Catholic and Protestant Widows in *The Duchess of Malfi*

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The Duchess of Malfi is about the secret marriage of a widow, the subsequent birth of her three children, her persecution, imprisonment and murder by her two brothers, and finally the retribution exacted from those brothers by their own consciences and by an avenger, a courtier formerly loyal to them. Adding resonance to this "action" are the royal blood and leadership roles of villains and protagonist, and a confrontation of values that underlies the dramatic conflict. The relation of these values to character and action is a fascinating aspect of the play, for *The Duchess of Malfi*, along with other tragedies of the period, is generated from and speaks to the transitional nature of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English society. Understanding this relationship is complicated by the twofold task of penetrating the confusions of a society in flux and determining the equally complex manner in which drama utilizes those confusions. In an attempt to understand how this process works, this paper has isolated a single issue – widowhood – which is both sensitive to changing values and significant in the play.

For a time, the widowhood and remarriage of the Duchess occupied critical examination of her character and function in the play. While the issue was considered resolved twenty-five years ago, a brief review of the controversy can help define the terms guiding the present discussion. One argument was that the Duchess could be faulted for remarrying, a violation of social norms for widows which was exacerbated by the secrecy of the match and the lower rank of her husband. Critics cited contemporary sources, both literary and non-literary, to demonstrate that remarriage was discouraged. One of the more compelling sources was the Overburyan "characters" of the virtuous widow (who remains chaste) and the ordinary widow (who remarries), now known to have been written by Webster himself.¹ In a rebuttal published in 1956, Frank Wadsworth demonstrated that other contemporary materials endorsed remarriage for widows; he argued that both views were tenable

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during the Renaissance and, as analysis of Webster's alterations of his primary source reveals, the dramatist clearly intended the Duchess to be regarded favorably.²

The debate rested at this point. Yet the issue of the Duchess' widowhood bears re-examination, for the significance of the fact that the question arose at all has not been understood. Confusion occurred among the critics because Webster in fact relied upon both attitudes toward the widow, each of which was current at the time, as one aspect of the crucial thematic and structural juxtapositions of his play. While it is not possible to separate these attitudes definitively, some broad distinctions do seem viable. Determining how Webster utilized these distinctions in the construction of the conflict shaping *The Duchess of Malfi* will clarify his tragic vision.

During the sixty years preceding the appearance of the play, there began a profound re-evaluation of the nature of matrimony and the family and of their function in society. The impetus for such a change was variously religious, social and economic, and the vast amounts of material published on marriage testify to the range, sometimes even the incoherence, of opinion that existed during this time of flux. Reformed clergy, concerned to bring the idea and practice of matrimony into line with changing orthodoxies, pursued the most systematic examination of the subject in handbooks that combined theory with prescriptions for conduct. Their concept of widowhood, one of the recurring topics in such discussions, differs substantially from that of earlier and contemporaneous Roman Catholic writers.

The Roman Catholic view, based upon the teachings of Paul, particularly as interpreted by the Church Fathers, offers to the widow two alternative courses of action. Ideally she should remain chaste – a Pauline concept that appears intact in the counsel of one late fifteenth-century writer: "widowhede ought to be kept holyly" unless the woman is young and unable to "contain."³ This idea is discussed at length in *Instruction for a Christen Woman*, written by the Spanish humanist Juan Luis Vives while he was in the court of Henry VIII. Vives has been found to be moderately tolerant of remarriage;⁴ however, his long discussion of decorous behavior for widows, appropriated in part from St. Jerome, reveals his unmistakable opposition to such a practice:

For to condemne and reprove vtterly second mariages, it were a point of heresy. Howe be it that better is to absteine than mary agayne is not only counsailed by Christiane purenes, that is to saye, by diuyned wisdomed but also by pagan, that is to saie by worldly wisdomed.⁵ (sigs. Nn2^v-Nn3^r)

A widow should take Christ as "her husband immortall" and spend the rest of her life in devout seclusion. A good part of Vives' section on widowhood is concerned with orienting the woman to such an existence. His advice, directed toward removing all temptation from her life, includes such sugges-

tions as living with in-laws where there is "lesse cheryshyng and lybertee" and looking for counsel for herself and her children from "some aged man, that is past the lust of the world ..." (sigs. Mm4, Nn1). Protected by family or counsellor, she should

praie more intentysfely and ofter, faste longer, and be muche at masse and preaching, and rede more effectually, and occupy hir selfe in the contemplacion of those thynges that may mende hir liuynge and maners. (sig. Mm2)

Only at the end of this section does Vives discuss an alternative course of action, when he allows that the widow who is young and incapable of a life devoted to prayer and discipline should seek remarriage – counsel accompanied by the familiar Pauline exhortation that marrying is preferable to burning. Vives compels the widow to confront what he regards as the only genuine motivation prompting such a decision; listing the usual arguments advanced for remarriage, such as protection of property and lineage, he charges that all are merely rationalizations and insists (in a close translation of Jerome), "for none of you taketh an husband but to the ertent that she wil lie with him, nor except hir lust prick hir" (sig. Nn3^v). For this reason she should not marry a young man, who would be "wanton, hote, and ful of play" but a man "some thing paste mydle age, sobre, sadde, and of good wyt ..." (sig. Nn4^v).

Vives' discussion yields a concept of the chaste widow, whose attention is transferred from husband to God, and a contrasting portrait of the lusty widow who, because she cannot discipline her body, chooses the less desirable alternative and remarries. His advice is everywhere shaped by his view of woman as naturally lustful and incapable of self-governance, a condition previously kept in check by her husband (see, for instance, sig. Nn2^v) but now jeopardizing her spiritual and mundane well-being. As he cautions,

many be glad, that theyr husbandes bee gone, as who were ryd out of yocke and bondage: and they reioyse that they bee out of dominion and bonde and haue recovered theyr lybertee: but they be of a foolyshe opinion. For the shyppe is not at lybertee, that lacketh a gouernour, but rather destitute: neyther a chylde that lacketh his tutour, but rather wandrynge without ordre and reason. (sig. Kk4)

The dependence that is a given for the woman both before and after marriage should attend her in widowhood, when she is neither maiden nor wife.

Although Roman Catholic tracts on marriage were not commonly published in England during the later Renaissance, translations of continental works did appear which reveal that Vives' view of the widow remains essentially unchanged throughout the period. For instance, Fulvius Androtius, a Jesuit who wrote *The Widdoes Glass*, published in translation in 1621, insists that even the widow who is tempted to remarry by "disordinate

appetite" or because she is "very rich, or faire, or sought after by someone ... in high degree of Honor or state" but who resists and remains chaste cannot, in his view, be "worthily called a widdow. ..." He celebrates as ideal only the woman who relinquishes "al worldly impediments, [and] attend[s] only to the service of God contemplating him, and meditating on him day and night."⁶

Early Reformed writers explicitly rejected this type of counsel against remarriage. Thomas Becon, a well-known preacher of the second half of the sixteenth century, claims that second marriages were never disallowed "tyl the Deuyll and the Pope began to beare rule, whiche enuye no State so much, as the holy state of honorable Matrimonye."⁷ He insists that "God is no les the author of the seconde, thyrd, fourthe, &c. maryages, then of the firste" (fol. cccclxxvii). This sentiment is picked up by later handbook writers such as William Gouge who, several decades removed from the more polemical years of Becon, merely criticizes "ancient heretiques" who found remarriage adulterous. He declares that widows (and widowers) are "as free as they who were neuer before married," and that their love to their second spouse must be as complete as to the first – or better if there were defects in that toward the first.⁸

Protestant advocacy of remarriage is often accompanied by indication of the increased autonomy granted the woman who is a widow. In contrast to Vives' concern that she be flanked by elderly advisors is the counsel of an early Puritan named Andrew Kingsmill, who pointedly leaves the decision about remarriage to his sister:

as a well wishing brother [I] open my mouth, & vtter my mind vnto you, not that I mind to persuade or dissuade mariage with you, for therin you may best be your own iudge, for you know best where your shwe [sic] wringeth you: neyther need you any counsellor to bid you cut where it wringeth you. ...⁹

The possibility for independence appears, too, in the assumption that a widow will choose her own second husband, a change from the frequent stipulation in the conduct books that she defer to her parents for the first. Kingsmill advises his widowed sister to choose for herself in the *image* of the Lord (sig. K3) – in contrast to Vives' exhortation that she take the Lord for a second spouse. Assuming that she plans remarriage, Kingsmill directs the bulk of his counsel to establishing criteria that should guide her selection of a second mate. Another tract of the same period, *A Laudable and Learned Discourse* (1579), written by one I.R., contains similar advice for the author's widowed cousin. And William Perkins, the otherwise fairly conservative Puritan author of one of the more complete compendia on marriage, *Christian Oeconomie* (1613), bypasses the issue of remarriage altogether. He says only that while the widow can remarry without consent, it is nevertheless "fit and convenient" that she seek it, due to the "duty and honor" owed parents.¹⁰

The possibility of increased autonomy for widows is squarely addressed by someone identified only as T. E.; early in the seventeenth century, he wrote a book on legal questions pertaining to women which demonstrates a sensitive awareness of current restrictions along with a wealth of information about their legal rights. Promising that he will "play the Physitian" and alleviate the grief of widows, he asks them, "Why mourne you so, you that be widowes? Consider how long you haue beene in subiection vnder the predominance of parents, of your husbands, now you be free in libertee. ..." ¹¹ Such a view is in direct contrast to Vives' fear that the independent widow is a danger, at least to herself.

This comparison of Catholic and Protestant views of widowhood reveals substantial differences as to the advisability of remarriage and the ability of the widow to conduct her own life. ¹² These beliefs are predicated on contrasting, and competing, orthodoxies about matrimony. The Catholic position is a product of the patristic conviction, based upon the gospels of Paul, of the superiority of the contemplative and spiritual over the active and secular life; marriage is a necessary evil for those unable to "contain." As Protestants gained ascendancy they rejected such priorities, sometimes quite stridently; Becon, for instance, terms the vow of chastity the "dregges of Antichriste and a mere doctrine of deuylles ..." (fol. Dciii). The significance of matrimony extends beyond the nuclear family to society itself; it is celebrated as the preeminent institution, the first form of human society and "an hie, holye and blessed order of life" (fol. Dcxvi) that shapes and sustains social, political, and religious institutions. In an assertion echoed widely in Protestant tracts, Perkins declares that marriage has been "made and appointed by God himselfe, to be the fountaine and seminarie of all other sorts and kinds of life, in the Common-wealth and in the Church." ¹³

According marriage such a vital function in society is accompanied by a revised notion of what it means for the individual. Companionship, not prevention of fornication, is the concept that Protestant writers stress, even when their conventional list of the ends of marriage retains the time-honored order of propagation, prevention of fornication, and mutual solace. ¹⁴ Sex is enhanced in such a relationship, since it can strengthen bonds between husband and wife as well as serve its more traditional functions. Vives cautions against undue marital passion – "He is an adultrar wythe hys wife, who [is] so ouer excedyng and ouer hote a louer" (sig. Aa3) – a warning that appears throughout the period. Nevertheless, in the more progressive Protestant handbooks, not the danger but the pleasure of sex tends to be stressed. ¹⁵ Gouge, for instance, cites "due beneuolence," as it is called, as one of the most "proper and essential actions of marriage" – not only for preservation of chastity and propagation but to increase mutual affection. "Beneuolence" means "it must be performed with good will and delight, willingly, readily and cheerefully" (p. 222).

Attitudes toward widowhood are consistent with these distinctions between Catholic and Protestant views of matrimony. Advocacy of religious devotion for the widow by Catholics follows from their teachings about the superiority of chastity,¹⁶ as does their view that she should remarry only to prevent fornication. The elevation of the institution by Protestants similarly explains their endorsement of remarriage for the widow. However, while this theoretical distinction is quite clear in the handbooks, it is often obscured elsewhere by the inconsistencies that invariably attend periods of transition. (One symptom of the compatability of seemingly unfriendly opposites is the frequent republication of Vives' tract into the 1590s, and its sporadic verbatim appropriation by Protestant writers thereafter.) Many factors besides religion were involved in the creation of attitudes toward the widow; economic and social instabilities constituted formidable and shaping pressures during the period.¹⁷ Thus, the rather tidy polarity suggested in this contrast between the widows found in Roman Catholic and in Protestant conduct books does not hold up in other didactic tracts, which address practice as well as theory, or in the portrayal of the widow most often found in the literature. There, a much less decisive though equally consistent picture often predominates.

While these literary and non-literary materials are largely Protestant, a prominent influence on them is the Catholic double image of the widow. An example is provided in an acerbic handbook published in 1615 by a Puritan named Alexander Niccholes. Called *A Discourse, of Marriage and Wiving*, its advice to a man seeking a wife – that he avoid widows – provides an opportunity for an attack on such women. Lamenting bygone eras when widows vowed to remain single, Niccholes describes those of his day as women indifferent to their spouses and disloyal to their memories, women who in their eagerness to remarry “learne commonly the trickes to turne over the second or third” – women who are in fact in league with death itself. Extolling the widow who refuses remarriage, he says, “such a widdow couldst thou marry shee were worthy thy choyce, but such a one shee could not bee, because shee would not then marry” (E1-E1^v).¹⁸ Niccholes consistently acknowledges the inevitability of remarriage for the widow even as he excoriates those who do so. Thus the devout widow of Vives is a lost ideal and the remarrying widow but a pale progenitor of the avaricious woman described by Niccholes. Webster's characters of “A Vertuous Widdow” and “An Ordinarie Widdow” express similar sentiments. And the lusty widow, especially, appears frequently in Elizabethan and Stuart literature – in ballads, in plays (in Chapman's *The Widow's Tears* and most virulently in Marston's *The Insatiate Countess*).¹⁹ An apparent amalgam of Catholic and Protestant ideas of widowhood, the lusty widow provides support for the early critics of the Duchess of Malfi who found her remarriage one source of her culpability. The portrayal of the widow in this tragedy is, however, far more complicated than they have suggested.

A juxtaposition of Catholic and Protestant images of the remarrying widow informs Webster's portrayal of the Duchess and her brothers. But this juxtaposition is not a balanced contrast. His treatment of widowhood is responsive to the erosion of the influence of Catholic doctrine and related prescriptions of conduct in a postfeudal and self-consciously Protestant England. The Catholic view is not only affixed to the villains of the play but is perverted, corrupted. The Protestant view, on the other hand, found in the portrayal of the Duchess, is offered in its largest dimensions. And yet, reflecting the complexities of transition occurring in the first century of the Reformation, this pattern is significantly modified in the play's final vision.

The Catholic widow found in *The Duchess of Malfi* can be traced to the version of the tale appearing in *The Palace of Pleasure*. In Painter's narrative, the Duchess, plagued by "a certain vnacquaynted lust," decides she must remarry; after some deliberation she carefully chooses Antonio, falls in love and marries.²⁰ Although the Duchess is treated not unsympathetically,²¹ she is presented as acting predictably but unwisely. She conforms to the Catholic vision of the widow who remarries only if she cannot "contain."

In his tragedy, Webster shifts this image from the character of the Duchess into the fantasies of her brothers. It is exclusively in their imagination that all the trappings of the "lusty widow," as Ferdinand calls his sister, appear. He chides her, "Marry? They are most luxurious, / Will wed twice." The Cardinal adds that a widow's decision not to remarry commonly "lasts no longer / Than the turning of an hourglass – the funeral Sermon, / And it, end both together" (I.i. 325–6, 336–8).²² In one of those moments when Ferdinand reveals the wrenching anguish that drives him to murder his sister, he tells her "thou hast ta'en that massy sheet of lead / That hid thy husband's bones, and folded it / About my heart" (III. ii. 113–15), suggesting again the Catholic tendency to look backward to the first husband, rather than forward to the "seconde, thyrd or fourthe." Both in the bedchamber confrontation and in their last interchange, Ferdinand persists in seeing only lechery in his sister's actions.

Yet to say that Ferdinand's view of the Duchess as widow derives from Catholic tradition does not sufficiently explain even this limited aspect of his character. His peculiarly obsessive persecution of his sister suggests how Webster uses traditional if increasingly outmoded ideas connected with Catholic doctrine. Allowable independence for the widow is one issue on which the two religions differ, with the Catholics taking the more conservative stand. The Duchess' autonomy is a significant, though submerged, point of contention between her and her brothers. While they ostensibly grant their sister her independence when they depart early in the play, saying that her "own discretion" must guide her, they have of course already hired Bosola to insure continuance of the familial oversight traditional for the woman. "She's a young widow," Ferdinand informs Bosola. "I would not have her marry again" (I. i. 272–3). During her imprisonment, he tells the Duchess that she

has been "too much in the light" – and his persecution seems designed to strip her of all sources of her independence, to immobilize her. He systematically deprives her of kingdom, family and finally of life itself. While she is his prisoner, he threatens first her psychological and then her spiritual integrity (with the madmen designed to bring her to despair). He forces a kind of discipline upon her that resembles Vives' counsel that the widow occupy herself "in the contemplacion of those thynges that may mende hir liuyng and maners." As she kneels to await her death, she has been reduced to the Catholic image of the ideal widow who relinquishes "al worldly impediments" and attends "to the service of God. ..." Her journey to that point has, however, been engineered by the strategies of a brother who is a corrupt parody of the counsellor Vives advocated for the widow, a man sage, religious and "past the lusts of the world."

Both versions of the Catholic widow appear in the brothers' relationship with their sister. They consistently see her as the lusty widow, and in their persecution of her gradually reduce her to the posture of the devout widow. But while these images had considerable currency during Webster's time, they appear in *The Duchess of Malfi* only in perverted form, in conjunction with the play's villains. The heroine, the sole actual widow of the play, conforms to neither.

"This is flesh and blood, Sir / 'Tis not the figure cut in alabaster / Kneels at my husband's tomb ..." (I. i. 519–21). With this exclamation, any connection between the Duchess and Vives' devout widow is dismissed. Yet the wedding and the subsequent scenes depicting the married life of the couple establish the distance between the Duchess and Vives' sole alternative, the lusty widow. A gentle dalliance marks the Duchess' wooing (far different from comparable scenes in the plays of Chapman and Marston), and the couple's synchronized evocation of natural and cosmic harmonies as they wed expands the significance of their union.²³ Their marriage resembles neither the one reluctantly granted the young widow by Vives nor that envisioned by the Aragonian brothers. It conforms instead to the "companionate" marriage extolled by Becon, Gouge and other Protestant handbook writers. As critics have noted, the scenes between husband and wife bespeak quite ordinary domestic intimacies rather than grand passion.²⁴ The sexuality of the bedchamber scene is an integral part of the casual, affectionate badinage shared by husband, wife and maid. And the children, some of the few born during stage time, are among the last concerns of the couple as they part and of the Duchess before her murder. Such a relationship is far removed from the brothers' fantasies of the rampant sexuality propelling the Duchess, "vile woman," as widow, wife and mother.

The brothers' attitude toward the Duchess as widow derives from traditional Catholic doctrine; yet their actions, particularly their attempt to immobilize their sister, represent the perversion of that doctrine. The marriage of the

Duchess, on the other hand, conforms to Protestant counsel for the widow found in religious conduct books. This straightforward dichotomy shapes the underlying dynamics of the play, which dramatizes a fairly clearcut conflict between good and bad characters.²⁵ It also suggests that *The Duchess of Malfi* makes simple use of changing attitudes toward marriage and widowhood. In the final vision of the tragedy, accorded a leisurely exposition through Act V, this alignment is developed and even extended. However, there is a dramatic shift in its balance, so much so that ultimately a different sense emerges of how tragedy can utilize and reflect social tensions of the day.

In order to understand this pattern, it is necessary to go beyond the restricted issue of remarriage to look at the final significance of the Duchess' power. The key may be found in that crucial part of Protestant polemic, the insistence by tract writers that marriage has the power to determine the social and political well-being of society. As Becon declares, "the whole health and prosperyty of mankynde, of publique weales, of kyngdoms, and finally of all degrees may justly be ascribed to matrimony alone" (fol. Dcxvi^v). The tragedy offers a suggestion of this kind of power for the Duchess as wife and for her marriage; finally, however, it is attenuated, even eclipsed, by a competing dramatic vision.

The Duchess' role is established in the opening scene of the play, as Antonio articulates both the political ideal and the political reality that will govern its world. His fountain image initiating this description shows stability as spreading centrifugally from a strong ruler.²⁶ And his "characters" of the Aragonian brothers demonstrate decisively that they are a poisoned fountain, together corrupting both secular and religious institutions – an assessment verified when Bosola, refining on the fountain image, describes them as a "standing pool."²⁷ Antonio's character of their sister does not similarly concentrate on her institutional role but on her virtue and power as a person. He defines her exemplary energies in an image that, significantly, echoes praise for the "virtuous widow" of the Overburian character: "Let all sweet ladies break their flatt'ring glasses, / And dress themselves in her" (I.i. 204–5).²⁸

The cumulative impact of these opening portraits, which alike rely on an expanding movement from a powerful centre, begins to suggest the kind of authority accorded the Duchess in the play. She defies not only her brothers but the kind of society they represent, and she accomplishes this not by a head-on political confrontation but by the intensely personal acts of marriage and childbirth. Yet, while she functions primarily in her familial role, her remarriage transcends that limited sphere. Through it she establishes a value system that, while lacking social or political power, contains the potential for the restoration of order. It is independent of the corrupt institutions of her brothers; as the Duchess says as she weds, "What can the church force more?" (I.i. 538). "Within this circumference" it offers love (divine and mundane),

integrity, familial bonds and generational progression – in contrast to her brothers who promulgate sterility, corruption and hatred. Moreover, its influence extends outward. Thus, against a society that is notably Catholic and notably corrupt, Webster pits an alternative vision that is neither.

This pattern is worked out dramatically in two ways. The first involves the conversion of the representative courtier Bosola, a man avowedly dependent upon the court not only for his material well-being but for his moral orientation. Bosola is corrupted by the “angels” of Ferdinand and the Cardinal and reclaimed by the example of the Duchess. His task through much of the play is to discover her secrets; as he does so, he progressively learns not only about the existence of her marriage but about personal and political integrity. Informed by the Duchess of the identity of her husband, he exclaims

can this ambitious age
Have so much goodness in't, as to prefer
A man merely for worth, without those shadows
Of wealth, and painted honors? possible? (III. ii. 276–80)

The point here is not that Bosola's comment contains more Machiavellian bait than genuine admiration for his victim. In his paraphrase of the accepted humanist definition of nobility and political virtue, he states a truth for the audience: by her very marriage, the Duchess establishes a system of values opposing those of her brothers. That this same truth comes home to Bosola himself becomes clear in his explicit echo of these lines after the Duchess' murder. At once repelled by the ingratitude and cruelty of the brothers and attracted by the integrity of the Duchess, he announces his conversion to her cause and to virtue by casting off his “painted honor” (IV.ii. 336). His transformation illustrates the lesson of Antonio's fountain image even as it illuminates the particular power of the Duchess. For it is not as ruler that she converts him but as woman, wife and mother. By exploring the implications of the political ideals established early in the play through the Duchess' relationship with Bosola, Webster draws the link between private act and public good.

This link is demonstrated once again at the end of the tragedy. By altering his sources so that the surviving child of the Duchess' union with Antonio, rather than the son by her first husband,²⁹ inherits the throne, Webster suggests that it is this marriage that offers promise for the “renewed order” traditionally closing tragedy. Thus the Duchess' remarriage is not confined to self-indulgent parameters, as Vives would insist it must inevitably be. Rather, it offers the possibility of reforming the entire world of the play and, in so doing, demonstrates the institutional power of matrimony claimed by Protestant handbook writers.

Affirming the power of the marriage is not, however, the dominant thrust of

the tragedy, which propelled by the confusions of Act V, finally moves in a different direction altogether. Bosola's determination to rescue Antonio fatally and ironically miscarries, causing him to disavow all exemplary models: "I will not imitate things glorious, / No more than base: I'll be mine own example" (V.iv. 81-2). Though his commitment to virtue endures, he persistently sees the world as "a deep pit of darkness." Antonio's dying legacy to his son who will inherit the Duchy is the plea, "let my son fly the courts of princes" (72). Moreover, most of the act is engulfed by the self-torments and finally the mutual slaughter of the miscreants themselves. It is apparent that Act V depicts "a working model of the world of 'policy' unredeemed by human love" — that is, Aragon without Malfi.³⁰ Consequently, while the renewing powers of the Duchess and of her marriage are explicitly delineated, the long fifth act unquestionably allows the destructive energies of the brothers to dominate the play's final vision.

This vision of a stricken society does not conform to the Protestant view of the power of marriage to create and maintain order. In this respect, then, the alignment between marriage tracts and play clearly falters. For if the play were to maintain its original relationship to tract material, the corrupt society perpetuated by the brothers would be vanquished by the reforming energies of the Duchess and her family, a configuration that is posited but not pursued. Understanding what complicates this pattern will allow a more accurate assessment of the relationship between drama and society as it appears in Webster's play.

The most significant mediating factor is the play's genre. The appropriate dramatic vehicle for representing the Protestant insistence on the social power of matrimony is romantic comedy, where the marriage(s) of the protagonists can suggest, or be accompanied by, the reformation of society (as seen, for instance, in *As You Like It*). Following a different trajectory altogether, tragedy as a genre operates within constraints that are incompatible with this part of Protestant doctrine. Its conventions cast attention backward on the old society rather than forward onto the new. And *The Duchess of Malfi* modifies traditional tragic conventions, with a subsequent change in dramatic effect.

In scrutinizing the dissolution of an old society of value, tragedy celebrates the humanist *ethos* even while charting its destruction by policy, efficiency, and amorality, dramatic shorthand for early modern values and mores as seen through the conservationist proclivities of the genre. In a significant though subsidiary development, the villains are themselves vanquished, often by one another, so that the hostility of their values to prosperity for anyone is unmistakable. The order restored in the concluding scene generally does not bring back the lost humanist society, which indeed has seemed all but overwhelmed from the beginning of the play, but it does promise solid if uninspired governance. *The Duchess of Malfi* largely follows this pattern, except that it reverses the conventional orientation. For, as suggested by the

two kinds of widowhood and marriage found in the play, the humanist values are identified with Protestant doctrine, and policy and efficiency (most fully articulated in the speeches of Bosola) are identified with the older feudal and Roman Catholic values. Thus the time relationships are the opposite of what is traditionally found in tragedy.

This inversion profoundly affects the meaning of the play. Instead of celebrating a vanishing Elizabethan world order, it depicts the ability of the dying feudal order to threaten the power of the newer Protestant, early-modern society. The prolonged focus on the corruption and demise of the brothers and their society in the last act demonstrates the lingering dominance of an older society that is decadent in the sense that religious and social institutions remain only to pervert the values they once upheld. The significance of the Duchess and her values, established earlier in the play, is precisely delineated in its last lines. Unlike most tragedies, where the blood-line of the protagonists is extinguished with their death, *The Duchess of Malfi* concludes with the assurance that both the biological and the ethical legacy established by the Duchess' marriage will continue. This ending presents an image of the strength of the system of values that the Duchess and her family embody, but also of its tentativeness in a world where the old society retains formidable power. *The Duchess of Malfi* thus offers, converted into the dramatic idiom, a picture remarkably similar to that suggested in the texts concerned with widowhood and marriage. A fully articulated Protestant ethic competes with older Catholic views that remain influential, as seen in the continued popularity of Vives' *Instruction of a Christen Woman*, and, more significantly, in the perpetuation of the older attitudes in Protestant texts such as Nicholes' tract, Webster's characters of the widow, and in the popular drama.

Webster's play about a widowed Duchess and her remarriage relates in a complex manner to the shifting values of his day. Written during a period when all faces of the changing social mores were visible, it shows how the rich polarities found in tragic conventions of character, plot, and theme may be used to reflect the differing attitudes toward widowhood and marriage current at that time. In its allocation of Catholic values to the villains and Protestant ones to the protagonist, the tragedy not only chronicles the evolution of the changes, but expresses the anti-Catholic bias of a country that was self-consciously but tentatively Protestant. And the dominion of the "Italianate corruption" records the tenacity of social and religious values perceived to be bankrupt but stubbornly entrenched and threatening. In *The Duchess of Malfi*, Webster both exploits the instabilities of his day and discharges the tensions generated by them.

Notes

- 1 See Clifford Leech, *John Webster: A Critical Study* (1951; rpt. New York: Haskell House, 1966), p. 69, and M.C. Bradbrook, *Themes and Conventions of Elizabethan Tragedy* (1935; rpt. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1969), pp. 199–200. Critics have not noticed that the Duchess is no more like the “Ordinarie Widdow” than the “Vertuous Widdow.” Webster’s characters are based upon the conventional Catholic distinctions discussed below. His Duchess is not.
- 2 Frank W. Wadsworth, “Webster’s *Duchess of Malfi* in the Light of Some Contemporary Ideas on Marriage and Remarriage,” *PQ*, 35 (1956), 394–407.
- 3 Jacques Legrand, *The Book of Good Maners* (London, 1507), Book IV, Part 8 (first published by Caxton, 1487).
- 4 Wadsworth, p. 396; Lu Emily Pearson’s view that Vives favors remarriage is based upon a misreading of a passage appropriated from St. Jerome. See “Elizabethan Widows,” *Stanford Studies in Language and Literature*, ed. Hardin Craig (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1941), p. 127 and note.
- 5 Juan Luis Vives, *Instruction of a Christen Woman*, trans. Richard Hyrd (London, 1557). All subsequent quotations from Vives will be taken from this edition.
- 6 Published in a volume with Father Leonard Lessius, *The Treasvre of Vowed Chastity in Secular Persons*, trans. I. W[ilson] (St. Omo, 1621), pp. 229, 237. Nine years later, St. Jerome’s epistle advocating a chaste widowhood was published in English (in *Certaine Selected Epistles of S. Hierome*, trans. H. Hawkins [St. Omer, 1630]).
- 7 *The Booke of Matrimony*, in *Worckes* (London, 1560), I, fol. cccclxxvii^r. All subsequent references to Becon are from this edition. See also Henry Cornelius Agrippa, who criticizes those “who sayeth the grace of God is voyde in [second] marriages, mocking that sacrament, to which all honour, reuerence, and lybertie, is gyuen,” (in *The Commendation of Matrimony*, trans. David Clapham [London, 1540], p. 17^v) and Heinrich Bullinger, *The Christen State of Matrimonye*, trans. Miles Coverdale (London, 1552), p. 90^v.
- 8 In *Of Domesticall Duties* (London, 1622), pp. 186, 226. All subsequent references to Gouge will be taken from this edition.
- 9 Andrew Kingsmill, *A View of Mans Estate ... Wherevnto is Annexed a Godly Aduise ... Touching Mariage* (London, 1574), sig. 13^v.
- 10 *Workes*, trans. Thomas Pickering (Cambridge, 1613), III, 696.
- 11 *The Lawes Resolution of Womens Rights* (London, 1632), p. 232. The book was apparently written some thirty years before it was published. See Juliet Dusinberre, *Shakespeare and the Nature of Woman* (London: Macmillan, 1975), p. 97.
- 12 In *Doctrine for the Lady of the Renaissance*, Ruth Kelso makes no such distinction between Catholic and Protestant positions, perhaps because the bulk of her work involves tracts published in countries relatively untouched by the Reformation. See the summation of her discussion of the widow, pp. 132–5 (1956; rpt. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1978).
- 13 Perkins, p. 761. See also Becon, fol. Dcxvi^r–Dcxvi^v, and Robert Cleaver and John Dodd, *A Godlie Forme of Household Government* (London, 1612), sig. A7^r.
- 14 Just when Protestants began to emphasize the companionate function of marriage is increasingly a subject for controversy. Traditionally the Puritans have been seen as the innovators. (See Chilton Powell, *English Domestic Relations 1487–1653* [1917; rpt. New York: Russell & Russell, 1972], pp. 120–1 and William and Malleville Haller, “The Puritan Art of Love,” *HLQ*, 5 [1942], 235–72.) However, John Halkett has recently argued that Milton was the first to systematically stress companionship (in *Milton and the Idea of Matrimony* [New Haven: Yale UP, 1970], pp. 24–5, for instance.) While agreeing with Halkett that there is no discernible difference between Anglican and Puritan attitudes (pp. 13–14), I take the view stated in the text.
- 15 See Roland Mushat Frye, “The Teachings of Classical Puritanism on Conjugal Love,” *Studies in the Renaissance*, 2 (1955), 148–59.
- 16 Charles H. and Katherine George, *The Protestant Mind of the English Reformation 1570–1640* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1961), pp. 261–62, and St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (London: Burns Oates & Washbourne, 1932), XIII, Part II,

- Question 152, Art. 4, p. 115. The importance of this stance to Catholic views of widowhood is argued by Ruth Kelso: "That at the heart of Christianity, as it took shape in early times, there was something opposed to marriage crops out even more strongly in the problem of the widow than in the first consideration of whether parents should find a husband for their daughter or dedicate her to the church" (p. 121).
- 17 See Pearson, pp. 138–40, for a discussion of some of these pressures.
 - 18 Alexander Niccholes, *A Discourse of Marriage and Wiving* (London, 1615).
 - 19 A detailed study of the numerous English plays written during the Renaissance that contain widows, and of poetry and ballads on the same subject, may be found in Norman Weisman, *The Wooing of Widows in the English Drama, 1558–1642*, M.A. Diss. Columbia 1948. Many of the works discussed by Weisman sport lusty widows whose financial legacies left by their husbands are of greater interest both to themselves and to their suitors than is their sexuality.
 - 20 William Painter, "The Duchesse of Malfi," *The Palace of Pleasure*, in John Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi*, ed. John Russell Brown (1964; rpt. London: The Revels Plays, Methuen, 1972), pp. 176–177 (from the 1567 edition, reprinted in full here). The differences between Painter and Webster are analyzed in detailed by Wadsworth (pp. 399–401).
 - 21 Bradbrook, p. 198.
 - 22 All quotations from the play will be taken from the Revels edition.
 - 23 Critics fault the Duchess for disregarding her status in this *per verba de praesenti* wedding. See, however, Richard Hardin's discussion of the scene in relation to contemporary religious controversies about the use of ceremony. ("Chapman and Webster on Matrimony: The Poets and the Reformation of Ritual," *Renaissance and Reformation*, 16 [1980], 70.).
 - 24 Gunnar Boklund, "*The Duchess of Malfi*": *Sources, Themes and Characters* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1962), p. 95 and Inga-Stina Ewbank, "Webster's Realism or, 'A Cunning Piece Wrought Perspective,'" in *John Webster*, ed. Brian Morris (London: Mermaid Critical Commentaries, Ernest Benn, 1970), p. 172.
 - 25 Disagreement about this point has dominated critical discussion of the play. Although there is consensus about the iniquity of the brothers, the extent of the Duchess's culpability remains controversial. In addition to the charge of her indecorous remarriage, she has been accused of violations of degree (by James L. Calderwood, "*The Duchess of Malfi*: Styles of Ceremony," *Essays in Criticism*, 12 [1962], 133–147, reprinted in *Twentieth Century Interpretations of "The Duchess of Malfi,"* ed. Norman Rabkin [Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1968, pp. 73–84] and Rober R. Whitman, "The Moral Paradox in Webster's Tragedy," *PMLA*, 90 [1975], 894–903); of dereliction to her state (most recently by Joyce F. Peterson, *Curs'd Example: "The Duchess of Malfi" and Commonwealth Tragedy* [Columbia, Mo.: University of Missouri Press, 1978]; and of lying and subterfuge (for instance in Ralph Berry, *The Art of John Webster* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972], p. 110). While these charges are each anchored in the play, they are problematic and have to be qualified. (For instance Calderwood's argument, which offers one of the more trenchant criticisms of the Duchess, is troubling in that it does not consider how the malignant decadence of the world of degree that she defies affects the significance of her action.) Perhaps a statement such as Larry Champion's most fully captures the delicate balance of the Duchess's portrayal: "even though the Duchess is not morally flawed, her actions throughout the first part of the play constantly force the spectators to question her good judgement (in *Tragic Patterns in Jacobean and Caroline Drama* [Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1977], p. 143). What is clear is that her catastrophe develops not so much from her own weakness as from an action – her marriage to Antonio – that enrages relatives corrupt and powerful enough to seek retribution. The persistent "harmartia hunt" that has characterized analysis of the Duchess seems motivated by a preconceived sense of the conventions governing the portrayal of the tragic protagonist as much as by the character of the Duchess, who is more akin to Marston's Sophonisba than to Shakespeare's Lear. For a powerful defense of the Duchess, see Nigel Alexander, "Intelligence in the *Duchess of Malfi*," in *John Webster*, ed. Brian Morris (London: Mermaid Critical Commentaries, Ernest Benn, 1970), pp. 93–112. For a discussion of the differing dramatic conventions for tragedies with male and female protagonists, see my own "The Formative Power of Marriage in Stuart Tragedy," *Modern Language Studies*, 11 (1981), pp. 36–44.
 - 26 This fountain image, commonly found in tracts on governing (Revels, p. xxvi), turns up in marriage handbooks as well. See, for instance, Perkins, p. 761.

- 27 Alexander, p. 103.
- 28 The comparable passage in the character is "Shee ought to bee a mirroure for your youngest Dames, to dress themselves by, when shee is fullest of wrinkles" (in John Webster, *Works*, ed. F.L. Lucas [London: Chatto & Windus, 1927], IV, 39). For an interesting analysis of the constrast of this centrifugal movement of the Duchess with the circumscribing pressures of her brothers, see Paula S. Berggen, "Spatial Imagery in Webster's Tragedies," *SEL*, 20 (1980), pp. 295-303.
- 29 As Russell Brown points out in his notes to III.iii. 69-70, this son is mentioned only once in the play, and never in conjunction with the inheritance of the duchy. His presence does not appear to be meant to undercut the legitimacy of Antonio's son's succession.
- 30 Alexander, p. 109.