Bosola and his ambitions as well as his ill-fated revenge against his patrons, the Aragonian brothers, seems to be a Websterian augmentation intended to emphasize the social unrest created by the patronage seeking of the middle class. Bosola appears to seek preferment through whatever means possible as evidenced by the sheer desperation of his attitude: "I will thrive in some way" (1.1.33). As the scene progresses, it is explained that Bosola is a soldier as Antonio discusses Bosola's service record: "I

have heard / He's very valiant" (1.1.74-75). Thus, Castruchio's commentary on the social mobility of brave soldiers is relevant in light of Bosola's failed attempts to attain patronage through courageous military service. Furthermore, Bosola has studied at university as evidenced by Delio's familiarity with him: "I knew him in Padua – a fantastical scholar" (3.3.41). Attending university was a way to legitimize middle class offspring of yeomen and merchants. Finally, Bosola's failed attempts to attain preferment by carrying out the devious plans of Ferdinand and the Cardinal illustrate the challenges in navigating routes to social mobility in a hierarchical, class conscious society.

Antonio's role as a steward as well as his relationship to land indicate that he is also a middle class upstart. Antonio owns land through Pescara, "The Marquis of Pescara, / Under whom you hold certain lands in cheat" (5.1.5-6), and because his lands are subject to escheat, he may bestow the land on his heirs as long as he does not die prior to making a will and is not convicted of treason or a serious felony. The possession of heritable land demonstrates that Antonio achieved some sort of social legitimacy. The depiction of both Bosola and Antonio as ambitious middle class upstarts underscores the social context of Webster's England. While the two engage in different strategies to achieve social standing, their ambitious striving for preferment destroys both of them; the outcome of the two characters' aspirations highlights apprehension surrounding social advancement in a nation of strict hierarchical class.

Shifting Economic and Political Atmosphere

Tensions arose in Jacobean England due to the burgeoning middle class's desire to attain social rank that would befit their budding economic wealth. The middle class,

which included educated, landholding sons of yeoman farmers and the merchant class, sought patronage from the crown to legitimize their status in society (Hart Seventeenth Century 7). Pressure from the middle class led King James I to expand the peerage significantly. While Queen Elizabeth had been rather tight-fisted with granting honors (Hexter 26), the inflation of honors under James led Sir Francis Bacon to decry “the almost prostituted title of knighthood” (Hart Seventeenth Century 7). During Elizabeth’s reign, she created one peer per two years for a total of eighteen peers, whereas between 1603 and 1630, James created 84 peers, which was approximately eight times the Elizabethan rate. Further, under Elizabeth, there was one earl for every two barons in the House of Lords; however, by 1628, there was a four earls to three barons ratio in the House of Lords (Hexter 27). James also invented a new form of English aristocracy by introducing the baronetage, which was a lower ranking level of nobility (Hexter 30). A five-fold increase in the granting of knighthoods was witnessed under James (Hexter 26) while he created around 60 Irish peerages (Hexter 30).

The astonishing availability of honors is evidenced by the patronage seekers’ competition for public works projects under James’s rule. Merchants and other social upstarts attempted to participate in projects that intended to privatize functions of government in order to gain entrance into the peerage from James. For example, patronage seekers attempted to convince James to fund the construction of a fleet of 100 fishing vessels to challenge Dutch supremacy in the fishing trade and another project suggested that the crown invest in dyed and dressed cloth exports (Cramsie 346-349). In sum, James either oversaw or addressed hundreds of projects; the fact that these project went so far in their influence of the crown’s fiscal policy suggests a breakdown at the

governance level. More importantly, though, the volume of projects under James demonstrates how open the channels were to the King and his policymakers (Cramsie 363-364). This openness and availability of entrance into the nobility had a drastic impact on Jacobean society.

As can be expected, the availability of honors under James greatly reduced their value. Elizabethan honors were priceless because they were not for sale whereas James sold honors and utilized the class-conscious Jacobean society to generate revenue. The inflation of honors had a perplexing impact on a society that was status-bound and built upon degree, priority, and place. For Jacobean society, the observance of precedence and reverence and acceptance of their authority guaranteed social stability. However, James's ambivalence about the social viability of who he bestowed honors upon shook a social system in which existed a widely acceptable honor structure and acceptable progression in status (Hexter 31). Essentially, under James, any upstart was able to attain a peerage if he could afford it. James's irreverent attitude toward the granting of honors is echoed in the rapidity of Antonio's elevation through his marriage to the Duchess. Antonio's ascension also emphasizes issues surrounding the erotic favoritism that was cause for resentment and tension in the courts of both Queen Elizabeth and King James (Engle 1749). While the Duchess understands the virtue and inherent dignity of Antonio's character, the concern of the Malfi constituents regarding Antonio's advancement – "They observe I grow to infinite purchase" (3.1.28) – demonstrates the tenuous nature of granting peerages without going through prescribed, acceptable avenues. It is clear that Antonio has some ambition as he holds land in escheat, travels to France, and appears to work hard as the Duchess's steward; however, he does not

imagine that advancement will come about through a clandestine marriage to the Duchess. As a steward, however, Antonio could use his natural talents to improve his fortunes and rank during Webster's era (Correll 66).

Stewards played an important role in Jacobean and Elizabethan society. The Oxford English Dictionary defines a steward as "an official who controls the domestic affairs of household, supervising the service of his master's table, directing the domestics, and regulating household expenditure." However, the definition is complex; while the early modern definition referred to the administrative, secondary, and mediating positions within a large household, there is also an indication that stewards played an important role in royal households and were nobility themselves. Another meaning of steward is: "the title of an officer of a royal household, which in England as on the continent, had come to designate an office in the royal household held only by a great noble of the realm" (Oxford English Dictionary). For example, both the "Great Steward of England" and the "Steward of Scotland" were high offices of state, which inevitably became hereditary positions occupied by the peerage. The Steward of Scotland controlled the royal household, held great administrative powers, and was given the privilege of leading the army into battle. The link between royal households and stewards suggests the importance of the position of steward. Among aristocratic households, stewards were responsible for regulating expenditures and held the manor court in the lord's absence; Antonio's involvement in the Duchess's finances in his role as treasurer is evident during the courtship scene in which he prepares to write her will. Additionally, stewards' responsibilities could include judicial or diplomatic tasks. Also, overseeing manual laborers was a role of manor stewards: "the overseer of workmen;

houseboy” (Oxford English Dictionary); for example, Bosola’s position as provisorship of the horse is an enviable stewardship on a manor (Correll 85). The fact that stewards had authority over other workers at manor homes underscores their authoritative roles. Overall, stewards supported their superiors and occupied an intermediate position in which they were able to distinguish themselves by providing excellent service.

While stewards were involved in the administrative aspects of managing a household and estate, they were also factors of power in the sense that they were employed to achieve the desires of their social superiors, although they may know very little about those desires (Correll 66). Bosola is employed by the Aragonian brothers to hold the enviable position of the provisorship of the horse in the Duchess’s household in order to allow him to spy on her for Ferdinand and the Cardinal with apparently little knowledge of the brothers’ motives; for example, Bosola appears perplexed at Ferdinand’s desire that the Duchess never remarry, to which Ferdinand responds: “Do not ask the reason, but be satisfied / I say I would not” (1.1.259-260). Further, Bosola is mystified over Ferdinand’s cruel torture of the Duchess in Act IV (Correll 67). Additionally, stewards’ ignorance of their masters’ desires is apparent in the marriage scene of the Duchess and Antonio. The Duchess requests Antonio’s assistance with the intent of arranging a marriage with him, which appears to be completely unbeknownst to Antonio. During the ensuing exchange between the two, the Duchess makes several suggestive comments: “I look young for your sake” (1.1.370), to which Antonio responds in a business-minded manner: “I’ll fetch your Grace / The particulars of your revenue and expense” (1.1.372-373). The scene evolves into an impromptu marriage ceremony in which the suddenness of the Duchess’s transition and Cariola popping out

from behind a curtain make it appear almost like an entrapment scene; the effect on Antonio is overwhelming and dizzying: “You have made me stark blind” (1.1.411). Clearly, Antonio entered the scene unaware of the intentions or wishes of his mistress. Bosola and Antonio are examples of the steward/aristocrat relationship as both men seek to achieve a better position through committed service to the will of their masters but are often unaware of the extent or motivation of their masters’ requests.

While stewards were often indentured to their aristocratic master’s will, the profession was considered a respectable calling and a means of climbing the ladder of social degree. The interaction between Ferdinand and Bosola infers this fact after Ferdinand obtains the provisorship of the horse for Bosola and retains him as a spy: “and ere long thou mayst arrive / At a higher place by’t” (1.1.264-265). In fact, approximately 190 Members of the Parliament of Queen Elizabeth I had been, still were, or were destined to be stewards. Also, Sir Thomas Thynne used his position as steward to the Earl of Hertford to establish the wealth of a gentry family, after which he entered the nobility himself. Thus, in many ways, stewards acted as a “class hinge in the opening door of transition and social mobility” (Correll 75). That is to say, stewards were part of a shift in Elizabethan and Jacobean society in which opportunities for social advancement were available, particularly with the movement towards a market economy. Stewards in particular played a mediating role between pastoral aristocratic power and the metropolitan-centered market economy through their attempts to improve the standing of their masters; accordingly, stewards are “slippery characters as a mediation in a shifting agricultural economy with increasingly fluid market relations as well as changing structures and valences of service” (Correll 75). Webster appears to have highlighted a

new discourse that emerged with the British economy's shift from an agricultural-based to a market-centered economy through the Duchess's use of metaphors during the scenes in which her marriage is featured (Correll 81).

The Duchess's Entrepreneurial Discourse

The Duchess uses an entrepreneurial discourse consistent with market economy ideology in relation to her marriage in order to justify her behavior. For example, the nuptial scene begins with the Duchess's request for Antonio to write her will, and the emphasis on money and wealth continues throughout the exchange. During the nuptials, the Duchess discharges Antonio's debts: "And, 'cause you shall not come to me in debt, / Being now my steward, here upon your lips / I sign your *quietus est*" (1.1.463-465) as she clearly recognizes the impossibility of the match from both a social and economic standpoint; however, she attempts to sidestep the issue of aristocratic limitations on inter-class marriage by leveling their economic positions:

This goodly roof of yours is too low built;
I cannot stand upright in't, nor discourse,
Without I raise it higher. Raise yourself,
Or, if you please, my hand to help you (1.1.417-420).

From the Duchess's perspective, the economic leveling that takes place in the wedding scene sufficiently paves the way for their union. The Duchess uses their now equal financial position to convince Antonio of the validity of their match: "So, now the ground's broke, / You may discover what a wealthy mine / I make you lord of" (1.1.429-431). Once the financial disparity is resolved, the marriage ceremony resumes with both Antonio and the Duchess committing to sustaining affection and loyalty to each other.

However, the very fact that the Duchess addresses only the economic position of her spouse, rather than Antonio's deficiency in having an aristocratic background indicates her divergence from an ideology that maintains a class hierarchy. It is through a language and ideology of a shifting economic situation that the Duchess is able to find a place for her marriage to exist. However, she must ignore long lasting social customs in order to sustain a marriage to a lower class husband.

Similarly, the Duchess continues to use the language of exchange to argue for the legitimacy of widow remarriage during her disagreements with her brothers: "Diamonds are of most value, / They say, that have passed through most jeweler's hands" (1.1.302-303). The claim that the value of diamonds is founded in the fact that diamonds must traverse the market in order to attain worth suggests the freedom that the Duchess sees in the concept of establishing worth based upon a consumer's desire for an object. The very fact that the Duchess seeks out a spouse underscores her rather entrepreneurial behavior.

Throughout the play, the Duchess calls upon the language of consumerism in order to justify the irregularity of her marriage to Antonio. For example, the Duchess utilizes commerce rates in her fish parable as she discusses with Bosola her clandestine marriage (Correll 89). The parable relates an exchange between a dog-fish and an inferior salmon. The dog-fish insults the typically stream-dwelling salmon for entering the ocean and not providing the superior dog-fish with proper deference:

Why art thou so bold
To mix thyself with our high state of floods,
Being no eminent courtier, but one

That for the calmest and fresh time o'th' year
Dost live in shallow rivers, rank'st thyself
With silly smelts and shrimps? And darest thou
Pass by our dogship without reverence? (3.5.128-134).

Clearly, this connects to the class conflict that the marriage between the Duchess and Antonio invokes and her brothers' indignant rejection of Antonio's position. However, the salmon's response to the dog-fish relates to the value assigned through commerce: "Thank Jupiter, we both have passed the net! / Our value never can be truly known / Till in the fisher's basket we be shown" (3.5.136-138). Thus, merit is determined by worth dispensed in the market based upon consumer demand, not preternatural noble birth: "I'th' market then my price may be the higher, / Even when I am nearest to the cook and fire" (3.5.139-140). Similarly, for workers in a market-based economy, the value of an employee is determined by demand for the talents and work ethic of an individual. In this sense, Antonio's value to the Duchess is also reflective of a more contemporary stance; the Duchess's desire for Antonio is apparently based upon the worth he has attained through his admirable personal characteristics and his effective stewardship of her household: "If you will know where breathes a complete man – / I speak it without flattery – turn your eyes / And progress through yourself" (1.1.436-438). Thus, the Duchess's use of the fish anecdote as well as her marriage to the middle class Antonio illustrates the fact that in order to attain her goals, she must invest in a system that bestows value based upon quality, rather than aristocratic high birth.

Ferdinand's Aristocratic Discourse

It is through the language of this system that the Duchess is able to rationalize to herself and others the act of marrying Antonio. Utilizing entrepreneurial discourse to solidify her decision to remarry, the Duchess seeks a way to cross a social barrier by way of language. It is clear that an aristocratic discourse, which relies on personal value dispensed at birth rather than through action or talent, would not allow her to marry a commoner like Antonio. Ferdinand's discourse is staunchly aristocratic throughout the play and is the antithesis of the Duchess's enterprising language. For example, upon discovery of the fact that the Duchess has borne children since her first husband's death, Ferdinand flies into a rage that underscores his aristocratic insecurity regarding the purity of the family's blood. He imagines her having sexual relations

Happily with some strong-thighed bargeman,
Or one o'th'woodyard, that can quoit the sledge
Or toss the bar, or else some lovely squire
That carries coals up to her privy lodgings (2.5.43-46).

Bosola is unable to provide information as to the identity of the children's father and yet Ferdinand automatically imagines the worst by deducing that the Duchess's lover is a laborer. Ferdinand's extremist assumption that the Duchess is procreating with a coarse laborer indicates his discomfort with the concept of relationships that cross social barriers. Additionally, Ferdinand infuses his tirade with references to the type of work done by the commoners with whom he imagines his sister is having an affair. He alludes to the basic work of a manor employee responsible for chopping wood as well as the squire's role of bringing coals for the fire to the Duchess's bedroom. This indicates that

Ferdinand sees the lower classes only in terms of the roles and duties they fulfill. Furthermore, their type of employment is viewed as a means for derision in Ferdinand's perspective as evidenced by the sexual connotations he implies as he refers to the "strong-thighed bargeman" and the squire who "carries coals up to her privy lodgings." Before he is made aware of the entire situation, Ferdinand uses language to divest the Duchess's relationship from any sense of legitimacy by describing the Duchess with a base laborer at her manor and relating their lowly roles alongside his crude sexual innuendos.

Ferdinand's angry outburst underscores the importance that he and the Cardinal place on maintaining their position among the noble elite through not only themselves but their family members as well; the Duchess's actions, then, reflect on the brothers' status and any societal infractions that would lower her would then correlate to a lowered position for the Cardinal and Ferdinand as well. The Cardinal further emphasizes that reputation among the aristocracy is impacted by the family members: "Shall our blood, / The royal blood of Aragon and Castile, / Be thus attainted?" (2.5.21-23). The Cardinal's language, which relates issues of tainting the purity of noble blood and Ferdinand's vulgar description of the Duchess and her supposed lover emphasizes aristocratic apprehension regarding the lower class and the consequences of the presence of an emerging upwardly mobile class in Jacobean society. The brothers employ aristocratic language that precludes any attitude that would sanction relations among different classes. Furthermore, their discussion presents a condemnation of the Duchess so roundly that seeing her behavior through an impartial lens is out of the question.

Ferdinand's discourse indicates that he is unable to view the Duchess's affair from any perspective other than abject horror:

O most imperfect light of human reason,
That mak'st us so unhappy, to foresee
What we can least prevent! – Pursue thy wishes,
And glory in them; there's in shame no comfort
But to be past all bounds and sense of shame (3.2.79-83).

Not only are the Duchess's actions horrifying to Ferdinand, but her behavior is completely unreasonable according to his world view. From his position as a member of the peerage, the shame that the Duchess should feel for her actions also reflects upon him. His horror and shame are further indicated by his refusal to hear her explanation as she entreats him to "Pray sir, hear me" (3.2.74), at which point, Ferdinand continues to rage against her and states "Do not speak" (3.2.76). He later advises her against divulging more information about her marriage – namely the identity of her husband – because he would not be able to control his fury:

Let me not know thee. I came hither prepared
To work thy discovery, yet am now persuaded
It would beget such violent effects
As would damn us both (3.2.94-97).

Moreover, upon hearing that the Duchess has, in fact, married, Ferdinand's succinct retort, "So" (3.2.84), is illustrative of his absolute disdain. The Duchess sees her marriage as a justification of her sexual attraction to Antonio; she is not just taking a lover and overly wanton, but rather, she marries her him. Ferdinand, however, does not

see any redeeming quality in the Duchess's decision to remarry because her actions violate cultural taboos regarding suitable potential suitors for her as well as familial authority within the aristocracy. Among the nobility, marriages were negotiated by the families of the bride and groom; in the absence of a father, the brothers took on the role of arranging a marriage for their sibling in which a brother became responsible for arranging a partner as well as settling the business aspect of a union (Mikesell 237-238). Ferdinand certainly is aware of his role in this respect; this position is symbolized when he presents the Duchess with their father's dagger as he and the Cardinal attempt to dissuade her from remarriage: "You are my sister / [*Showing his dagger*] This was my father's poniard. Do you see?" (1.1.331-332). Ferdinand presents the Duchess with their father's dagger again when he is railing against her for remarrying against his wishes. While the Duchess appears to believe her marriage to Antonio instead of keeping a lover will vindicate her in her brother's eyes, it is clear that Ferdinand sees her action as a violation of aristocratic customs and of his familial authority. According to Calderwood, Ferdinand views private marriage as reprehensible because a reliance on personal choice conflicts with the established social hierarchy (75). Clearly, the Duchess has misjudged how important aristocratic insularity is to her brother, and the siblings' use of divergent discourses result in their talking past each other.

As previously indicated, stewards like Antonio, who successfully ran large households had a number of avenues for upward mobility in Jacobean society; however, a reigning authority like the Duchess would certainly have been beyond Antonio's grasp. Yet, certainly a relationship or marriage to Antonio would not have been as galling as an

illicit affair with a bargeman or some other type of laborer. However, upon discovering Antonio's identity, Ferdinand's rage is not abated:

Antonio!

A slave that only smelled of ink and counters,

And nev'r in's life looked like a gentleman

But in the audit time (3.3.71-74).

Once again, Ferdinand describes the identity of the Duchess's lover in terms of the lowliness of his service at her manor. While Ferdinand must admit that at times Antonio can appear as a gentleman, or member of the aristocracy, he makes certain that this fact is couched in terms of Antonio's employment, which he views as below the family's social position.

Ferdinand's anger at the Duchess is derived, in part, from his belief that the preeminence of the aristocracy rests on loyalty to the family name. By marrying without her family's authorization, the Duchess betrayed Ferdinand, in his opinion, and she has lost the luster that her position commands as evidenced by the reputation parable, which he relates to her upon discovering her clandestine marriage. In this allegory, Ferdinand describes the separation of Reputation, Love, and Death; Love and Death can be found elsewhere after the parting of ways. However, once one parts ways with Reputation, they can never find it again; Ferdinand believes that the Duchess has lost her reputation: "And so, for you: / You have shook hands with Reputation / And make him invisible" (3.2.136-138) and, as a result, she has lowered herself, which causes him to disassociate himself from her: "So, fare you well. / I will never see you more" (3.2.138-139). The fact that Ferdinand must distance himself from his sister after the discovery of her surreptitious

marriage indicates the extent of her fall from grace in his eyes. Ferdinand's parable underscores the role that marriage plays in aristocratic society as a construct surrounded by economic and political negotiations that have little to do with love. Indeed, Ferdinand explains that Love can be found

'mongst unambitious shepherds

Where dowries were not talked of, and sometimes

'Mongst quiet kindred that had nothing left

By their dead parents (3.2.130-133).

Thus, a marriage for love in Ferdinand's opinion is for those who lack status and wealth, not the Duchess. The language of Ferdinand's parable directly conflicts with the Duchess's more entrepreneurial speeches. Ferdinand's discourse rests on traditional principles regarding status and the peerage in a class-conscious England whereas the Duchess's independent and enterprising language relates to emerging economic transitions, which provided more opportunity for blurring the lines of class and social distinctions.

Significantly, England's budding reliance on a market economy did grant more freedom to working women both economically and in the realm of marriage (Green 1084); however, little matrimonial freedom was granted to women of the aristocracy during the seventeenth century. Accordingly, the Duchess's marriage to Antonio ends disastrously with her execution, which is an extension of her inability to establish a setting in which the principles that dictate value in the market outweigh hierarchical status among the aristocracy. Webster highlights societal and economic transitions in England by dramatizing the real life story of an Italian Duchess. Certainly, the changes

during Renaissance England allowed for a number of opportunities for the lower classes, as evidenced by the rise of the yeoman farmers and their educated children, the openness of King James's court to new ideas, and the increase in the granting of peerages during James's rule. Throughout the play, the Duchess appears to utilize through her language the ideology that exists as a result of an emerging market economy in order to create an environment that would sanction her marriage to Antonio. Thus, the Duchess's claim to her brother – "I have not gone about, in this, to create / Any new world or customs" (3.2.112-113) – falls flat. While the play recognizes new opportunities that emerge within the context of societal transition, Webster also underscores the insecurity that these economic and social changes elicit. King James's disregard for time-honored avenues towards preferment destabilized British society. As the monarchy was often forced to rely on the aristocracy by calling upon the Parliament – which comprised members of the gentry – to raise taxes (Hart Tudor Times 7), their dissatisfaction with the monarch could certainly be disastrous. This is most evident in the example of James's son and successor, King Charles I. Like his father, Charles was resentful towards the authority of the aristocratic Parliament and this attitude eventually led to Civil War within the country (Hart Seventeenth Century 46) in 1642, only thirty years after The Duchess of Malfi was first performed. The play, then, underscores the dangers of a society in transition

CHAPTER TWO: THE IRREGULAR MARRIAGE

Marriage as a Religious Institution

The Duchess's second marriage, to Antonio – a steward of her household – is at the epicenter of the action of The Duchess of Malfi. The Duchess's use and rejection of religious institutional practices is often ambiguous. On the one hand, her actions subvert the authority of religious institutions by claiming authority – as a ruling prince – to conduct her own marriage contract without the sanction of either her family or the church. However, Webster's Duchess models the ideology of emergent Protestant perspectives of marriage, which focused on compatibility of unions over financial and political motives. In spite of the emphasis on compatibility in Protestant theology, the cultural and political reasons for marriage among the gentry were not abandoned. Thus, the Duchess's position in the aristocracy overrides religious philosophy and she, therefore, violates a taboo by marrying for companionship over familial considerations. The similarity of the play's wedding ceremony to the Anglican Common Prayer Book, even though she is Roman Catholic, points to the importance of validating her marriage through the use of religious customs even as she is denying their authority over her.

Both the historical Duchess and her fictionalized counterpart are Italian Catholics and, as such, were bound by the ecclesiastical requirements of the Vatican. However, between 1551 and 1620, the legal apparatus of the Catholic Church – the Ecclesiastical Courts – reflected changing attitudes towards marriage. The Catholic Reformation, in response to the Protestant Reformation, augmented the religious significance of marriage and the nuptials ceremony; in effect, the Church reaffirmed that marriage is a sacrament (Safley 61- 64). Additionally, a number of transitions were also chronicled within the

Anglican Church of Webster's England. Protestant, particularly Puritan, ideology began to emphasize the importance of compatibility within marriages, which was often a vision at odds with existing notions of parental and feudal authority within the aristocracy (Finch 190). The Catholic Church remained suspicious of passionate love and emphasized subjection of children to parental control (Stone 182-183), which merged well with the aristocratic view that marriage was a business arrangement, more often revolving around the transfer of land and the alignment of political objectives (Green 1110). While the aristocracy still relied on the Catholic notion of arranged marriages, Puritan doctrine attempted to add a greater stress on marital compatibility through the idea of the companionate marriage (Stone 205). Companionate marriages called for the preeminence of mutual comfort and "due benevolence" as a necessity among married couples (Mikesell 235). Proponents of companionate marriage disagreed with the financially motivated marriages among the nobility and, instead, emphasized the importance of finding a love match (Mikesell 235-236). The Duchess's decision to marry Antonio appears to fall under the category of companionate marriage as she is clearly not motivated by money, but rather by her affection for and attraction to Antonio. Furthermore, the Duchess's actions underscore the transitioning ideological beliefs about marriage within both the Catholic and Protestant framework.

The Anglican ceremony begins with the Priest's explanation of the reasons for marriage. There are three reasons for marriage outlined by the Church; specifically, the service recognizes the importance of procreation as the first purpose of marriage, followed by regulation of fornication, and, lastly, for the provision of companionship: "Thirdleye for the mutuall societie, helpe, and coumfort, that the one oughte to haue of

thither, both in prosperitie and aduersitie” (The First and Second Prayer Books 252).

Considering the three reasons for marriage that are set forth by the religious doctrine of Webster’s day, the Duchess’s marriage to Antonio seems to fall in line with the Church’s ideology. She disavows the common practice among the royalty of maintaining lovers – a clear violation of Judeo-Christian standards surrounding fornication – and puts her faith into the institution of marriage. Furthermore, the Duchess woos Antonio based upon her affection for and attraction to him, which is more consistent with companionate marriages within the Protestant tradition.

The Anglican Church’s philosophy regarding marriage had considerable influence on plotting in Jacobean drama. Religion was at the center of life in Renaissance England and church attendance was compulsory (Findlay 11). As a result, playwrights’ knowledge of matrimonial conventions was extremely extensive at the time. Further, it is clear that Shakespeare and his contemporaries transferred English religious and legal practices to foreign settings (Ranald “As Marriage Binds” 68-69). The nature of the marriage between the Duchess and Antonio demonstrates that the Duchess subverts the conventional notion of marriages derived from a Catholic tradition, which emphasized arrangement of financially motivated nuptials among the nobility (Stone 186). Through the Duchess, Webster suggests elements of transition within religious thought regarding marriage, including the increased importance placed on companionship over the business side of marriage. However, a double standard existed within the more egalitarian approach to partnerships because while the class barrier between the Jacobean aristocracy and the middle class weakened during the late sixteenth century (Stone 196), it remained indecent for an aristocrat to marry a member of the middle class (Stone 190). Thus, the

transference of English religious practices onto the Italian setting of The Duchess of Malfi serves to point out shortcomings within contemporary English religious and social practices; however, it also appears to highlight the failures of the corrupt Catholic Church as evidenced by the Cardinal's depravity and the apparently inappropriate revocation of the Duchess's ruling rights at the banishment ceremony in Ancona.

The Duchess's Appropriation of Religious Authority

The nuptials occur in the first act of the play with little preparation afforded to the audience. Early in the first scene, Antonio is presented as a virtuous voice of reason as he analyzes the players in the court at Malfi; his commentary is followed by Cariola's confidential message for Antonio to meet the Duchess – "You must attend my lady in the gallery / Some half an hour hence" (1.1.210-211) – which does not intimate the shocking proposal scene that unfolds in the Duchess's drawing room. Even the intended groom is seemingly taken by surprise as he enters her room prepared to handle the financial matters of her estate. Adding to the unexpected nature of her proposal is the conversation that transpires between her brothers and the Duchess on the subject of remarriage, which immediately precedes her nuptials with Antonio. Aristocratic women rarely had the authority to initiate a courtship or choose their husbands (Green 1110); however, the Duchess manages to use and distort social conventions that initially might have served to limit her in an effort to grant herself the authority to select the husband of her choice. The Duchess's manipulation of customs and stereotypes to enact her will is most prominent in the courtship and marriage scene. Throughout her impromptu wedding ceremony, the Duchess parodies the ceremonial aspects of a church wedding in order to summon a degree of authenticity for their commitment; therefore, she uses "symbols of

order to sanction private impulses” (Calderwood 78). The Anglican Common Prayer Book, which was in print during Webster’s era, provides a script for the wedding ceremonies at the time. The couple’s actions and language appear to mimic the ceremonial aspects of the English Church’s celebration of matrimony. Throughout the couple’s impromptu nuptials, the Duchess takes on the role of the Priest; according to the The First and Second Prayer Books, a Priest has the authority to validate a marriage contract with the words “I now pronounce that they bee man and wyfe together” (254). Similarly, the Duchess appears to believe that her position as a ruler affords her the same type of power: “We now are man and wife, and ‘tis the church / That must echo this” (1.1.493-494). Thus, the Duchess has established her own supremacy over that of the church, and yet, the ideology informing her choice in a husband as well as the ceremonial aspects of the couple’s marriage parallel Protestant religious beliefs regarding marriage.

The couple’s exchange of vows appears unusual on its face; however, upon further analysis, we can see that their dialogue follows a course similar to the scripted vows found in Christian marriage services. The Anglican ceremony, which Webster would be familiar with, begins by establishing consent between the two parties as the couple is asked to state that they agree to “liue together after Goddes ordeinaunce in the holy estate of matrimonie” (The First and Second Prayer Books 253). Similarly, the “ceremony” in The Duchess of Malfi begins with the Duchess attempting to attain Antonio’s consent through several different tactics. Initially, the Duchess broaches the topic of marriage with Antonio by ordering him to write her will, which would be unnecessary if she were married: “If I had a husband, now, this care were quit” (1.1.383). Her use of the word “now” connotes the immediacy of her intentions. Further,

the Duchess indicates that Antonio will act in the role of a de facto husband as an overseer of her financial affairs; she seems to be preparing Antonio emotionally for the astonishing proposal that she plans to make while simultaneously mimicking the tendency among the nobility to settle financial affairs prior to the nuptials (Green 1109).

When Antonio encourages her to consider remarriage – “’Twere strange if there were no will in you / To marry again” (1.1.392-393) – she asks him his opinion of marriage. His ambivalent response leads her to try another more bold strategy to encourage his consent to marry her; she wittily suggests her intentions by applying her wedding band to one of his bloodshot eyes:

One of your eyes is bloodshot. Use my ring to’t.

They say ‘tis very sovereign. ‘Twas my wedding ring,

And I did vow never to part with it

But to my second husband (1.1.405-408).

Antonio responds with shock: “You have made me stark blind” (1.1.411), but with the offer on the table, Antonio is reluctant to deny her courtship, although he seems to provide a weak claim of unambitious modesty: “Were there nor heaven nor hell, / I should be honest. I have long served virtue, / And nev’r ta’en wages of her” (1.1.439-441). Understandably, Antonio is resistant to the idea due to his lower status; however, once the Duchess convinces him of her sincerity, he offers his assent to the marriage: “I will remain the constant sanctuary / Of your good name” (1.1.461-462). At the point of Antonio’s consent, the unusual conversation takes on more ceremonial aspects.

The similarity of the language and themes expressed in the play’s wedding with the Anglican Prayer Book is further emphasized by the reference to the danger that the

Duchess's brothers present to their union. The scripted ceremony of Webster's era acknowledges the necessity for remaining loyal during difficult times; couples were required to vow to stay together "for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness, and in health" (The First and Second Prayer Books 253). Antonio's allusion to the peril that the Aragonian brothers pose imitates the Church service's emphasis on an awareness of the pitfalls that married couples encounter. Furthermore, Antonio's concern about the Duchess's brothers parallels the ceremony's opportunity for objections about the union to be voiced: "At which daye of marriage yf any man doe allege any impediment why they maye not be coupled together in matrimonie" (253). The groom's apprehensive reference to her brothers alludes to the opposition that is not granted a voice in this ceremony. The mention of the Duchess's family further highlights the independence of her act as brides were generally "given away" typically by a family member and in some cases by a friend; in fact, as part of the ceremony, the Priest asks "Who geueth this woman to be married to this man?" (The First and Second Prayer Books 253) at which point "the minister receiuing the woman at her father or frendes handes: shall cause the [groom] to take the [bride] by the hande" (The First and Second Prayer Books 253). Finally, a Priest at the end of a wedding ceremony was required to command that "those whome god hath ioyned together: let no man put a sunder" (The First and Second Prayer Books 254). The Duchess replicates this scene within her own nuptials: "Bless, heaven, this sacred Gordian, which let violence / Never untwine!" (1.1.481-482), with Antonio repeating her sentiments: "That fortune may not know an accident, / Either of joy or sorrow to divide / Our fixed wishes!" (1.1.490-492). Clearly, the Duchess has taken on the role of the priest by solidifying the legitimacy of this atypical ceremony. Additionally, she has omitted the

role that the bride's family plays in both negotiating a marriage agreement and giving the bride away to her groom; she has denied her family's role in the marriage contract and ceremony because they would not sanction a union with a social subordinate. Thus, both the Duchess and Antonio rely on the tenets of the Church's prescribed nuptials ceremony to lend a degree of validity to their actions even as they exclude aspects of the ceremony that would undermine their union.

While both the Duchess and Antonio imitate the rites of marriage she shifts the gender roles during her own ceremony. Typically, the groom gives the bride a ring and does the majority of the speaking during the procedure as he promises to provide her with all of his possessions: "With thys ring I thee wed: Thys golde and silver I thee give: with my body I thee wurship: and withal my worldly Goodes I thee endowe" (The First and Second Prayer Books 254). The Duchess, however, gives Antonio her wedding band from her previous marriage and bestows all of her possessions to him: "You may discover what a wealthy mine / I make you lord of" (1.1.430-431). Moreover, she acquits him of any debts he might have to her. Thus, it would seem as though the Duchess takes on the role of the groom. Similarly, the The First and Second Prayer Books require the bride to state her willingness to obey, honor, and serve her husband whereas the groom is not required to make a similar vow to his wife. The submission trope is further emphasized by references to the writings of Saints Peter and Paul at the conclusion of the ceremony: "Ye weomen submit yourselves unto your own husbandes as unto the lord: for the husband is the wives head, even as Christ is the head of the church" (The First and Second Prayer Books 258) and "Saincte Peter also doeth instructe you very godly, thus saying, Let wives be subject to theyr owne husbandes" (The First and Second Prayer

Books 258). While the couple's nuptials makes no direct reference to this aspect of the church's ceremony, it is relevant to the couple's unequal social standing. Thus, the notion of submission is switched in the play's nuptials as Antonio is and remains employed by the Duchess, which – coupled with her position as a ruler – suggests that Antonio must be in service and obedient to his wife.

Antonio appears to be aware of the anomalous nature of his abbreviated and somewhat emasculated role: “These words should be mine, / And all the parts you have spoke, if some part of it / Would not have savored flattery” (1.1.473-474). Thus, while Antonio is conscious of their role reversal, he appears to recognize that it is a necessity given their disparate backgrounds. Similarly, the Duchess understands that her role in enacting the courtship is unusual for her gender, but typical for a person in her position: “The misery of us that are born great! / We are forced to woo, because none dare woo us” (1.1.442-443). While the unequal positions of the Duchess and Antonio force the irregularity of their courtship, they attempt to ground their relationship in styling their nuptials after the standards set by the religious institution. There are a number of references to dogmatic beliefs surrounding the sacred nature of marriage; Antonio refers to the primacy of marriage and its correlation with religion: “Begin with that first good deed began i'th'world / After man's creation: the sacrament of marriage” (1.1.387-388) and the couple kneels during their own ceremony while calling upon heaven to bless their union. However, even though the couple relies on the ritualistic aspects of ceremony, they also subvert the authority of it through their alterations. The Duchess acts both as groom and priest by taking on the role of courting Antonio and giving him the ring while promising him her earthly possessions. She appropriates the role of a priest presiding

over the nuptials by organizing the ceremony and calling upon heaven to bless and solidify their union. The priest serves as an intermediary between the couple and God, and thus, the Duchess makes use of the priest's role in order to grant the marriage ceremony legitimacy. The Duchess's enterprising behavior indicates that, in order to advance a union with Antonio, she must create a setting in which she is the authority, not the patriarchal rule of the Church.

The couple invokes the rituals of the Church during their nuptials, but by decontextualizing those rituals, they divest the Church and societal conventions in general of their control over their actions. For example, the Duchess provides for a legal avenue for legitimizing her marriage. The Duchess arranges the setting to create a legally binding marriage contract with Antonio – a sponsalia per verba de praesenti, which is a marriage contract that is established when a couple exchanges vows at the moment. Her servant, Cariola, hides behind the curtains to serve as the required witness in order for the contract to be legally binding. While the couple's vows fall in the category of a de praesenti contract, these spoken agreements were supposed to be solemnized in a church (Safley 65). In fact, de praesenti marriages did not confer physical rights of marriage. Consummated but unsolemnized marriages were extremely rare because the action was deplored and subject to penalties including public penance and even excommunication (Ranald "As Marriage Binds" 76). However, while the Duchess utilizes the contractual aspect of marriage to authorize her actions, she inevitably subverts the legal apparatus as well by refusing to solemnize the ceremony prior to the consummation of the marriage. Immediately following the agreement between the couple, the Duchess audaciously leads Antonio into her bedroom: "I would have you lead your fortune by the hand / Unto your

marriage-bed” (1.1.496-497). Thus, the Duchess further undermines the authority of the Church and social conventions with the enactment of her own will.

In fact, after the couple parodies some of the ceremonial facets of a religious wedding, the Duchess suggests that what she and Antonio have done is equivalent to the church’s authority: “What can the church force more?” (1.1.489). In fact, the Duchess stresses her authority over the church’s ability to rule her private life: “How can the church build faster? / We now are man and wife, and ‘tis the church / That must echo this” (1.1.493-494). The Duchess, then, is attempting to create an insular world in which neither the Church nor society has the power to interfere with her demands. The symbolism invoked by pervasive references to circles and rings in the marriage scene highlights the privacy of a world that is created between Antonio and the Duchess: “There is a saucy and ambitious devil / Is dancing in this circle” (1.1.412-413) and “And may our sweet affections, like the spheres, / Be still in motion –“ (1.1.483-484). However, as a ruler seeking a private sphere, the Duchess is entering a dangerous world that eventually causes her to lose both her family and her ruling authority. Through Antonio’s cautious warning against conjuring a devil through their actions, it is clear that he recognizes the danger implicit in both a marriage of such unequal proportions as well as a prince seeking to have a private life separate from her position as a duchess. By parodying a Church ceremony, the Duchess is establishing herself as the arbiter of validating her behavior in place of the religious authority’s position as moral judge and she is situating her marriage within a private world.

Consequences of Denying Social Authority

Inevitably, the Duchess's bold strategy is undermined by an inability to prevent societal conventions from crashing down on their marriage. For instance, due to the secrecy of their marriage, the couple's children are not baptized, and it is this divergence from prescribed religious conventions that allows her brothers to obliterate the privacy of her self-determined world. Ferdinand indicates to the Cardinal that the Duchess has not baptized her children: "I make it a question / Whether her beggarly brats were ever christened" (3.3.64-65), which allows the brothers to revoke her princely authority: "Cardinal: I will solicit the state of Ancona / To have them banished" (3.3.66-67). The very public scene of the couple's banishment immediately follows the Aragonian brothers' discussion. The public nature of the scene is underscored by the description of two pilgrims and stands in contrast to the privacy of the wedding ceremony. The excommunication scene demonstrates that the official Church – now in its Catholic form – has reasserted its control over the lives of the characters: "the Pope, forehearing of her looseness, / Hath seized into th' protection of the church / The dukedom for which she held as dowager" (3.4.32-34). The church's authority appears to supercede the Duchess's power as a sovereign as suggested by the pilgrims, who are the objective audience in this scene: "But I would ask, what power hath this state / Of Ancona to determine of a free prince?" (3.4.29-30). The Duchess then misjudges her own authority to both determine matters in her private life and to disregard the social conventions of her time. Thus, her attempt to evade Ferdinand's castigation by calling upon the authority of religious doctrine – "Do you visit me for this? / You violate a sacrament o'th' church / Shall make

you howl in hell for't" (4.1.38-40) – falls flat in the face of her previous subversion of its authority.

The Duchess's marriage ends disastrously because she miscalculates her power to maintain a private sphere as a public ruler (Peterson 58). She fails to consider her body as a means for losing power (Jankowski 95-96) and she places her private desire to marry Antonio is placed over her public status (Jankowski 90); the secrecy of the marriage further subjects her to loss of rule as her brothers are able to invalidate her reign because the public already views her as a strumpet (Jankowski 92). The conflict between the Duchess's private desires and her civic responsibilities is underscored by the fact that she ignores the public aspect of marriage. The public nature of marriage negotiations, ceremonies, difficulties, and punishments was widely recognized during Webster's era, particularly among the nobility. According to the The First and Second Prayer Books, the couple must participate in the "crying of the bannes" which requires that "First the bannes must be asked three several Soondaies or holye dayes, in the service tyme, the people beeyng presente, after the accustomed maner" (252). Thus, couples were required to announce their intentions publicly weeks in advance of their nuptials date. This contrasts with the immediacy with which the play's marriage ceremony follows the Duchess's courtship of Antonio. Furthermore, during the ceremony, it is important that the couple publicly declares their intentions before an audience (The First and Second Prayer Books 252). In addition, marriage rites were followed by large feasts that frequently ended with the "public bedding of the couple, with all the ancient ceremonies of casting off the bride's left stocking, and of sewing into the sheets" (Stone 197-198); often, this did not end the publicity surrounding a new bride and groom for, if either of

the two were a royal favorite, “King James would cross-question them closely the next morning to extract the last salacious details of the events of the day” (Stone 198).

Marriage ceremonies, then, were a deeply public, and, at times, invasive event.

Moreover, the marriage itself was the business of the community at large: public punishments existed for individuals who violated Church policies including public beatings in the church or marketplace and excommunication (Finch 194).

The public and political nature of marriage among the aristocracy is further evident in the case of King James’s involvement in arranging unions between Scottish and English nobles for political purposes. While prior to 1603, Anglo-Scot marriages were rare (Curran 56), King James saw political opportunity in initiating these unions, which represented a literal union between England and his home, Scotland (Curran 57). James’s participation in negotiating Anglo-Scot marriages is demonstrated by the union between Scottish James Hay and English Honora Denny. This marriage involved linking one of his court favorites, Hay, to a daughter of the English aristocracy. James’s participation included eighteen months of negotiating and bribing Denny’s father to convince him to acquiesce. Additionally, James granted Hay Strixton Manor and other lands while making him a baron for life in order to raise Hay’s position to further justify the match (Curran 59). Thus, the publicity surrounding the marriages among the aristocracy of Webster’s era demonstrates the irregularity of the Duchess’s use of subterfuge.

The Duchess’s rejection of the feudalism of arranged aristocratic marriages creates a precarious world for the couple at the Malfi court. The primary source of this threat to her power is the condemnation of her brothers should they became aware of her

remarriage. Ferdinand's threat to the Duchess discouraging her from a remarriage further illustrates the public nature of aristocratic marriage: "Your darkest actions – nay, your privats't thoughts – / Will come to light" (1.1.317-318). Her brothers' desire that she not remarry is linked to her presence in the aristocracy and the fact that, for her, publicity surrounding a marriage would be inescapable. Ferdinand's prediction comes true and the Duchess is forced to suffer as a result of her enterprising marriage. Her brothers are the main obstacles to her marriage because she has subverted the social hierarchy, which they are invested in, by relying on personal choice (Calderwood 75) rather than familial negotiations that controlled marriage. While the Duchess appears to believe that her role as a ruler and an experienced widow authorize her independent actions, her behavior is unconventional within the constructs of marriage negotiations, particularly for widows. Thus, her position as an autonomous ruler is cancelled out by her role as a widowed woman.

Widowhood and the Politics of Remarriage

Widows were a common subject of interest for Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatists, who explored issues surrounding their courtship and re-marriages. Frequent representations of widows on stage suggest their widespread presence. During the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, approximately forty-five percent of English women were widowed, many of whom at a young age. Further, remarriages during this time constituted twenty-five percent of marriages, which accounted for the highest proportion of remarriages until the late twentieth century (Clark 400). The frequency of widow remarriage is a point of concern for the Aragonian brothers as the Cardinal suggests:

So most widows say,
But commonly that motion lasts no longer
Than the turning of an hourglass; the funeral sermon
And it end both together (1.1.304-307)

The high proportion of widows who chose to remarry in the early modern era of widow appears to drive the brothers' concerns about their sister marrying for a second time. This paranoia causes the brothers to couch their warnings to their sister about remarriage in aggressive and subtly violent terms.

The Aragonian brothers' speech regarding their disapproval of a prospective remarriage for their widowed sister immediately precedes the marriage scene and situates her siblings as an opposition to the Duchess's desires. Throughout the brothers' seemingly rehearsed lecturing of their sister, they invoke a number of tropes consistent with ideology surrounding widows of the time period. Ferdinand's parting insult – "Farewell, lusty widow!" (1.1.341) – draws attention to the stereotype of the lecherous widow. The common perspective in Webster's era was that "as a widow, the Duchess would be all the more prone to fits of the mother because the uterus of a sexually inactive woman was more likely to marry" (Haslem 451). The Duchess's brothers, and Ferdinand in particular – consistently summon the lusty widow stereotype: "They are most luxurious [lecherous] / Will wed twice" (1.1.299-300). Further, the Duchess's attempt to justify widow remarriage by referencing the method by which diamonds attain value is resoundingly refuted by Ferdinand's statement: "Whores, by that rule, are precious" (1.1.302). His reference to livers – "Their livers are more spotted / Than Laban's sheep" (1.1.300-301) – is an allusion to a Jacobean belief that, anatomically speaking, the liver

was the seat of passion. The Aragonian brothers continue to allude to the lusty widow trope by using speech that is rife with references highlighting Jacobean medical opinions that connect appetite for food and desire for sex; specifically, the brothers invoke the attitude that female sexuality and reproduction are linked to digestion (Haslem 439). For instance, Ferdinand fears that the Duchess wants to taste “a kind of honeydew that’s deadly” (1.1.309), which underscores his “suspicion that female gastronomic and sexual appetites are dangerously linked” (Haslem 452).

The brothers also rely on the danger widows faced from sinister suitors to convince the Duchess to avoid remarriage. The fantasy of the “widow-hunt,” in which the younger sons of the gentry pursued wealthy, older widows was a common theme among Renaissance dramatists. Early modern depictions of the widow hunt in literature relate back to primogeniture issues in which younger brothers needed money to establish their position (Clark 400 - 401). Interestingly, Webster collaborated with Dekker on Keep the Widow Waking, a play that mocked the pursuit of a real life wealthy widow. This work presents the story of Ann Elsdon, who was kept intoxicated and sleep-deprived in order to force her into a marriage in which she lost all of her possessions through the fraudulent actions of her suitor. Clearly, a danger existed for wealthy, independent widows as the Cardinal suggests to the Duchess that, for a widow, “The marriage night / Is the entrance into some prison” (1.1.325-326). Ferdinand further emphasizes the danger to widows by suggesting that they are easily swayed by the doublespeak of suitors: “Variety of courtship! / What cannot a neat knave with a smooth tale / Make a woman believe?” (1.1.339-341). Thus, Ferdinand is distrusting of both his sister’s motives and the intentions of potential suitors.

The Cardinal and Ferdinand distrust the Duchess's judgment and motives based upon stereotypes of female sexuality, specifically pertaining to widowed women and their suitors. In several instances, the Duchess's behavior supports her brothers' typecasting her as a lusty widow. While wooing Antonio, she hints at sexual motives that, in part, underscore her desire to remarry: "This is flesh and blood, sir; / 'Tis not the figure cut in alabaster / Kneels at my husband's tomb" (1.1.454-456); furthermore, she uses a similar metaphor to justify to her brother the reasons for her remarriage:

Why should I,
Of all the other princes in the world,
Be cased up, like a holy relic? I have youth,
And a little beauty (3.2.140-144).

The Duchess expresses a desire to continue to be vivacious in widowhood, which encompasses remarrying and remaining sexually active. Moreover, like her brothers, the Duchess herself connects sexuality and ingestion during the course of courting Antonio. The Duchess mocks Antonio's reluctance to indulge in lust by teasing him with a metaphor that relates to his desire for food: "I have seen children oft eat sweemeats thus, / As fearful to devour them too soon" (1.1.467-468). Further, the Duchess extends the stereotypical connection between digestion and female sexuality when she voraciously eats the apricots Bosola has brought her. Bosola uses the fruit, which was believed to be an aphrodisiac (Haslem 454), to induce labor thereby proving she is pregnant: "For, but for that and the loose-bodied gown, / I should have discovered apparently / The young springald cutting a caper in her belly" (2.1.153-155). Bosola's instincts are rewarded when she goes into labor immediately after ingesting the apricots: "there's no question

but her tetchiness and most vulturous eating of the apricots are apparent signs of breeding” (2.2.1-3). The Duchess, then, often behaves in a manner that confirms the label of a lusty widow, who seeks continued sexual activity. However, Webster does not present the Duchess’s behavior as aberrantly violating cultural taboos.

According to Haslem, Webster “makes clear that she really is a lusty widow and implies that there is nothing in the world the matter with that” (457). Rather, Webster redirects the audience’s attention from apprehension surrounding female sexuality towards a more positive perspective on the Duchess (Haslem 457-458). For instance, Webster turns the stereotype of female appetite against the Aragonian brothers as the Duchess alludes to their ability to feed on her at her deathbed: “Go tell my brothers, when I am laid out, / They may feed in quiet” (4.2.227-228). Furthermore, she is depicted as sublimating her brothers’ control over her by making their desires her own: “when death seems imminent, she defies her brothers by making death *her* desire” (Haslem 458). Thus, while the audience is intended to view the Duchess as a vibrant, lusty widow, they are not to view the Duchess as Ferdinand views her – as a whore – because “a whore is a body, all lust without soul” (Kahn 251). Depictions of the Duchess’s happy and productive marriage and the very fact that she desired a partner rather than a lover clash with Ferdinand’s condemnation of her and with the stereotype of a whore.

While the pursuit and remarriage of widows was a popular theme in Renaissance plays, Webster’s Duchess counters the stereotype by becoming the pursuer rather than the hunted. Pursued widows were invariably at a disadvantage because they were subject to the whims and motivations of their suitors. The Duchess, however, pursues Antonio

because he is of a noble character and is a compatible partner; thus, choice provides the Duchess with a degree of safety. Widowhood was the only unencumbered status for women in Elizabethan and Jacobean England and, accordingly, the widows who were most likely to remarry had young children and were seeking financial security for their children. Conversely, women of wealth were the least likely to remarry (Clark 399 - 401); that is to say, women of wealth did not need to remarry because their financial security was already ensured. In this sense, the Duchess defies the tendencies of the time by choosing to remarry despite the fact that she was not financially obligated to do so. The Duchess's decision to remarry in spite of her secured status in terms of wealth and her position indicates that her choice is based upon the principles of companionate marriage. However, the fact that she is not only a female widow, but also a public ruler makes negotiating a private marriage within the political and religious frameworks of the era an insurmountable task.

The primacy of the marriage in the play and an analysis of the matrimonial scene and the repercussions of the marriage underscore the unnerving effect that cultural and economic transitions had on society in Webster's era. In effect, none of the characters is prepared for the kind of irregular marriage that occurred between a ruling female and her commoner husband. Although economic variations began to influence social and religious transitions in Renaissance England, the consequences that the Duchess and Antonio face as a result of their irregular marriage is indicative of the vulnerability of this kind of marriage in the cultural, political, and religious setting of the time period. While the Duchess attempts to establish a suitable marriage to Antonio by using the idea of a companionate marriage, the independence of widowhood, and the authority of her role as

a sovereign, she is unable to navigate the environment of secretive intrigue that her actions have created.

CHAPTER THREE: A DESTABILIZED SOCIETY

Marriage's Role in Social Stability

The incongruity of Antonio and the Duchess's social position would preclude acceptance of their nuptials in a society as class-conscious as that of the Jacobean. That is, in spite of the fact that English society was transitioning during the early seventeenth century, inter-class marriages remained uncommon (Stone 187); in fact, while the middle class hoped to use marriage to members of the peerage as a vehicle for social mobility, 91 percent of the marriages among the nobility occurred within the gentry (Hexter 36). This statistic is due in large part to the predominance of parental authority in arranging marriages for their offspring (Stone 184). Moreover, the position of duke and its feminine form – duchess – is distinct from the peerage in and of itself. As a title, duke/duchess was reserved for members of the royal family, and the King's Justices, the most authoritative source of legal opinion, drew a fine distinction between nobility and the monarchy's relatives, or the so-called "blood royal." Within the blood royal, marriage was used to bring economic and political benefits that often resulted in alliances with other countries (Cannon 248-255). Therefore, the position of Webster's Duchess suggests her responsibility to her family in terms of her marital status. Her coded response to Ferdinand's false claim that he plans to arrange for the Count Malateste to become her spouse is revealing: "A count? He's a mere stick of sugar candy; / You may look quite through him. When I choose / A husband, I will marry for your honor" (3.1.42-44). In fact, the Duchess falsely implies her subordination to the patriarchal nature of arranged marriages in an attempt to prevent Ferdinand from discovering her unsanctioned marriage.

In contrast to the more feudalistic and Catholic nature of aristocratic unions (Kennedy 116), Protestant religious texts began to encourage an ideology in direct conflict with familial authority – choice. As a result, parents began to provide their children with the opportunity to veto matches their parents had arranged (Stone 186-187). The emerging Protestant ideology that trumpeted the idea of companionate marriage, then, conflicted with the established practices of the nobility. The drama of Renaissance England encapsulates the anxieties surrounding the contracting of engagements without social license or parental permission, particularly with respect to women (Green 1085). The socially unequal match between the Duchess and Antonio acts as a catalyst that destabilizes relationships and time-honored social practices and conventions. The play’s depiction of the downward spiral into chaos is brought about by a strict society’s inability to handle the Duchess’s re-appropriation of conventions and shifting ideologies in order to create an environment that authorizes her astonishing choice in partners.

In Renaissance England, social stability was maintained by precedence and deference and acceptance of the legitimacy of degree, priority, and place (Hexter 31). Marriage as a societal convention was utilized to maintain certain standards that often correlated with preserving rank and position among the aristocracy. Fundamentally, marriage is part of a “total social system, and is always tied into economic and political arrangements” (Hall 123). Despite their interest in companionate marriage, many Protestant texts continued to emphasize the traditional view of marriage. William Perkins summarizes the five reasons for marriage in his pamphlet, Christian Oeconomie. For example: marriage has its origin with Adam and Eve before the fall from Eden; it remedies loneliness; it is an institution of God; it serves as a vehicle to populate Earth;

and it is the primal social unit (Johnson 430). Marriage is a further source of societal restrictions as evidenced by its role as a preventative measure against fornication. Similarly, its position as the “primal social unit” signifies its function in maintaining economic and social position as well as establishing familial authority. Thus, to Jacobean society, the Duchess does not simply invalidate religious dogma by avoiding a church-sanctioned wedding, she violates codes of behavior, which dictated loyalty to familial objectives and social station. The ensuing disorder in the acts following the marriage underscores the characters’ difficulty with managing the “new world” (3.2.113) that the Duchess has established with her nuptials.

Antonio’s position in the Duchess’s household is significant considering the possibilities for promotion available to stewards during the time. As a prime example of the potential for upward mobility, effective stewards often acted as an interface between classes and were able to elevate their position in society through competent management of their employers’ households (Correll 74-75). However, there were clearly prescribed avenues for advancement, and marriage to a duchess was not in the realm of possibility for stewards (Cannon 256). Inevitably, Antonio is not prepared to navigate the courtly world that he is introduced to through his wife (Whigham 183). Their marriage, then, compromises their ability to function in such a stratified society.

Antonio’s Role as Husband and Servant

The scene relating the couple’s nuptials suggests that Antonio is ill equipped to engage in courtly intrigue or to complement a wife of superior station. While the Duchess is firmly in control of the ceremony, Antonio not only takes on a diminished and, thereby emasculating role, in the procedure; he also expresses concern for the

censure of her brothers: “But for your brothers?” (1.1.469). His apprehension about her family leads her to attempt to allay his fears:

All discord, without this circumstance

Is only to be pitied and not feared.

Yet, should they know it, time will easily

Scatter the tempest (1.1.470-473).

The Duchess’s comforting words further establish her dominance within the relationship; Antonio, of course, is not in a position to discount her brothers. Both her arrangement of the nuptials and her view of Antonio’s naïveté surrounding the dynamic of her position as sibling and ruler indicate that she is in control of the situation. Admittedly, Antonio’s reservations regarding the Aragonian brothers are well founded and likely based upon his observations of their corrupt and unscrupulous behavior, which he alludes to at the beginning of the first act. However, his anxiety is woven throughout the rest of the play and often acts as an impediment to the couple’s ability to maintain their lifestyle.

Throughout the remainder of the play, Antonio appears uncomfortable in his sudden rise in status. He is keenly aware of and insecure about the suspicions emanating from the Malfi general public, which he relates to Delio: “They do observe I grow to infinite purchase / The left-hand way, and all suppose the Duchess / Would amend it if she could” (3.1.28-30). His understanding of the people’s opinion of him demonstrates his tenuous position; the Duchess is respected because of her rank while, as merely a steward, he is expendable. Clearly, there is a sense of insecurity regarding his unequal marriage and he is consistently paralyzed by this apprehension. For example, preceding the Duchess’s very public labor pains brought on by Bosola’s manure-ripened apricots,

he banters with the Duchess about French trends. Yet, when the Duchess goes into labor immediately after this discussion, he is silent and the Duchess is compelled to handle the situation on her own as she rushes to her bedchamber. Furthermore, it is Delio, and not Antonio, who shrewdly proposes to Antonio a ruse that would excuse the Duchess's absence during childbirth and her recuperation by placing blame upon Bosola: "Give out that Bosola hath poisoned her / With these apricots. That will give color / For keeping her close" (2.1.172-174). Antonio's response – "I am lost in amazement. I know not what to think on't" (2.1.178) – is particularly revealing of his inability to cope with courtly intrigue. Additionally, after the birth, Antonio inadvertently drops his newborn son's horoscope in front of Bosola, which confirms the spy's suspicions. Antonio consistently demonstrates his distrust of Bosola – "This mole does undermine me" (2.3.14) – and, thus, his carelessness in front of him is all the more reprehensible in light of the vulnerability of the Duchess during and following the birth of their child.

Antonio continues to avoid authoritative action even as the secrecy of their union becomes more precarious. Moreover, when he does take action, it is misguided. After Ferdinand hastily travels to Malfi in light of Bosola's discovery that the Duchess carried and gave birth to a child, Antonio clearly recognizes the threat that Ferdinand's presence poses for his marriage: "The Lord Ferdinand, that's newly come to court, / Doth bear himself right dangerously" (3.1.19-20). Yet, even though Antonio is aware of the peril that Ferdinand's presence at Malfi signifies, he still attempts to spend the night in the Duchess's bedchamber. The ensuing playful dialogue between husband and wife is quickly overshadowed by Ferdinand's eavesdropping as the Duchess unknowingly reveals her unsanctioned marriage after Antonio has left the room. Ferdinand surmises

that the Duchess has remarried, which would not have happened if Antonio had kept his distance from his wife during Ferdinand's visit; clearly, his entrance into the Duchess's bedchamber with her suspicious and devious brother under the same roof is a strategic error on Antonio's part.

Further, once Ferdinand ascertains his sister's marital status, Antonio remains powerless to act or protect his wife. In spite of Antonio's consciousness of Ferdinand's ominous disposition, Antonio overhears Ferdinand's threats to the Duchess and does nothing until Ferdinand has left after claiming that he will not seek out her husband. According to Whigham, Antonio's claim that "would this terrible thing would come again, / That, standing on my guard, I might relate / My warrantable love" (3.2.150-152) is a "compensatory gesture" (184) because he acts only when the threat of Ferdinand is no longer present. Furthermore, given the opportunity to valiantly defend and protect his wife, Antonio instead follows her orders and escapes Malfi, which leaves the Duchess defenseless. The contrivance itself, which is a claim that Antonio had embezzled money from the Duchess, is both created and executed by the Duchess with Antonio following her lead. The Duchess's plan is implemented with apparently no input from Antonio; she informs him that "You must instantly part hence; I have fashioned it already" (3.2.163), to which he provides no response and, according to the stage directions, immediately exits following her directive.

Clearly, the interaction between the couple suggests the Duchess's authority within the relationship. The Duchess has the power to concoct a plan that accuses Antonio of fraudulently mismanaging her money, which deprives Antonio of the virtuous reputation he attempted to establish for himself: "Were there nor heaven nor hell, / I

should be honest. I have long served virtue / And nev'r ta'en wages of her" (1.1.439-441). Antonio has no recourse but to follow his wife's orders as she is both his employer and ruler. This relationship dynamic is in direct conflict with the cultural and religious attitudes of the time that established male domination within all aspects of society, including marriage; this fact is made clear by the typical wedding ceremony in which the bride promised obedience to her husband. Throughout the literature of the time, anxiety and uncertainty about unequal partnerships between spiritual equals is a prevalent theme that focuses on the contradiction between a wife's dominion over the home duties and household and her subordination to her husband (Kahn 249). Conversely, Antonio manages the duties of the Duchess's household and is below her in social rank, yet he struggles with his sense of the "traditional gender hierarchy, which enjoins him to dominate" (Whigham 185). The bedchamber scene in which the couple playfully joke about their relationship is riddled with allusions to Antonio's subordination; in particular, after Antonio asks to spend the night in her bedchamber, the Duchess refers to him as the "Lord of Misrule" (3.2.7), a character at courtly masques who has temporary authority to give orders to social superiors. Antonio's subordinate role to the Duchess, then, creates a dynamic within the relationship that Antonio finds difficult to navigate.

Finally, it is clear that Antonio's elevated position wears on him. Delio suggests the physical toll that the role has placed upon him: "Methinks 'twas yesterday. Let me but wink / And not behold your face, which to mine eye / Is somewhat leaner" (3.1.8-10). The friends' conversation establishes the time that has elapsed between the play's acts as Antonio informs Delio that he has fathered two more children by the Duchess. Delio recognizes that Antonio's "leaner" face is indicative of the stress induced by

continuing to conceal the marriage from the court, public, and her family. Antonio wistfully responds to Delio's comments on his altered visage:

You have not been in law, friend Delio,
Nor in prison, nor a suitor at the court,
Nor begged the reversion of some great man's place,
Nor troubled with an old wife, which doth make
Your time so insensibly hasten (3.1.12-16)

His response implies envy as he points out the many things with which Delio does not have to concern himself. Undoubtedly, the marriage's violation of cultural taboos weighs heavily upon Antonio as he continuously mismanages the politics of the aristocracy. Prior to his nuptials with the Duchess he is characterized as a morally upright voice of reason in contrast to the corruption of her brothers. However, following the union with his employer and ruler, he is portrayed as rather bumbling. His final miscalculation inevitably leads to his death as he erroneously believes that reconciliation with the Cardinal is possible in spite of the Aragonian brothers' death threats and Delio's warnings of the danger to his safety.

Distortion of Social Authority and Revenge

The Duchess's actions embody the ideology prevalent in the shifting religious and economic trends of Renaissance England. However, the collapse of the Duchess's world as a result of her marriage signifies the limitations of a religious philosophy that emphasizes compatibility and companionship as a purpose of marriage, which conflicts with other aspects of religious philosophy and its connection to economic and political customs that promote the preservation of hierarchical class structure through marriage.

The union destabilizes an already corrupt society and, ultimately, none of the characters is able to cope with the repercussions of the Duchess's cultural transgression. Thus, this one aspect of Protestant thought cannot erase the preconceived conservatism of most religious and cultural thought at the time. The astonishing death toll at the close of the play in which every major character has been murdered symbolizes their inability to inhabit the "new world" (3.2.113) that the forbidden marriage promotes. While Antonio has difficulty managing his role as both husband and subordinate, the marriage impacts the relationships outside of the claustrophobic insularity of their marriage.

A union with a low-born man has ramifications for the Duchess's family. Her position as a duchess underscores the dynastic and hierarchical aspects of her society because, as a relative to the monarch, she is a member of an elite class within the aristocracy. Her brothers certainly have an interest in her marital state, as a misstep could detract from the considerable political power, wealth, and influence that relatives of the king enjoy (Cannon 255). In fact, Ferdinand's paranoid concerns about blood ties are not so peculiar when examined through the lens of the politics surrounding the monarchy's relatives. This small group was linked by their blood connection to the king and they "had a self-conscious identity which made them widely regarded as a distinct estate within the ruling establishment" (Cannon 244). Thus, Ferdinand and the Duchess are connected not only by their relation to each other, but also by their relation to the monarch. After discovering the identity of his sister's spouse, Ferdinand rails against her transgression: "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" (4.1.123-125). The emphasis placed upon the shared purity and superiority of their blood harkens back to the

importance of establishing and maintaining blood relations to the central figure at the top of the hierarchical pyramid – the king. Thus, the Duchess’s relationship with Antonio pollutes not only herself, but her family as well according to Ferdinand’s perspective.

Ferdinand is already unstable and clearly invested in the hierarchy of his culture and, therefore, he is unable to accept his sister’s unsanctioned marriage to a household steward. Her blood ties to both him and the family of the monarch must be purged since the marriage contaminates their family. His behavior around his subordinates in response to which they are not allowed to laugh without his permission – “Why do you laugh? Methinks you that are courtiers should be my touchwood: take fire when I give fire, that is, laugh when I laugh, were the subject never so witty” (1.1.124-126) – immediately establishes his belief in his own superiority in the action of the play. This sense of entitled dominance is prevalent throughout the remainder of the play. Further, his disdain for Bosola and characters of a more base background is based in his aristocratic sense of privilege. His sister’s marriage to a social inferior is a violation so grave that he must remove the source of contamination. Yet, he claims to Bosola that he does not know his motivations for ordering the Duchess’s murder:

What was the meanness of the match to me?

Only, I must confess, I had a hope,

Had she continued widow, to have gained

An infinite mass of treasure by her death (4.2.281-284).

Certainly, the legal and religious clout of Ferdinand and the Cardinal would have provided sufficient authorization to seize her wealth without necessitating her assassination; in fact, the banishment ceremony at Ancona appears to be a symbolic

annulment of their marriage as the Cardinal vehemently rips off and discards the Duchess's wedding band. Consequently, Ferdinand's alleged financial motive for the murder of his sister falls flat in the face of the overwhelming evidence pointing to the contrary.

His aristocratic insularity notwithstanding, his execution order is not sanctioned. In fact, he admits that the assassination is illegal:

Was I her judge?

Did any ceremonial form of law

Doom her to not-being? Did a complete jury

Deliver her conviction up i'th' court?

Where shalt thou find this judgment registered

Unless in hell? (4.2.300-305).

Like his sister's marriage ceremony, the murder of the Duchess is not endorsed by social convention. However, Ferdinand attempts to provide the same degree of mock ceremony that is prevalent in the marriage scene in the first act. While the Duchess distorts the prescribed nuptials script of the Anglican Church to lend a degree of authority to the marriage, Ferdinand similarly twists legal doctrine in order to provide approval of his plans for his sister. His guilty references to the absence of a jury and a court-sanctioned conviction invoke the importance of social structures in maintaining order. While Ferdinand attempts to ground the Duchess's punishment in the authority of legal conventions, he ultimately fails to attain endorsement of his sinister plans because his behavior conflicts with the customs he invokes.

Interestingly, the dialogue indicates that Ferdinand meets his imprisoned sister at her palace in darkness; he explains to her that “This darkness suits you well” (4.1.30), which is an allusion to her covert wedding ceremony. The clandestine nature of her nuptials is mimicked by the secrecy of her trial and execution. Ferdinand directs these proceedings, which occur in the dark both literally and metaphorically; the Malfi constituents are oblivious to their Duchess’s plight. Additionally, the lack of light in the scene invokes a contrast with the proverbial light of justice and truth. As with marriage ceremonies, a cornerstone of the judicial system is the public nature of the event. In essence, the requirement for public awareness of court proceedings is based on the interest of justice and avoiding the kind of tyrannical judgments that Ferdinand enacts against his sister. The type of marriage ceremony utilized by the Duchess and Antonio – sponsalia per verba de praesenti – requires a witness in order to validate it (Ranald “As Marriage Binds” 76); as a legally binding contract, the witness was also necessary to ensure that one party did not attempt to invalidate the marriage commitment, which became a concern during the time as evidenced by the cases argued in the ecclesiastical courts (Safley 70). Ferdinand and the Duchess employ servants to serve as witnesses, who are bound by their subjected status to participate in the respective ceremonies; the Duchess has Cariola hide behind the draperies, while Bosola is Ferdinand’s agent and inevitably carries out his malevolent plans.

In the Duchess’s mock trial, Ferdinand acts as her judge and jury. He raises evidence against her as he cites the law to claim that her children are illegitimate because her marriage was not presided over by the Church: “our national law distinguish[es] bastards / From true legitimate issue” (4.1.36-37). The Duchess responds with the

assertion that his actions “violate a sacrament o’th’ church” (4.1.39), which is perhaps a perfunctory justification given her earlier disregard for ecclesiastical requirements regarding her marriage. Ferdinand’s response indicates that he has already made up his mind and no opposing arguments will change it: “It had been well / Could you have lived thus always, for indeed / You were too much i’th’light” (4.1.40-42). His response further emphasizes that her chief transgression is dishonoring her aristocratic position by taking an inferior spouse. Additionally, the fact that Ferdinand’s pun rests on the Duchess’s actions being “public” and too wanton accentuates his belief that her noble position is undermined socially by her liaison with Antonio.

Ferdinand’s self-imposed role as judge and jury of his sister inhibits justice because he has determined his sister’s guilt and punishment prior to her capture. Therefore, even though the ceremonial trial and punishment of the Duchess parallels the functions and procedures of the judicial system, Ferdinand divests this ritualistic retribution of any sense of justice by departing from the stipulated rules of the legal system. The penalty imposed upon the Duchess by her brother is particularly gratuitous. Ferdinand not only seeks to end her existence, but prior to her execution, he attempts to annihilate her emotionally as well; he intimates to Bosola that his aim is “To bring her to despair” (4.1.118) after the spy questions his motives for making her believe that both her husband and children have been killed. Even the emotional torment inflicted upon the Duchess is rooted in social convention as Ferdinand brings the strict observances of courtship rules into play while seeking the Duchess’s psychological decimation.

During the Renaissance, courtship customs had clearly delineated avenues that were rooted in symbolic significance (Green 1091); O’Hara argues that “as the marriage

progressed along a line from courtship to church wedding, passing through various more or less clearly defined stages, so gifts and tokens marked that progression or served to confirm, accelerate, or terminate” the relationship (19). Ferdinand presents his sister with objects riddled with symbolic significance that mark the progression of his revenge scheme. For example, upon discovering her marriage, Ferdinand gives her their father’s poniard, which has the dual meaning of signifying the family’s disapproval of the match as well as suggesting the violence he intends for his sister, which Antonio correctly infers: “And, it seems, did wish / You would use it on yourself” (3.2.153-154). Further, Ferdinand bequeaths his handkerchief to his sister’s newborn son, which is certainly an ironic gesture. While “handkerchiefs are most visible in the period as love tokens” (Green 1090), they often take on more sinister symbolic roles: as a blood-stained handkerchief serves as a witness of murder in Kyd’s The Spanish Tragedy and possession of Desdemona’s handkerchief is compelling evidence of cuckoldry in Shakespeare’s Othello. Thus, in The Duchess of Malfi, it is not surprising that handkerchiefs and other symbolic love tokens like rings are more ominous signs. The handkerchief and the poniard serve as a prelude to the menacing designs of Ferdinand in the same manner as love tokens were used to progress courtships.

Ferdinand’s promises of revenge come to fruition as he hands the Duchess a disembodied hand, which he claims is Antonio’s: “Here’s a hand, / To which you vowed much love; the ring upon’t / You gave” (4.1.43-45). Ferdinand mimics the traditional courtship habits of token exchange with the presentation of the hand that is falsely attributed to Antonio:

bury the print of it in your heart.

I will leave this ring with you for a love token,

And the hand, as sure as the ring; and do not doubt

But you shall have the heart too (4.1.47-50).

He gives the Duchess the hand and promises that a more vital organ will follow – Antonio’s heart. Ironically, Ferdinand is employing a social convention that the Duchess avoided in her courtship of Antonio. The suddenness and the irregular nature of the marriage proposal in the plot do not permit a drawn out courtship in which prescribed customs are observed. From Ferdinand’s aristocratic perspective, the Duchess’s unconventional marriage destabilizes the societal elements of class stratification and familial authority in which he is so invested. Ferdinand’s use of social customs surrounding courtship and legal authority serve as an attempt to invalidate the Duchess’s actions. Thus, the torture and execution ceremony, which on one level parodies the Duchess’s “marriage,” is a confirmation of order and Ferdinand takes his cue from his sister; the punishment is highly ceremonialized because – in Ferdinand’s view – the Duchess’s marriage was a crime against society and the punishment, then, should be derived from social customs (Calderwood 82). Additionally, his use of love token imagery is a reminder of the prescribed traditions that she should have followed in courtship; therefore, Ferdinand’s metaphorical use of love tokens is an attempt to reject the Duchess’s prohibited courtship of Antonio.

Ferdinand distorts social norms while wreaking revenge on his sister in order to create a sense of social sanction of his actions in the same manner in which the Duchess’s wedding ceremony parallels church conventions. Ferdinand attempts to restore the

aristocratic order that he believes his sister's unconventional marriage has destabilized. Inevitably, a new type of order is restored through the actions of Bosola, who was employed by Ferdinand to enact his revenge. Significantly, Bosola becomes the avenger of the Duchess, whom he assassinates under Ferdinand's orders. Bosola comes to this role reversal because of the unconventional actions of his aristocratic superiors.

Ferdinand hires Bosola to spy on the Duchess because he does not trust his sister's motives. While Bosola is reluctant to participate in this subterfuge, he inevitably agrees to the employment – "I am your creature" (1.1.289) – out of a sense of his role as a servant; that is, within the economic context of early modern England, Bosola identifies his role as service rather than employment (Whigham 188). Bosola's explanation for carrying out deeds that he did not want to perform reinforces his investment in the role of service: "though I loath'd the evil, yet I lov'd / You that did counsel it; and rather sought / To appear a true servant, than an honest man" (4.2.331-333). However, while Bosola fulfills his end of the agreement, Ferdinand rejects Bosola's appeal for reward; in fact, while Bosola seeks his reward for executing his assignment, Ferdinand rejects him and places the blame for the Duchess's death on him:

Bosola: Let me quicken your memory, for I perceive

You are falling into ingratitude. I challenge

The reward due to my service.

Ferdinand: I'll tell thee

What I'll give thee –

Bosola: Do.

Ferdinand: I'll give thee a pardon

For this murder (4.2.291-295).

Thus, Ferdinand does not grant Bosola the preferment he seeks for his service and, as a result, “the central fact of Bosola’s life is ingratitude” (Wiggins 174) of the Aragonian brothers for his work: “Let me know / Wherefore I should be thus neglected” (4.2.330-331). Both Ferdinand and the Cardinal violate the norms of service and reward as the “relationship involves exploitation without commitment” (Wiggins 182) to Bosola. Consequently, Bosola chooses to take up the cause of revenging the Duchess’s murder. The attack that Bosola stages against his former patrons – Ferdinand and the Cardinal – allows the establishment of a new style of order. At the close of the play, the soldiers and courtiers – Pescara, Delio, and Malateste – establish Antonio’s son as inheritor of the duchy, which the Duchess was maintaining for her son with her first husband. The significance of this is twofold; first, it violates primogeniture requirements that would require the Duchess’s first son’s ascendancy to the duchy and, secondly, it symbolizes the fact that the title is inherited through the Duchess’s line, which allows the son of a low born man to ascend to the position.

The Duchess attempts to utilize religious and social customs in her wedding in order to convince Antonio to breach a cultural taboo. However, Antonio is not equipped to manage either the courtly intrigue or the unconventionality of the relationship. Similarly, Ferdinand bases the punishment of his sister on societal conventions in order to validate his revenge. However, the divergence from the cultural norms that lie behind these conventions creates a destabilized society in which servants like Bosola are

emboldened to take revenge against their patrons. This lack of stability allows a new order to be enacted, as Antonio's son is guaranteed the duchy.

CONCLUSION

The Duchess's marriage to her household steward is central to the action of The Duchess of Malfi. Webster's modifications to the previous treatments of the Duchess's life reflect Jacobean anxieties surrounding shifting economic, social and religious institutions. By marrying Antonio, the Duchess refutes Catholic, feudal views regarding the arrangement of marriage for political and financial purposes. Through her courtship and marriage of her steward, she utilizes freedoms brought about by the emerging market economy as well as a Protestant religious philosophy, which emphasized companionship instead of arranged, politically convenient marriages. In both cases, Webster's Duchess miscalculates the ability of a woman of the aristocracy to violate a cultural taboo.

While the Duchess enacts her own agency through clever and enterprising ways, she is not able to maintain her marriage and superior position in the face of such strong opposition to her will. Thus, Cariola's fears about her Duchess – "Whether the spirit of greatness or of woman / Reign most in her, I know not, but it shows / A fearful madness. I owe her much pity" (1.1.505-507) – foreshadow the results of her daring attempt to establish a private sphere in which her class does not dictate her actions. Ferdinand and the Cardinal exploit their power to undermine the Duchess. They make use of the religious institutions – of which the Cardinal is a leader – to weaken the Duchess's authority as they annul her marriage and depose her at Ancona after determining that her children were not baptized. Similarly, Ferdinand utilizes his roles as an aristocrat and a judge to give credence to the trial, torture, and execution of his sister. The brothers, thus, employ the conventions that the Duchess has repudiated with her marriage to Antonio in order to strip her of authority and agency. Yet, in the face of losing everything, the

Duchess maintains her independence by refusing to submit to her brothers' will as she denies madness and wishes for her own death.

While Webster underscores the instability that religious and economic transformations can have on society, the Duchess and her steward ultimately symbolize the possibilities and limitations provided by that change.

NOTES

¹ John Webster, The Duchess of Malfi, 5.3.2, English Renaissance Drama: A Norton Anthology, Ed. David Bevington (New York: Norton 2002). References to The Duchess of Malfi are to this edition and are cited in the text.

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