

**“INCESTUOUS SHEETS” AND “ADULTERATE BEASTS”:
INCEST AND MISCEGENATION IN
EARLY MODERN DRAMA**

by

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*To Amy, Owen, and Calvin.
Yes, it is now finally done.*

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INTRODUCTION

Incest and Miscegenation on the Early Modern Stage

In the second act of *Titus Andronicus*, the tribune Marcus, out hunting panther and hart in celebration of the newly crowned and married emperor, comes across his niece Lavinia, herself the prey of a much different kind of hunt performed earlier in the act. Finding her ravaged and mutilated – her tongue cut out and her hands “lopped and hewed” – Marcus can only make sense of her dreadful condition through the art of comparison: “Fair Philomel, why she but lost her tongue, / And in a tedious sampler sewed her mind; / But, lovely niece, that mean is cut from thee” (2.3.38-40).¹ This observation that Lavinia’s wounds parallel yet excel the violations done to Philomel leads him to declare, “A craftier Tereus, cousin, hast thou met” (2.3.41). The connections between the Ovidian tale of Philomel, Procne and Tereus have already been laid out earlier in the play by Aaron, who planned the attack and was the first to make the Lavinia-Philomel association, and we are thus strongly encouraged to read her plight through the lens of her classical counterpart’s. Yet the correlation between the two stories is far from exact, and Marcus, adept as he is at immediately recognizing the underlying narrative foundation at work here, proves less proficient when it comes to pinpointing the specifics of her assailant. To begin with, his identification of a singular Tereus, while understandable given his lack of knowledge concerning the details of the

¹ All quotes taken from the Arden Shakespeare, Third Series, ed. Jonathan Bate (Walton-on-Thames, Surrey, UK: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1995).

rape, appears suspiciously imprecise to the knowing audience, since Lavinia's rapists number not one, but two. More significantly, though less obviously, neither Demetrius or Chiron maintain any kinship ties to their victim. For in Ovid, Tereus is Philomel's brother-in-law, which makes his rape of her a clear act of incest that violates the second degree of affinity prohibitions that existed in both classical Rome and early modern England.

Critics have long noted that Ovid's tale, explicitly referenced some six times in the play, serves as the primary structural model of Shakespeare's drama. For instance Leonard Barkan, in *The Gods Made Flesh*, points out that the excessive violence of the play, which consciously and methodically supersedes that of Ovid, highlights what he identifies as the competitive mode of the narrative:

What is horrible in Ovid's Tereus story Shakespeare makes twice as horrible in *Titus Andronicus*. Not one rapist but two, not one murdered child but five, not one or two mutilated organs but six, not a one-course meal but a two. Just as Shakespeare reads Plautus's *Menaechmi* and twins the twins in his *Comedy of Errors*, so here he approaches a myth of competitive mutilation and adds another element of competition.²

When viewed in this light, the violence that dominates Shakespeare's construction of *Titus* logically demands that the play includes incest – or rather, something worse than the affinity incest in *The Metamorphoses*, like blood-incest (rape by an uncle, brother, even father) or perhaps double-blood incest (rape by an uncle-brother, or a father-brother). Yet none of that happens in *Titus*, and the omission of incest – one of the most taboo of taboos – stands out as all the more noticeable since it is the one crime that Ovid includes but that Shakespeare strangely excludes. So what happens to the incest in *Titus*

² Leonard Barkan, *The Gods Made Flesh: Metamorphosis and the Pursuit of Paganism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1986), 244.

Andronicus? Why is it left out? And once missing, how does this significantly change the text?

The key to unraveling these questions comes from recognizing a slight miscalculation in Barkan's math; Shakespeare ups the ante in *Titus* by having not two rapists but three, with Aaron, the mastermind behind the plot, being the additional figure. And Aaron, often referred to simply as "the Moor," an epithet that underscores his "barbarous" foreignness and his "Spotted, detested and abominable" (2.2.74) hue, bears a conspicuously different ethnicity from that of the pure and white Lavinia, "Rome's rich ornament"(1.1.55). In fact, both Demetrius and Chiron are likewise not Roman but Goths. While not marked by the same dark skin as Aaron, they are nevertheless depicted, like their Moorish companion, as barbaric outsiders who share many of his negative characteristics (lustful, deceitful, violent). These facts actually play into the configuration of narrative competition outlined by Barkan, though instead of out-Oviding Ovid with double-incest, the play instead renders the crime twice as horrible with what amounts to double-miscegenation: although Lavinia is physically raped and mutilated by the two Goths, she is ultimately raped by the machinations of the Moor. Thus what makes the rape in *Titus* all the more horrific is not just that Lavinia's mutilation supersedes that of Philomel, but that she is raped by that which is doubly-threatening: two different racial and cultural Others allied together. The incest found in Ovid has therefore been replaced by miscegenation in Shakespeare.

I will turn to *Titus* in more depth later, though I briefly mention it here since it represents such a striking illustration of the complex, sometimes nearly invisible, interplay between incest and miscegenation on the early modern stage – in this instance,

the erasure of one to foreground the other. As Lois Bueler and Charles Forker have noted, incest is surprisingly prevalent in early modern drama, appearing in no less than sixty early modern plays.³ Less conservative estimates, which include texts that do not directly deal with incest but can be interpreted to raise its specter (such as Shakespeare's *Cymbeline*, *King Lear*, *Measure for Measure*, *The Tempest*, and *The Winter's Tale*), easily add another twenty to thirty, which, remarkably, pushes the running tally to over 10% of all extant plays.⁴ These seventy-five plays cover every major genre – comedy, tragicomedy, pastoral, romance, history, morality, tragedy, revenge tragedy; stretch across the entire time span of the early modern period – 1559-1658; and include some thirty-eight dramatists, notably heavyweights as Dekker, Ford, Gascoigne, Lyly, Jonson, Marston, Middleton, Shakespeare and Webster.⁵ Although numbers by themselves only offer a crude measuring stick of significance, it is nevertheless perhaps something of an understatement to say that the impressive breadth and scope of incest's treatment shows a certain preoccupation with this issue.

But rarely is incest invoked in isolation. Instead it is often mentioned in conjunction with miscegenation and its perceived dangers and allures. Such a pairing indeed seems logical, as the two represent the extreme ends of the spectrum of sexual alliance. In fact, structural anthropology has long regarded the two as inextricably linked together.

³ Lois E. Bueler, "The Structural Uses of Incest in English Renaissance Drama," *Renaissance Drama* XV, ed. Leonard Barkan (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1984): 115-45. Charles Forker, "A Little More than Kin, and Less than Kind": Incest, Intimacy, Narcissism, and Identity in Elizabethan and Stuart Drama," in *Fancy's Images: Contexts, Settings, and Perspectives in Shakespeare and His Contemporaries* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1990): 141-68.

⁴ For the purposes of this survey, incest in a play can either be in the main plot or subplot, real or imagined/fictional, between affines or blood relatives, consummated or not, explicitly stated or strongly implied.

⁵ Of all the major playwrights of the period, Marlowe alone avoided the topic of incest. Forker hypothesizes that this was "perhaps because homosexuality, an alternative form of sexual nonconformity, engaged his attention more urgently" ("A Little More," 142).

Raymond Firth, in his classic 1936 study on the inhabitants of the tiny southwestern Pacific island of Tikopia, comments that:

the attitude towards incest has something in common with a popular, uninformed view about union of the sexes in the 'colour problem.' Here one meets with a comparable repugnance to the idea, the same tendency to put the objection on a 'natural' or 'instinctive' foundation.... It is often held that the very fibres of the being rebel against such a union, and that this rebellion is not the result of social conditioning but of innate biological constitution. Here, as in the case of the prohibition of the union of very close kin, is an irrational emotional attitude, developing from a set of powerful complex social institutions.⁶

If the incest taboo demands marriage outside the constraints of a certain group of related individuals, a corresponding taboo against extreme exogamy limits how unrelated these individuals can be, often ensuring that the spouses share a common racial, religious, and/or economic basis. As Judith Butler, commenting on the Lévi-Straussian model of kinship, states:

Marriage must take place outside the clan. There must be exogamy. But there must also be a limit to exogamy; that is, marriage must be outside the clan but not outside a certain racial self-understanding or racial commonality. So the incest taboo mandates exogamy, but the taboo against miscegenation limits the exogamy that the incest taboo mandates. Cornered, then, between a compulsory heterosexuality and a prohibited miscegenation, something called culture, saturated with the anxiety and identity of dominant European whiteness, reproduces itself in and as universality itself.⁷

Even though structural anthropology fails to address the vagaries of modern industrialized societies, such criticism proves less relevant when considering sixteenth and seventeenth century England. Given that marriage during the early modern period

⁶ Raymond Firth, *We, the Tikopia: A Sociological Study of Kinship in Primitive Polynesia* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1936, 2nd edn. 1957), 341.

⁷ Judith Butler, "Is Kinship Always Already Heterosexual?," *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 13:1 (2002): 14-44; 33. While Butler is not an anthropologist, her article, which looks at the question of gay marriage through the lens of kinship studies, does an effective job of summarizing major anthropological theories. For another overview of incest theories, see David F. Aberle et al., "The Incest Taboo and the Mating Patterns of Animals," *American Anthropologist* 65:2 (April 1963): 253-65. See also Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, trans. James Harle Bell, John Richard von Strummer, and Rodney Needham (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), esp. pp. 3-51.

was primarily based on an exchange system (dowries, arranged matches – especially for the ruling elite – and parental approval of spouses were the norm), such a framing provides a useful means of initially thinking about the relationship between early modern dramatic representations of incest and miscegenation.

A brief note on terminology: I define exogamy as any potential sexual relationship (not just marriage) that is not incestuous, since, by definition, if there is no incest then there must be exogamy of a sort. As for miscegenation, I employ the term rather loosely, as it can assume a number of different forms – class, religion, culture, and race. Indeed, often these categories overlap and are, especially the last three, nearly indistinguishable from one another during the early modern period. Thus, a miscegenistic relationship can be either a white Christian involved with a Turkish Muslim, a Protestant with a Catholic, or an aristocrat with a servant. As for the terms miscegenation, radical exogamy, and extreme exogamy, I essentially use the three interchangeably, though I tend to favor the first one.

Marriage in Early Modern England

In his poem “A Happy Husband” (1619) the Jacobean poet Patrick Hannay claims that “in human actions, none is of more consequence than marriage,” a sentiment that some modern social historians have now come to agree with: “the most momentous event in anyone’s life, apart from parturition and dying, was entry into marriage.”⁸ As David Cressy has shown, the act of marriage was not simply a domestic affair that affected only the bride, groom, and their immediate families; rather, it was a complex social process that, since it “assigned new privileges, advantages, and obligations...and conferred new

⁸ David Cressy, *Birth, Marriage, and Death: Ritual, Religion, and the Life-Cycle in Tudor and Stuart England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 6.

duties of status, authority, and dependency”⁹ outside the household, had consequences that extended deep into the community where the newly married couple lived. In essence, marriage was seen as a type of social maturation, a rite of passage that, upon completion, alerted neighbors that the couple was now prepared for community responsibilities that were either denied to or not expected of single persons. For men, entry into matrimony meant they became eligible for local office (as jury men, reeves or wardens) and were ready for the duties of paying assessments and taxes. For married women, they gained respect and recognition outside the household; wives were “privileged to attend the lyings in and gossipings from which single women were excluded, and as married women they accompanied newly delivered mothers to their churching.”¹⁰ Married couples were expected to attend church regularly, and, since they bore the responsibility for the conduct of their dependants (children as well as any servants), they were expected to lead by the example of behaving in an overall forthright and sober manner. In short, a marriage significantly affected the ways in which husbands and wives interacted with their community, and, as such, the community held married couples to a correspondingly high standard of moral integrity.

The community’s interest and investment in any given marriage can be seen in the use of the banns, which needed to be posted or announced in church for three straight Sundays prior to a union’s legal solemnization.¹¹ As the Welsh writer William Vaughan

⁹ Ibid., 287.

¹⁰ Ibid., 287-8.

¹¹ This was at least the standard for most normal marriages, as advocated by *The Book of Common Prayer*. One could, however, dispose of the open publication of the banns by purchasing a license from the ecclesiastical authorities for five or seven shillings. Such a license provided a greater degree of flexibility and privacy than the more protracted and public procedure of the banns: “An ecclesiastical license allowed a couple to marry in haste, when time was of the essence; it allowed them to marry during religious seasons when matrimony was otherwise prohibited; it permitted them to marry in a parish away from home, in the church or chapel of their choice; and it secured them a degree of privacy” (Cressy, *Birth*, 309). As with the

describes, “the Priest is bound openly in the Church to aske the banes: to wit, whether any man can alleadge a reason, wherefore they that are about to bee married, may not lawfully come together. Which being done, and no exception made, they then are ioyned in the holy linkes of matrimonie.”¹² In essence, the banns served as the community’s safeguard, a call of duty to the populace to ensure the legality of each proposed union. The major impediments that could render a prospective marriage ineligible included the following: if either of the parties fell within the prohibited degrees of kindred or affinity; was too young (marriageable age was 12 for females and 14 for males); lacked proper consent (those under 21 had to have the consent of either a parent or guardian); or was already married or contracted to someone else. With the open publication of the banns, weddings were therefore a community affair; they not only “gave neighbors notice of an impending wedding and encouraged them to speed any preparations”¹³ but also, and perhaps more importantly, opened up the union to a wide degree of scrutiny by kinsfolk and neighbors alike.

Of course, the state also had something at stake in the institution of marriage and the subsequent creation and running of the family, since the household (at least in theory) served as one of the primary means by which early modern society reproduced itself, a

system of indulgences before it, the system of licenses was open to abuse, particularly in the lack of checking into the parties’ background to ensure there were no impediments, and in the use of forged licenses. Gradually, though, marriage by license became more and more common; by the end of the seventeenth-century, Henri Misson observes, “To proclaim banns is a thing nobody now cares to have done; very few are willing to have their affairs declared to all the world in a public place, when for a guinea they may do it snug and without noise” (qtd. in Cressy, 311). While popular in medieval England, marriage by simple consent, the so-called clandestine marriage, was not widely practiced during the period of 1560 to 1640. Involving the simple exchange of consent in the present tense, these unchurched marriages “may have met the minimum requirements of the law, but they were severely deficient in social and cultural terms. The vast majority of couples in early modern England acknowledged the importance of religious ritual in establishing conjugal unions, and accepted the role of the clergy in the solemnization of holy matrimony” (Ibid., 316). The marriage between Antonio and The Duchess in Webster’s *The Duchess of Malfi* perhaps represents the best-known dramatic example of a union of this sort.

¹² *The Golden-Grove* (London, 1600), Book 2, Chapter 6, sig. N3^r.

¹³ Cressy, *Birth*, 306.

process which reinforced existing social, political, and gender structures. Fitting snugly into the macrocosm-microcosm paradigm, families during the period were often referred to as “little commonwealths,” with a father-mother-children-servants hierarchy that mirrored that of the king/queen and his/her subjects. Since the system was divinely ordained, the church and state widely propagated this image of a “natural” ordering of things in both official and unofficial discourse.¹⁴ The immensely popular *A Godlie Forme of Householde Government*, by the Puritan ministers John Dodd and Robert Cleaver, provides just one example of how a “proper” English household ordered itself. Beginning by stating “A Householde is as it were a little common wealth, by the good gouernment wherof, Gods glorie may be aduanced,” the text later describes the father-husband as “not onely a ruler, but a King, and Lord of all.”¹⁵ Seemingly ubiquitous, the family-state analogy essentially regarded the family as a mini-state, complete with its own mini-economy. Martin Ingram notes that family households served as the fundamental economic unit of the period:

the country houses of the nobility and gentry were the center of their great estates; a merchant’s residence was the site of commercial or financial dealings; and in the countryside, the house of yeomen and husbandmen, with their adjacent outbuildings, were the hub of farming activities, while spinning and weaving were carried on literally as cottage industries.¹⁶

¹⁴ See Su Fan Ng’s *Literature and the Politics of Family in Seventeenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 1-18, for an illuminating overview of the family-state metaphor in early modern thought and as it is interpreted by modern literary critics. Other critics have noted that the family metaphor extended to many other social, religious, and commercial institutions: courts, universities, churches, and guilds. See Paul Griffiths, *Youth and Authority: Formative Experiences in England 1560-1640* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996). For the standard account of the family-state analogy, see Gordon J. Schochet, *Patriarchalism in Political Thought: The Authoritarian Family and Political Speculation and Attitudes, Especially in Seventeenth-Century England* (New York: Basic Books, 1975).

¹⁵ John Dod and Robert Cleaver, *A Godlie Forme of Hovseholde Government: For the Ordering of Private Families, According to the Direction of Gods Word* (London, 1598), 13, 178-79.

¹⁶ Martin Ingram, “Family and Household,” in *A Companion to Renaissance Drama*, ed. Arthur F. Kinney (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002): 93-108; 95. Ingram contends that, at least for the landed gentry, the word “family” really meant “household,” which therefore included servants and apprentices, as well as blood-kin, under the umbrella term of family.

Susan Amussen argues that the family-state analogy should be read in just that order, that rather than the family modeling itself after the court, the “ordering of households provided a model for ordering villages, counties, church and state.” Since the family and state “were inextricably intertwined in the minds of English women and men in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries,” Amussen sees this as challenging modern conceptions of the separation between public and private life,¹⁷ a claim that suggests there existed little to no distinction between the “family” and “society” in early modern thought. All of this – that is, the “economic realities and political and social thought” – points to regarding the family as “*the* central institution” (emphasis mine) of early modern England.¹⁸

Given the social and ideological importance of marriage and family, it is perhaps not all that surprising to note that marriages and betrothals tend to dominate the plotlines of early modern drama. While it is a commonplace to say that marriage is the stuff of comedies, it may sound rather bold to claim that marriage is also the stuff of tragedies, even if such storylines often get relegated to the subplots; however, a tragedy that includes no such plot line stands out as the exception, not the norm. Take, for instance, the case of Shakespeare, who wrote only four out of thirty-eight plays that do not include any marriage or betrothal plots: *Macbeth*, *Julius Caesar*, *Coriolanus*, and *Richard II*. Yet even in these plays, all four prominently feature married couples with vexed husband-wife relationships, the complexities of which each play conspicuously explores (*Macbeth*

¹⁷ Ralph Houlbrooke, *The English Family 1450-1700* (London: Longman, 1984) holds a similar opinion, though he arrives at this conclusion via other means: “The family was subject to greater outside scrutiny than it is today. A concept of privacy certainly existed, and both law and social convention discouraged prying and snooping. Yet the simple internal layout and relatively insubstantial construction of the majority of dwellings, high housing densities along the streets of bigger villages and towns, and the widespread employment of servants all made it difficult to hide what went on in the ‘private’ domain” (23).

¹⁸ Susan Dwyer Amussen, *An Ordered Society: Gender and Class in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), 2.

and *Julius Caesar* perhaps more so than the others).¹⁹ Lisa Hopkins, in *The Shakespearean Marriage*, offers a slightly different assessment, arguing that “only twice in his career does Shakespeare seriously contemplate a world without marriage”: in *Troilus and Cressida* and *Timon of Athens*.²⁰ Yet the issue of marriage even creeps into these most unlikely of places, as they both technically include storylines that involve matrimonial subject matter: *Troilus* contains what essentially amounts to a parodied, burlesque wooing and betrothal between the two title characters, culminating in Pandarus’s “uniting” them in a mock-ceremony at 3.2; and *Timon* opens with an Old Athenian complaining to Timon that his servant Lucius is wrongly courting his daughter; Timon convinces him to let the two marry, saying that he will provide Lucius with the funds necessary to support the couple. And Shakespeare was, of course, not alone in his nearly ubiquitous reliance on structuring his plays around the drama of wooing, engagement, and marriage.

The logic of marriage and union, then, proves significant to dramatic studies, and the particular template under investigation here – incest versus miscegenation – provides the additional advantage of being that which potentially disrupts the normal state of affairs by testing the limits of acceptability. For incest flaunts the idea of marriage by rendering any such union, by definition, unlawful; and radical exogamy (whether class, cultural or racial) upsets the social order by bringing into the community an outsider who threatens possible contamination and destructive realignment. As boundary phenomena, incest and

¹⁹ Carol Thomas Neely, in *Broken Nuptials in Shakespeare’s Plays* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985), describes Shakespeare’s basic use of marriage in terms of its generic significance: “movements toward marriage constitute the subject of the comedies; disrupted marriages are prominent in many of the tragedies; the establishment or reestablishment of marriage in one or two generations is the symbol of harmony in the late romances” (1).

²⁰ Lisa Hopkins, *The Shakespearean Marriage: Merry Wives and Heavy Husbands* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: MacMillan Press, 1998), 188.

miscegenation served as powerful and surprisingly flexible dramatic tropes, providing a useful means of interrogating the social processes that create, instill, and, when conditions warrant, redefine acceptable choices in sexual and social partners.

Incest and Miscegenation in Early Modern England

English incest prohibitions during the Medieval period were famously restrictive, inscrutable, and expansive, at times seemingly all-inclusive. As Elizabeth Archibald notes:

in the Middle Ages the prohibitions relating to marriage and also intercourse with relatives were extended to a degree unprecedented in any other society; the family was defined so broadly as to include not only biological and social relationships but also spiritual ones. At their most draconian, in the tenth, eleventh, and twelfth centuries, these prohibitions banned sexual intercourse between all relatives connected by consanguinity or affinity to the seventh degree, and between persons linked by compaternity (spiritual affinity) to the fourth degree.²¹

In the early 1560s, Archbishop Parker set out to clarify and simplify these prohibitions, creating the Church of England's "Table of Kindred and Affinity," a somewhat shortened list of relations one was prohibited from marrying.²² Ratified by the church in 1563 and then officially canonized by Jacobean clergy in 1603, this codification served as the general basis for English law for centuries to come.²³ The table identified some thirty

²¹ Elizabeth Archibald, *Incest and the Medieval Imagination* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), 11.

²² There was also a political element to the creation of this table. In order for Henry VIII to invalidate his marriage to Anne Boleyn (the marriage itself achieved only thorough a papal dispensation), he first had to break with Roman Catholic law and pass legislation asserting the indispensable status of the Levitical prohibitions. This law was, in turn, repealed during Mary's reign when she realigned with Rome, and then subsequently re-established under Elizabeth. Archbishop Parker reworked this legislation, reshaping it into his Table of Kindred and Affinity. As a piece of protestant theological (and political) thought, it later found its way into the *Book of Common Prayer* starting in the post-restoration edition of 1662. See Thomas McCabe, *Incest, Drama and Nature's Law, 1550-1700* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

²³ This list remained virtually unchanged until 1835, when Lord Lyndhurst introduced an Act that outlawed marriage to a dead wife's sister, which he argued was an oversight of the original Table. Thus, prohibitions against affinity marriages continued to exist in England until well into the twentieth century. It was not until the Deceased Wife's Sister Marriage Act of 1907 (which overturned Lyndhurst's Act of 1835) that the

forbidden unions for each sex: with grandparents, parents, siblings, and offspring, to the siblings and spouses of such kin (uncles, aunts, nieces, nephews). Twelve of these restrictions applied to blood relations (consanguinity), while the other eighteen concerned those related through marriage (affinity) up to the fourth degree. Thus, a relationship between a man and his brother's wife (à la Claudius and Gertrude in *Hamlet*), or a man and his wife's son's daughter (step-daughter), or a woman and her husband's father's brother (uncle-in-law) would all be considered incestuous under early modern Anglican law. Perhaps oddly, given the thoroughness of these restrictions, the tables contained no explicit condemnation of marriages between first and second cousins, step-siblings, step-aunts/uncles, and step-nieces/nephews, though these practices were generally frowned upon and could even be judged incestuous by the ecclesiastical courts.²⁴

The basic logic underpinning the adoption of affinity prohibitions comes from the inherited legacy of Hebraic and biblical law, chiefly from Leviticus 18:6-18 and 20:10-21, which specify fifteen illicit matches, six dealing with consanguine and nine with affine relationships. According to Thomas McCabe, "analysis of the prohibited

seemingly antiquated laws began to be struck from the record books, resulting in the ecclesiastical courts finally losing jurisdiction over incest cases in 1908. The passage of this statute was the subject of intense scrutiny and debate. Sybil Wolfram describes the event as "one of the most protracted struggles in British Parliamentary history. It took 65 years, 46 sessions of debate, 18 successful second readings in the House of Commons to effect this piece of legislation" (*In-Laws and Outlaws: Kinship and Marriage in England* [London: Croom Helm Ltd., 1987], 30). Current English laws against incest were largely set in 1956, defining the offense as "sexual intercourse between a man and his mother, sister (full or half), daughter or granddaughter, and between a woman over 16 and her father, brother (full or half), son or grandfather" (Archibald, 10). The Church of England, however, still views certain relations by marriage as incestuous, as does the Scottish Incest and Related Offences Act of 1986. See Archibald, 9-11.

²⁴Despite their unprecedented breadth and scope, medieval English laws also did not prohibit marriages between cousins (perhaps because they were likewise never outlawed in the bible). In *The City of God*, St. Augustine notes with a certain degree of appreciation that such unions, though allowable under law, were quite rare: "Nevertheless there was a revulsion from doing something which, lawful though it was, bordered close on the unlawful" (Archibald, 24). Arguably, marriages between step-brothers and sisters could be prohibited under the simple categories of brother and sister. However, the Table is inconsistent in this regard, as it specifically includes step-parents and step-children. Later tables (namely the 1949 version) clarified these discrepancies by including entries for some step- and half-relatives (and by removing some affinal prohibitions).

relationships reveals that the primary concern of the Hebrew laws was the maintenance of domestic peace within essentially nomadic encampments: amongst the prohibitions against incest is one against adultery with a neighbour's wife whether related or not (18:20)."²⁵ While these passages contain many clearly expressed – and seemingly obvious – examples of forbidden unions, they have also sparked volumes of exegetical debate over their strange omissions (never mentioning any injunctions against daughters, nieces, or first cousins) and contradictions, such as the seemingly haphazard and random nature of differing punishments for each violation. Some are punishable by death (intercourse with a father's wife, daughter-in-law, and with a daughter and also her mother), while others only incur exile (sister) or even dying childless (an aunt by marriage or sister-in-law).²⁶

Perhaps the greatest source of debate stems from the apparent paradox between Leviticus 18:16, which outlaws any sexual contact between a man and his brother's wife, and the so-called levirate marriage outlined in Deuteronomy 25:5-10, which calls for a man to take his dead brother's wife as his own if the brother died childless: "If brethren dwell together, and one of them die, and haue no child, the wife of the dead shall not marrie without, vnto a stranger: her husbands brother shall go in vnto her, and take her to him to wife, and performe the duetie of an husbands brother vnto her."²⁷ Levirate marriages were never common during the early modern period, and certainly were not

²⁵ McCabe, 30.

²⁶ See Archibald, 22.

²⁷ Cited from the King James bible, 1611. The passage continues: "And it shall be, that the first borne which she beareth, shall succede in the name of his brother which is dead, that his name be not put out of Israel." R.G. Abrahams, "Some Aspects of the Levirate," in *The Character of Kinship*, ed. Jack Goody (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973): 163-74, explains that such a marriage partly functions "to maintain and preserve the individual identity of one beyond his normal lifespan by the sacrifice of at least part of the individuality of the other" (167). The levirate marriage also makes an appearance in the Book of Matthew 22:23-30, where a group of Sadducees question Jesus about a succession of six levirate marriages involving one wife and seven brothers.

regarded as the rule of law, though one could get a papal dispensation to marry a sister-in-law if one could prove the previous marriage was never consummated. This was, for instance, the tactic that Henry VIII employed to marry Catherine of Aragon, the widow of his older brother Arthur. Apparently the early protestant bibles of the period – the Coverdale (1535), Geneva (1560), and the Bishop’s (1568) – all glossed over this conflict by translating “brother” as “kinsman,” thus reading, “hir kynsman shal go vnto her, and take her to wyfe,” a much more ambiguous phrase. Jason Rosenblatt argues that the annulment of Henry VIII’s marriage to Catherine (on the grounds of incest), lay at the heart of this decision: these bibles “all distorted this verse into compliance with the Henrician emphasis on the unacceptability of the levirate.”²⁸ Other scholars take issue with the arrangement of the Levitical laws, claiming that the repetitions and puzzling, logic-defying sequencing (laws condemning Molech worship follow laws concerning incest, menstruating women, and adultery) hint at an aimless, erratic organization.²⁹ N.H. Snaith, in particular, charges that “the compilations of laws and customs [come] from different sources, all brought together without any real attempt at editing or correlation.”³⁰ Calum Carmichael, however, sees a sophisticated method to the madness, asserting that Leviticus’ compositional plan was formulated as a direct response to the seemingly allowable incestuous relationships told in the book of Genesis (e.g., Abraham,

²⁸ Jason P. Rosenblatt, “Aspects of the Incest Problem in *Hamlet*,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 29:3 (Summer, 1978): 349-64; 357. Tyndale’s 1530 edition, which uses “brother,” stands out as the one notable exception to this list. Interestingly, the King James bible of 1611 also correctly translates the term as “brotherlawe.” The alteration of this passage seems understandable, since it helps preserve the legitimacy of both Edward VI and Elizabeth, while, at the same time, calling into question the legitimacy of the Catholic Mary.

²⁹ For a good overview of the debate, see Adrian Schenker, “What Connects the Incest Prohibitions with the Other Prohibitions Listed in Leviticus 18 and 20?” in *The Book of Leviticus: Composition and Reception*, ed. Rolf Rendtorff and Robert A. Kugler (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2003): 162-85.

³⁰ N.H. Snaith, *Leviticus and Numbers, Based on the Revised Standard Version* (London: Nelson, 1967), 137. Quoted in Calum M. Carmichael, *Law, Legend, and Incest in the Bible: Leviticus 18-20* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), 9.

Lot, Noah, Judah, Amnon, Cain and Abel, etc.) that occur without any clear moral comment.³¹ All told, the early modern period's sometimes convoluted incest laws come from a long tradition of even more complicated and contentious regulations regarding endogamy.

Another significant biblical justification for laws barring affinal relations comes from Genesis 2:23-24 and the notion of *unitas carnis* (one flesh): "Then the man said, 'This now is bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh. She shall be called woman, because she was taken out of man. Therefore shall man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave to his wife, and they shall be one flesh.'"³² Affinity incest prohibitions were based on a literal interpretation of this passage, which essentially raises affinity to the level of consanguinity after a marriage's consummation. Thus, a man, wife, and their families (to the fourth degree) were not only united through the social and religious bonds of a marital contract, but also through the physical, indissoluble bonds of blood. In other words, after consummation, a brother-in-law and a sister-in-law became brother and sister. Early modern humoral theory, which conceived of the mixing of bloods during sexual intercourse, corroborates this type of reading, allowing for a "scientific"

³¹ Medieval theologians took great pains to offer elaborate explanations dealing with the problem of incest among the patriarchs. St. Augustine's exposition in *The City of God* established a much-followed precedent. As Elizabeth Archibald relates, "He explains that incestuous marriages – by this he means sibling marriages – were acceptable in the newly created world 'compellente necessitate' (by force of necessity); but as soon as the population expanded sufficiently, it became necessary to spread the net of 'socialis dilectio' (social affection) by marrying outside the immediate kin-group. He shows in detail how incest restricts social networking through the doubling of father and father-in-law, or even of father, father-in-law, and brother. Thus through 'lex humana' (human law) and the encouragement of the 'patres antiqui' (ancient fathers), instinctive shame was activated and incest became 'nefas' (taboo)" (24).

³² All biblical citations taken from the Geneva Bible, 1587 unless otherwise noted. In a 1679 one-sheet printing of the tables, labeled "Incestuous Marriages, or Relations of Consanguinity and Affinity Hindering and Dissolving Marriage," it explains the reasoning behind affinity laws by simply stating, "the reason of both is, because Husband and Wife are one Flesh, *Gen. 2.24.*"

understanding of this theological premise.³³ John Donne draws on this logic, to great effect, in his seduction poem “The Flea,” where the insect in question “suck’d me first, and now sucks thee, / And in this flea our two bloods mingled be” (ll. 3-4).

Apparently the church – or at least its administrative arm – took the Table of Kindred and Affinity very seriously. In order to promote a proper understanding of it among parishioners, Episcopal authorities required that all churches prominently display the tables somewhere in the sanctuary, and often encouraged churchwardens to read them aloud twice a year during service; in order to ensure compliance, the church administration routinely checked up on each parish. Some churches enthusiastically adopted these policies, even taking pains to encase the pages in elaborate and expensive frames.³⁴ Yet despite all of this policing, some six decades later church administrators continually encountered parishes that still had not procured or displayed copies of the tables. For instance, in 1597 the Diocese of Norwich discovered that as many as 10 per cent of parishes lacked them, findings that were echoed in various parishes within the Diocese of Norwich in 1627 and the Diocese of Lincoln in 1634. In 1636, a bishop of Chichester “found that a quarter of his parishes could not display the table of kindred and affinity, and it was missing from dozens of Nottinghamshire parishes in 1638.”³⁵

Even with some churches not in accordance with church procedures, it appears that most Elizabethans understood the basics of the prohibitions against incest, especially as they applied to close-kin relations. Prosecutions for the crime, which were handled by

³³ See Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender From the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), esp. 56-61.

³⁴ See Cressy, *Birth*, 313-15. The elaborate display of the tables was especially prevalent during the Caroline period.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 314.

the ecclesiastical courts (aka the “bawdy” courts),³⁶ were relatively rare. According to Martin Ingram’s summary of the records for the archdeaconry of North Wiltshire from 1586-99, only four charges for incest were ever levied, while “the appearance books of the three main Wiltshire jurisdictions for the years 1615-29 reveal only 28 cases, an average of less than 2 per annum.”³⁷ Records from other areas, such as the diocese of Ely and the archdeaconries of Chichester and Leicester, confirm this pattern of sparse prosecution. Given that an individual diocese could see anywhere from 1,200 to 5,000 defendants per year,³⁸ incest cases account for only a minuscule percentage of the total number of cases brought before the courts. What kinds of incest were most commonly prosecuted? G.R. Quaife’s analysis of the Rolls of the Somerset Quarter Sessions and the Act and Deposition Books of the Consistory Court of Bath and Wells reveals that affinal transgressions outnumbered those of blood-kin by a wide margin, with the majority of cases occurring between a stepfather and his step-daughter, followed by those involving a brother-in-law and his sister-in-law.³⁹ Ingram’s archival research yields substantiating evidence: of the 28 Wiltshire cases of prohibition violations, only six occurred between blood-kin: three for father-daughter, two for mother-son, and one for brother-sister.⁴⁰

³⁶ The jurisdiction of the ecclesiastical courts covered a wide range of criminal and sinful acts, most regarding religious offenses and personal immorality: from idolatry, heresy, and catholic recusancy, to witchcraft, usury, drunkenness, and a whole host of sexual offenses. The church courts also dealt with issues regarding marriage – issuing marriage licenses, hearing contract disputes, prosecuting irregular marriages, and the like. See Martin Ingram, *Church Courts, Sex and Marriage in England, 1570-1640* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 2-3.

³⁷ Ingram, *Church Courts*, 246.

³⁸ These numbers come from the diocese of York, which saw 1,200 defendants in 1575 and 5,000 in 1636. See Ronald A. Marchant, *The Church Under the Law: Justice, Administration and Discipline in the Diocese of York, 1560-1640* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 230-1.

³⁹ G.R. Quaife, *Wanton Wenches and Wayward Wives* (London: Croom Helm, 1979), 177.

⁴⁰ Ingram, *Church Courts*, 247. William Nahy, in *Sex Crimes From Renaissance to Enlightenment* (Stroud, Gloucestershire, UK: Tempus, 2004), further confirms these results. Drawing on research from both English and continental sources, he concludes: “Clearly, as most of these cases stress, incest rarely involved blood relatives. Also, the courts were very concerned about adults sleeping together who were not either of the same sex or married to one another” (204).

Another general trend apparent from court records is that cases only involving sexual relations between prohibited partners were far more common than cases of matrimonial incest. Ingram finds only four examples of the latter type: a Marlborough man married to his father's sister for thirteen years; John Sawyer of Minety who married his mother's brother's widow; Tristram Wattes of Warminster who applied for a marriage license to be wedded to his deceased wife's sister's daughter; and Roger Mowdie of Downton, contracted to his deceased wife's sister. David Cressy cites only a few additional examples, two of them from Norwich: Eustace Wiseman of St. Gregory's, accused in 1620 "for that contrary to the laws of the land he married with his first wife's sister's daughter"; and William Mallet, a glover from St. Andrews, whose second marriage was to Anne Fuller, "own sister by the father's side to Elizabeth Fuller alias Mallet, late wife of the said William." The punishment for this last offense included disciplinary action against the church officials who erroneously granted the license.⁴¹

Although most people understood that they were not to marry close relatives, people became much more confused when it came to determining violations of second, third and fourth degree affinity prohibitions. Charles Hardikin, a yeoman from Seend, pleaded ignorance for marrying his brother's daughter's daughter, a union "not *explicitly* forbidden in the official table of kindred and affinity but was held to be unlawful 'by necessary consequence.'"⁴² Even ecclesiastical officials expressed uncertainty about the lawfulness of some unions. The churchwardens at the parish of Porlock, for instance, presented the questionable case of Thomas Riddler before the court: "he took to wife Wilmot daughter of William Spark who died, after whose death, and the death of William

⁴¹ Cressy, *Birth*, 314-15.

⁴² Ingram, *Church Courts*, 246-47.

Spark, Ridler took to wife Mary, the second wife of William Spark, who was step-mother of Wilmot Spark, whether it be punishable by the law, they know not.”⁴³

Since ecclesiastical authorities lacked the investigative philosophy and evidence-gathering capabilities of *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*, “most presentments were on the basis of rumor or gossip.”⁴⁴ As one would perhaps expect, proving non-matrimonial incest cases turned out to be difficult, unless there was a full confession or the parties were caught red-handed. Many presented to the court denied the charges, claiming that even if the two were found sleeping in the same bed, no sexual acts took place and that they only occupied the same bed out of necessity. John Huscombe, charged with incest with his daughter, denied any wrongdoing, admitting only “that he did lie with his daughter Mary one night to keep his back warm.” Apparently Huscombe was being literal, and not invoking a euphemism. The brother of Agnes Young, on a visit from out of town, “rested” with her and “(as she confesseth afterwards) he lay with her, but she said her child lay between them whereof she thought no wise body would find fault.”⁴⁵ Similar examples come from John Mercer of Donhead St. Mary, who admitted that he slept in the same bed as his brother’s daughter but only “in respect of necessity of lodging,” and John Page of Fonthill Giffard, who claimed that “his daughter (he having no other place to lodge her in) did for many years past lie with him at his feet in the same bed.” Apparently natural calamities could also force close kinsmen into sharing close quarters. In 1625 one Thomas Court of Westhampnett, Sussex confessed that he and his sister did sleep in the same bed, but explained that they “did lie together about Christmas last, their house being torn by tempest of weather and little other room in the house to

⁴³ Quaife, 177.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 39.

⁴⁵ Quaife, 177.

keep them dry.”⁴⁶ If these explanations failed to sway the judge (and often they actually did work, such as in the cases of Mercer, Page, and Court), defendants could establish their guiltlessness by undergoing compurgation, a process that involved taking an oath of innocence, and then presenting between four and nine neighbors (depending on the seriousness of the offense) who swore that they believed the oath.⁴⁷

With the ecclesiastical rather than the civil courts prosecuting the majority of cases concerning sexual activity, incest was regarded as a moral crime, and convicted offenders were penalized with an eye towards reformation rather than retribution. Punishment could take the form of either admonition (a verbal warning), or, as it did most often, public penance, “a system of communal discipline...[and] a ritual of repentance and reconciliation, but equally a deeply humiliating experience designed to deter others and give satisfaction to the congregation for the affront of public sin.”⁴⁸ Depending on the severity of the infringement, penance could either be “public – in the church before the whole congregation – or in the market-place, or semi-public before the vicar, churchwardens and a specified number of parishioners.”⁴⁹ Normally, the prescribed penalty for incest, adultery, and fornication consisted of two appearances in the parish church followed by one in the diocese’s cathedral. The case of Thomas Odam, who was convicted of an incestuous relationship with his daughter-in-law, provides a representative example of a schedule of penance:

That upon Sunday the 18th and 25th days of this instant month of July he... Thomas Odam with a white sheet upon his uppermost garment, and a white wand in his hand shall come into the parish church at Charlton...at the beginning of the fornoon service and in that sort must stand forth in the middle space before the

⁴⁶ Ingram, *Church Courts*, 247.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 248-9.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁴⁹ Quaife, 194.

pulpit during the whole time of divine service, and a sermon then and there to be preached against the crime of fornication and incest, and immediately after the end of the...sermon shall with an audible voice make this humble acknowledgement following, repeating the same after the minister, namely, I, Thomas Odam do here before God acknowledge and confess that I have most grievously offended the divine majesty of almighty God in living, incestuously with... my wives daughter, and I do protest that I am right heartily sorry for the same, and I do faithfully promise never from henceforth to offend the like again. And I do desire you all to pray with me and for me to almighty God; that it will please him of his infinite goodness and mercy to forgive it me. And then humbly and penitently kneeling down he shall devoutly rehearse the Lord's prayer.⁵⁰

During this penance Odam was also commanded to wear on his front "a piece of paper spread abroad containing in great text... these words following viz. Charlton Mackrell; Thomas Odam for Incest with Aucharett White his wives daughter."⁵¹

For more egregious offenses, an additional shaming could be added, one that transpired in the more public space of the marketplace. Drew Stanton, convicted of fathering two children with his late wife's sister, was sentenced to appear in his penitential white sheet with the text of his crime on his back, and "stand upon a form or stool in the middle of the market place of Pensford from eleven of the clock before noon until three of the clock in the afternoon bare footed and without any hat upon his head."⁵² And on rare occasions, a fine could be levied. David Cressy relates the decision by the ecclesiastical High Commission in 1631 to impose "the enormous fine of £12,000 on Sir Giles Alington for marrying Dorothy Dalton, his half-sister's daughter."⁵³ Although some culprits regarded their public shaming as meaningless, either performing it unabashedly or ignoring the summons entirely, it appears that these severe penances proved effective deterrents for most people. If, however, convicted offenders failed to

⁵⁰ Ibid., 192-3.

⁵¹ Ibid., 193.

⁵² Ibid., 193-4.

⁵³ Cressy, *Birth*, 315.

carry out their sentences (or tried to bribe their way out of it), the court could resort to other means – suspension, lesser and greater excommunication, imprisonment by the civil authorities – to ensure compliance.⁵⁴ Some advocates for moral reform regarded these punishments for sexual immorality as much too slight, and called for a hardening of the laws against sexual offenders, which began as early as 1534 when “buggery committed with mankind or beast” became a felony tried by the secular courts and punishable by death. Nothing came of this movement, though, until 1650, when the Puritan-majority Rump Parliament passed the Act “for the suppressing of the abominable and crying sins of Incest, Adultery and fornication, wherewith this land is much defiled and Almighty God highly displeased,” which made incest and adultery felonies punishable by death, while fornicators received up to three months’ imprisonment. These provisions, however, ended up being both unpopular and ineffective; they were never really enforced and the subsequent Parliament allowed the entire measure to lapse in 1660.⁵⁵

Certainly incest occurred with more frequency than the court records indicate, not the least reason being that some accused of incest surely refused (or simply failed) to answer their summons to court, even after excommunication. In the diocese of York, for instance, the number of defendants actually satisfying the court varied quite widely over time, with the one constant being that there was always a sizable percentage that failed to appear: for the diocesan visitation of 1575, thirty-two per cent of defendants neglected to show up before the court, while the number grew to a commanding sixty-six per cent in 1623.⁵⁶ Since church court records – often fragmentary, incomplete, and never as detailed as historians would like – frequently did not include any specific information

⁵⁴ Quaife, 195.

⁵⁵ See Ingram, *Church Courts*, 151-3.

⁵⁶ Marchant, 205.

about cases where the culprits failed to appear, either omitting the nature of the charge against them or even their names, an untold number of incest cases that would have otherwise survived in the records has been lost.⁵⁷ Other cases of suspected incest might not even make it as far as the process of presentation. Quaife notes “that many churchwardens, perhaps influenced by their experiences with common law, were loath to present on the basis of rumour or unsubstantiated suspicion.” The nature of the office of churchwarden, whose duties included presenting each possible violation before the ecclesiastical courts – essentially reporting their neighbor’s moral shortcomings to the authorities⁵⁸ – could also help explain why some churchwardens hesitated to bring forth certain cases. As lay members elected to their office for only one year, they “would soon revert to the role of an ordinary parishioner and the new wardens might remember their predecessors’ activities.” Churchwardens could also be reluctant to present their friends and allies. The latter seems to have been the case with Henry Bryant, a Durston churchwarden whose friend was caught in bed with Joan Chead, a married woman. Joan’s husband (who discovered the two together) demanded that they be brought up on the charge of adultery, but Bryant refused on the grounds of insufficient evidence, citing the husband’s inability to swear that “he saw the thing in the thing.”⁵⁹ The relatively common practice of family members sleeping together in the same bed, due to a lack of spacial and material resources, could also facilitate, perhaps even encourage, illicit sexual

⁵⁷ See Ingram, *Church Courts*, 22-3.

⁵⁸ Once a presentation was made, the court would then, via its apparitors or messengers, issue charges against the accused and establish an appearance date. Each English cathedral held a courtroom, where most legal activity took place, though sometimes the courts traveled to local parishes and held sessions in churches, inns, or other improvised settings. Ingram explains that “the ecclesiastical courts formed an elaborate, omnipresent complex of institutions organised at the levels of province, diocese and archdeaconry” (*Church Courts*, 1).

⁵⁹ Quaife, 187-88. If the public felt strongly enough about an incident denied presentation by the churchwarden, then parishioners could take it upon themselves to inform the court.

activity, a problem well known to the court and which aroused suspicions (see the above examples). And then there are the difficulties of detection, which not only included the limitations of “evidence” gathering, but also the general reluctance of victims to speak up about this type of sexual, social, and familial violation (it did not help matters that victims were rarely regarded as such during the period, certainly not with the same level of sympathy as today).

But just how much more frequently incest occurred than survives in the court records remains a point of contention. Taking the above factors into account, some critics argue that the actual number of occurrences of incest was not just higher, but rather *much* higher. The historian Keith Thomas insists that Parliament passed the 1650 act that made incest a capital offense out of necessity, rather than as a display of puritan authoritarianism, arguing it “represented a fairly general view that the community needed protection from such acts.”⁶⁰ Literary critics in particular, perhaps due in no small part to the prevalence of incest in their field of study, tend to believe that a large percentage of incestuous incidents escaped detection. Bruce Boehrer, claiming that the English commonalty reacted differently to the incest taboo since “the offense loses much of its symbolic value” outside of the landed gentry, argues for a high rate of casual, lightly punished and largely overlooked, incestuous sex among the lower classes.⁶¹ And Thomas McCabe cautions that

the relatively small number of incest cases recorded by the ecclesiastical courts need not be taken to indicate a correspondingly low incidence of its occurrence in

⁶⁰ Peter Laslett, *The World We Have Lost: Further Explored* (London: Methuen, 1983), 158.

⁶¹ Bruce Boehrer, *Monarchy and Incest in Renaissance England: Literature, Culture, Kinship, and Kingship* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992), 17. Boehrer, whose overall argument remains quite compelling and astute, asserts “a fairly high frequency of prosecutions for incest among the Renaissance English commonalty,” a claim that does not correspond to my own findings (16-7). Since he does not cite any sources for these statements, they may be based more on assumed (and convenient) generalizations rather than historical research.

local communities, since the records themselves are often incomplete and families had an interest in resisting disclosure. Even today it is estimated that only a small fraction of cases are ever reported to the appropriate authorities.⁶²

Yet there are good reasons to doubt the existence of a pervasive, unrecorded epidemic of incest primarily afflicting the lower classes. First, incest, often referred to as “the most wicked sin of incest” by churchwardens, was regarded as a serious matter by both the church and local officials, a more heinous crime than either fornication, adultery, or bastardy.⁶³ When sworn in to office, churchwardens were provided with the “Articles of Inquiry” – essentially a list of acts of “uncleanness and wickedness” to look out for – that specifically mentioned the crime of incest.⁶⁴ Second, many families participated in the widespread practice of “exporting” or “fostering out” adolescents to other households as either apprentices or domestic servants, or for the purposes of schooling or patronage. This system of exchange, which vacated homes of hormonally-challenged teens, resulted in the byproduct of reducing the “incestuous temptations” of those in living spaces with insufficient bedrooms.⁶⁵ And third, even if a dwelling contained any number of adolescent (or older) family members living and sleeping in cramped lodgings, the physical and social conditions of early modern life conspired against those seeking to indulge in secret vice. As Ralph Houlbrooke notes:

The family was subject to greater outside scrutiny than it is today. A concept of privacy certainly existed, and both law and social convention discouraged prying and snooping. Yet the simple internal layout and relatively insubstantial construction of the majority of dwellings, high housing densities along the streets

⁶² McCabe, 13.

⁶³ See Ingram, *Church Courts*, 248-9, and Laslett, 165.

⁶⁴ E.R.C. Brinkworth, *Shakespeare and the Bawdy Court of Stratford* (London: Philmore & Co., 1972), 13.

⁶⁵ See Alan MacFarlane, *The Family Life of Ralph Josselin, a Seventeenth-Century Clergyman* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 205. Lawrence Stone shares this view. See *The Family, Sex and Marriage In England 1500-1800* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1977), 107-10. On the other hand, McCabe, noting that “it is a well documented psychological phenomenon that separated siblings... are more prone to feel erotic attraction when suddenly reunited than siblings continuously reared together,” argues that estrangement can facilitate, rather than deter, incestuous desire (11-12).

of bigger villages and towns, and the widespread employment of servants all made it difficult to hide what went on in the ‘private’ domain.⁶⁶

The rarity of window curtains – even in the manors of the wealthy – only made it all the more challenging to keep illicit activities away from prying eyes.⁶⁷ And there were prying eyes – not only those of the churchwardens and constables, but also those of regular citizens encouraged by church authorities to report any suspicious happenings. That a such a large number of acts of sexual intercourse ever became public knowledge – literally thousands are recorded in the archives of the ecclesiastical courts – testifies to a culture adept at ferreting out immoral acts of carnality. Quaife identifies six basic “categories of revelation” that helped bring to light such private deeds: “suspicious company, suspicious circumstances, caught in the act, confessing the deed [primarily deathbed confessions and men bragging of their escapades], consequences of the act [pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases], and cracks in the curtain of initial concealment.”⁶⁸

Other evidence pointing towards a relatively low occurrence of incest comes from the work of clerical moralists, who normally jumped at the chance to speak at length about any perceived depravity practiced by the public. Yet with the subject of incest, they showed a certain level of disinterest, devoting little time to extended discussion on the topic. A quick search of the EEBO archives yields only six unique texts with the word “incest” in their titles; only three belonging to the moralist pamphlet tradition were printed before 1650: the twelve-page *A Most Straunge, and True Discourse, of the Wonderfull Judgement of God. Of a Monstrous, Deformed Infant, Begotten by*

⁶⁶ Houlbrooke, *The English Family*, 23.

⁶⁷ Ingram, “Family,” 96.

⁶⁸ Quaife, 48.

Incestuous Copulation, Between the Brothers Sonne and the Sisters Daughter, Being Both Vnmarried Persons (1600); the four-page *A Plaine Demonstration of the Vnlawful Succession of the Now Emperour Ferdinand the Second, Because of the Incestuous Marriage of His Parents* (1620); and the six-page *The Life and Death of John Atherton Lord Bishop of Waterford and Lysmore... Who for Incest, Buggery and Many Other Enormous Crimes... was Hanged* (1641).⁶⁹ By way of comparison, EEBO searches for other common sexual and moral crimes garner much larger results: fornication, 26; rape, 58; adultery, 62; lust, 72; whore/whoring/whoredom, 186; drunkenness, 332; and murder, 1,177.⁷⁰ In published sermons, incest likewise occurs with little frequency.⁷¹ A search through the 160 extant homiletic works of John Donne reveals only eleven which reference incest, and none of these sermons are “about” incest *per se*. Most occurrences only serve as casual references to sinful acts (Donne seems particularly prone to using “Lots incest” as an example of shameful vice), with just one mentioning incest more than once: a sermon preached at Lincoln’s Inn in 1618, which cites the term twice. In comparison, Donne refers to fornication (and its variants) in some eighteen sermons, murder (and its variants) in some forty-six sermons, and adultery (and its variants) in

⁶⁹ A fourth pre-1650 text with “incest” in the title is a compilation of Ovid’s incest stories from *The Metamorphoses: The Picture of Incest: Liuely Portraicted in the Historie of Cinyras and Myrrha* (1626). Parliament’s 1650 *An Act for Suppressing the Detestable Sins of Incest, Adultery and Fornication* was also printed, in the same year that it passed.

⁷⁰ The results here are meant for rough comparison only, as they have not been filtered for duplicates, publication type, or by date. Performing a basic keyword search (which searches all fields and, when available, full text) yields a similar ratio of results: “incest” produces 3,738 hits in 1,623 records; “fornication” 10,176 hits in 2,610 records; “adultery” 20,242 hits in 4,335 records; and “whore” 22,781 hits in 4,898 records.

⁷¹ The one exception to this that I am aware of comes from the sermons of Arthur Lake, bishop of Bath and Wells (1616-26), who preached on the topic during the penances of some parishioners convicted of incest.

some fifty-one sermons; many of these citations include multiple references per sermon, an indication of a prolonged discussion of the topic.⁷²

When pamphlets, moral treatises, and sermons do mention incest, it often appears as just one in a list of other felonious sins and crimes. For instance, Thomas Adams writes in *The Blacke Devil or the Apostate* (1615), “there is roome enough in one heart for many sins.... Absolon had treason, ambition, pride, incest, ingratitude, for his hearts stuffing.”⁷³ Robert Abbot, in *A Triall of Our Church-Forsakers* (1639), compares the iniquities of his parishioners to those of the early Christians: “I am sure that the church of Corinth was worse then ours can be (in some things), it was too bad with envyings, carnall men, uncharitable wretches, that went to law before infidels, scandalizing the weake, partaking with Idols, heresies, abuse of the Lords supper by drunkennesse, and contempt of the poore, and with detestable incest.”⁷⁴ John Robinson compiles a slightly different, yet still representative, list in his *A Justification of Separation From the Church of England* (1610): “what detestable crimes the members of the Church of England fall into... the very gallowes, & gibbets in every country declare sufficiently, vpon which for treason, witchcraft, incest, buggery, rape, murders and the like, the members of that Church (so living and dying) do receive condigne punishment.”⁷⁵

A similar pattern emerges in the moralist emblem tradition, where incest, when mentioned, occurs within the context of other forms of debauchery. The best known example comes from Henry Peacham’s *Minerva Britanna* (1612), the most sophisticated

⁷² All results taken from *John Donne Sermons*, an online electronic archive based on the ten-volume *Sermons of John Donne*, ed. George Potter and Evelyn Simpson (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1953-62). < <http://www.lib.byu.edu/dlib/donne/> >.

⁷³ Thomas Adams, *The Blacke Devil or the Apostate, Together with the Wolfe Worring the Lambes, and the Spiritual Navigator, Bound for the Holy Land* (London, 1615), 70.

⁷⁴ Robert Abbot, *A Triall of Our Church-Forsakers, or A Meditation Tending to Still the Passions of Unquiet Brownists, Upon Heb.10.25* (London, 1639), 29.

⁷⁵ John Robinson, *A Justification of Separation From the Church of England* (London, 1610), 58.

and important of the English emblem books. For his emblem titled “*Crimina Gravissima*” (the worst vices), the epigram reads:

Upon a Cock, heere Ganimedè doth sit,
Who erst rode mounted on IOVES Eagles back,
One hand holdes Circes wand, and ioind with it,
A cup top-fil’d with poison, deadly black;
The other Meddals, of base maettals wrought,
With sundry moneyes, counterfeit and nought.

These be those crimes, abhorr’d of God and man,
Which Iustice should correct, with lawes severe,
In Ganamed, the foule Sodomitan:
Within the Cock, vile incest doth appeare:
Witchcraft, and murder, by that cup and wand,
And by the rest, false coine you understand.⁷⁶

Just exactly how this rooster represents “vile incest” in any technical sense is rather unclear, as this association does not seem to be part of the standard iconographic tradition, and looking closely at the accompanying woodcut reveals no obvious “appearance” of incest. Christiane Hille speculates that Peacham’s representation “may refer to the vases given as gifts in homosexual affairs between Greek men in antiquity, where the *erastes*, an adult man in love with a youth, was expected to give his *eromenos* tokens of his desire, which usually displayed the image of a cockerel.”⁷⁷ Hille goes on to claim that Italian Renaissance art and literature often feature the image of a cockerel as a synonym for penis.⁷⁸ Whether or not this actually helps to explain the seemingly

⁷⁶ Henry Peacham, *Minerva Britanna, or A Garden of Heroical Deuises* (London, 1612), 48.

⁷⁷ Christiane Hille, “‘Antwerpian Rubens’ best skill made him soare’: George Villiers, first Duke of Buckingham and the Elevation of Painting at the Stuart Court,” *Immediations* 2:2 (2009): 31-43; 35.

⁷⁸ Perhaps more convincing is Hille’s argument that the emblem represents a veiled swipe at “James’ supposedly undignified infatuation with his favourite” (35). Building off of this line of reasoning, one could argue that the emblem also takes aim at James’ legitimacy, which rested firmly on that of Elizabeth’s. Although she did, of course, reign for many decades, her own legitimacy was never fully secure. Declared an illegitimate bastard at the time of her mother’s imprisonment for treason and incestuous adultery with her brother, she was continually haunted, sometimes less, sometimes more, by suspicions that she was the product of an incestuous union. These issues persisted well into James’ reign. See John Watkins,

torturous logic that leads from chicken to incest to Ganymede, it does, at the least, present another example of the belief in the interconnectedness of all forms of deviancy “abhorr’d of God and man.” In this rendering the non-sexual crimes – witchcraft, murder, and forgery/lying/falseness – emanate from “the foule Sodomitan” (he wields all of these in his hands) who is, in turn, held aloft by incest (with bestiality mixed in there somewhere between the two). Rarely ever isolated as an individual act of depravity, incest is almost always associated – often conflated – with a litany of other religious, sexual, and social crimes.

This apparent disinterest in the subject matter by clergy and moralists also seems evident in the public at large. Incest, as a slanderous term, lacked a certain shorthand normally assigned to all manner of venality; unlike murderer, whore/whoremaster, cuckold, adulterer, or even sodomite (which included buggery with both man and beast), there was no one-word colloquialism to indicate an “incestuous person.”⁷⁹ Martin Ingram also observes that accusations of incest only played a very minor role in instances of defamation, and that “people do not seem to have spent much time or energy searching out suspected cases of incest, and there is no evidence of savage informal penalties directed specifically against incestuous couples.”⁸⁰ Based on this information, he concludes that “incest does not seem to have loomed large in the minds of the inhabitants of early modern England,” an opinion shared by many historians of early modern crime and sexuality.⁸¹

Representing Elizabeth in Stuart England: Literature, History, Sovereignty (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002) , esp. 14-35.

⁷⁹ J.A. Sharpe, *Defamation and Sexual Slander in Early Modern England: The Church Courts at York* (York: University of York Press, 1980), 15.

⁸⁰ Ingram, *Church Courts*, 248.

⁸¹ Quaife, for instance, asserts that “incest did not cause the horror that it did in later centuries” (177).

As for miscegenation (whether social, religious, or racial), there were no official royal or ecclesiastical prohibitions against it, certainly nothing similar to the matrimonial tables for incest.⁸² In fact, this type of a union never really had its own specific name in the early modern period – it was, in a sense, the nameless. According to the *OED*, the word “miscegenation” was first used in 1863, while “exogamy” came two years later in 1865. Yet if one found oneself in a situation which today’s lexicon would label miscegenation, one could pick from a few possible candidates: “Mell” (*OED* 1c, 1387): “to mix, interbreed (people)”; “intermarriage” (*OED* 1b, 1602): “marriage between members of different families, castes, tribes, nations, or societies, as establishing a connexion between such families”; and “mixture” (*OED* 4a, 1634): “the interbreeding of different races, lines, etc., of people or animals; an instance of this.”⁸³ However, none of these words were used with any regularity or consistency. In fact, “intermarriage,” cited in EEBO in only six different texts published before 1650, apparently could also refer to instances involving incest. In Francis Rous’ *Meditations of Instruction, of Exhortation, of Reproofe Indeuouring the Edification and Reparation of the House of God* (1616), he writes concerning the incestuous relationships in Genesis: “for though there were inforced thereby an intermarriage between brethren and sisters, yet thereby was inforced no incest; for when marriage and generation were pure and without shame, then the brother

⁸² According to Lawrence Stone, “Neither social nor ethnic exogamy was prohibited by any laws, but in practice both were strongly disapproved of” (*The Family*, 491). Alan MacFarlane likewise contends that no laws explicitly barred social miscegenation, particularly after the fifteenth century (*Marriage and Love in England: Modes of Reproduction 1300-1840* [Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986], 255-57). David Cressy notes that although some ministers attempted to impose a religious test for marriage – some tried to require that the couple had to recite catechism by heart before the banns and wedding ceremony – such a practice “could not be sustained in law” (*Birth*, 315). Between the eleventh and fourteenth centuries, canon law did prohibit any sexual contact between Christians and non-Christians. See David Nirenberg, *Communities of Violence: Persecution of Minorities in the Middle Ages* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 131.

⁸³ All *OED* citations are taken from the online 3rd edition, available at <<http://www.oed.com/>>.

discouered not the shame of his sister, which is the wickednesse and vnlawfulnesse of incest.” But if incest takes place today, in this time of “multitude,” then “this neere intermarriage is a loathsome abomination in the eies of God.”⁸⁴ Thus, unlike incest, the crime and shame of which could be invoked with the utterance of one word, and which was readily knowable given the (relatively) clear tables that spelled out each prohibited degree, miscegenation remained a much more elusive concept.

That is not to say, of course, that a lack of laws forbidding miscegenation or of a vocabulary strictly defining it equaled a tolerance of such unions. To the contrary, one would be hard pressed to find a stronger taboo during the early modern period than that against miscegenation, particularly that of Protestants marrying with either Catholics, Jews, or Muslims. And for the most part, English law indirectly rendered such marriages illegal for the common citizen since England was (supposedly) void of both Catholics (practicing Catholicism was punishable by death) and Jews (expelled from the land in 1290). If and when interracial or interfaith marriages did take place, they almost exclusively occurred on the continent by Englishmen in religious exile, involved in the trade industry, or as ex-captives who “turned Turk” and took Muslim brides.⁸⁵ One does not have to venture far to find other forms of cultural control at work in discouraging miscegenation. From travelogues to sermons to cartographic engravings to plays, all manner of social, religious, and political institutions actively propagated the stereotype of the foreign Other as barbaric, hypersexual, violent, and immoral. Part of this process of cultural inscription involved an expansive and inventive vocabulary depicting the dangers

⁸⁴ Francis Rous, *Meditations of Instruction, of Exhortation, of Reprofe Indeauouring the Edification and Reparation of the House of God* (London, 1616), 152-3; 155.

⁸⁵ See Daniel Vitkus, *Turning Turk: English Theater and the Multicultural Mediterranean, 1570-1630* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

of interracial sex. Perhaps most famously, Iago draws from and contributes to this pool when he describes Desdemona's clandestine marriage as a sexual theft in vivid imagery that associates interracial sex with the bestial and the demonic: "Even now, now, very now, an old black ram / Is tupping your white ewe!" (1.1.87-8); "your daughter and the Moor are now making the beast with two backs" (1.1.114-5); "Arise, arise...Or else the devil will make a grandsire of you" (1.1.88-90).⁸⁶ This last quote also gestures at an overlap between the fear of miscegenation and the paranoia surrounding witches,⁸⁷ the trials of which often included the defendant's chronicling of their amorous encounters with the devil. David Friedman goes so far as to say that "the devil's penis was the obsession of every Inquisitor and the 'star' of nearly every witch's confession.... Most reported it was black and covered with scales."⁸⁸ Indeed, the rest of the devil was often imagined as black as well, and sometimes even as African.⁸⁹ While blackness during the period stood more as a marker of moral depravity rather than race, "skin colour was never too far from any articulation of race."⁹⁰ Thus, while there was nothing "official" outlawing miscegenation, in practice the pervasive "unofficial" demonizing of Catholics, Jews, and Muslims more than made up for it, effectively portraying, at the very least, the foreign Other as something less than a desirable marriage partner.⁹¹

⁸⁶ All *Othello* quotes taken from the Arden Shakespeare, Third Series, ed. E.A.J. Honigmann (London: Thompson Learning, 2001).

⁸⁷ England, at least during the early modern period, did not pursue witches with nearly the same zeal as they did on the continent. Although there were few official prosecutions of witches (see Ingram, *Church Courts*, 96,8), England was still concerned with (and fascinated by) the threat and possibility of witchcraft. See Michael MacDonald, *Mystical Bedlam: Madness, Anxiety, and Healing in Seventeenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 107-10, 208-11; see also James Sharpe, *Witchcraft in Early Modern England* (Harlow, UK: Longman, 2001), 1-13.

⁸⁸ Quoted in Celia R. Daileader, *Racism, Misogyny, and the Othello Myth: Inter-racial Couples from Shakespeare to Spike Lee* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 1.

⁸⁹ See Daileader, 1-8.

⁹⁰ Ania Loomba, *Shakespeare, Race, and Colonialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 160.

⁹¹ This policy against miscegenation, particularly against marriage, persisted into England's later empirical days. Lawrence Stone notes that "even in colonies with highly unbalanced white sex ratios, like India in

In order to explore the cultural significance of dramatic representations of incest and miscegenation, this study grounds itself historically by taking into consideration two different, yet intricately connected, cultural issues: the anxieties of a society undergoing a painful transition – from a culture still highly stratified along feudal lines, to one suddenly exposed to the possibilities for radical economic and political advancement; and to a society rather suddenly exposed, through exploration and trade, to other geographic and cultural realms.

Social Order and Social Mobility

At one point in time – namely from the 1940s until the late 1970s – historians and literary scholars tended to view early modern society as an ordered system of harmonic interdependences. This perception was in large part propagated by E.M.W. Tillyard in his widely influential *The Elizabethan World Picture*, which argued that Elizabethans conceived of their social world as “an ordered universe arranged in a fixed system of hierarchies.”⁹² With God and the King at the top, and craftsmen and peasants at the bottom, everyone was connected to everyone else through a network of obligations and privileges inherited from the medieval period, the so-called “Great Chain of Being.” Patrons were bound to dependants, sovereigns to subjects, aristocrats to retainers: “Monarchs demanded that their nobles help them wage war; in turn they delegated the nobles’ authority over certain territories or enterprises. Aristocratic landowners expected specific kinds of service and materials from their tenants; the tenants for their part felt

the eighteenth century, it was normal to take a native mistress but unthinkable to marry her. This was in marked contrast to the attitude of other European colonists in similar situations, for example the Portuguese in Brazil, the key difference being that the Portuguese were there to stay and settle, while the English were in India to make a fortune and return home” (*Family*, 491).

⁹² E.M.W. Tillyard, *The Elizabethan World Picture* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1943), 18.

entitled to traditionally fixed rents.”⁹³ At the center of this stood the late medieval country estate, “the symbol of good housekeeping: a moral economy wherein all classes and all peoples lived in right relationship with each other and the rest of creation.”⁹⁴ As long as everyone knew their place in society and deferentially paid homage to those above them, society would function smoothly and everyone would prosper according to his or her station. Peace and stability depended on this order of mutual dependence, as breaking or upsetting it would not only be a moral sin, but would also invite chaos and anarchy, which, needless to say, was to be avoided at all costs.

While Tillyard’s outlook held sway for over thirty years, scholars now regard his *World Picture* as an idealistic representation of early modern society rather than an accurate reflection, and have worked to complicate his account of how history and culture actually work. Just as history does not develop in a unilinear fashion, “culture itself is not a unitary phenomenon; nondominant elements interact with the dominant forms, sometimes coexisting with, or being absorbed or even destroyed by them, but also challenging, modifying or even displacing them.”⁹⁵ In the case of Elizabethan England, scholars now recognize that the highly stratified social order of early modern society was becoming less rigid; while still unquestionably hierarchical, it was far from simply a static system of fixed orders or groups. The realities of society indicate that it was in fact a more fluid and dynamic system, one that was undergoing a series of substantial changes. Many critics now view the Renaissance as “lacking in essentialist unity,

⁹³ Katharine Maus, “Introduction,” in *Four Revenge Tragedies*, ed. Katharine Eisaman Maus (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), xi-xii.

⁹⁴ Kari Boyd McBride, “The Politics of Domestic Arrangements,” in *Domestic Arrangements in Early Modern England*, ed. Kari Boyd McBride (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 2002): 1-14; 5.

⁹⁵ Jonathan Dollimore, *Radical Tragedy: Religion, Ideology and Power in the Drama of Shakespeare and His Contemporaries*, 3rd ed. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 7.

belonging neither to the medieval nor the modern period, but rather to a boundary era that was 'liminal' and conflicted in ideology."⁹⁶

Since Tillyard, historians have had difficulties in coming up with an accurate way of describing Tudor and Stuart social order. David Cressy offers one of the more clearly defined systems of categorization, a self-identified "working" classification: Gentlemen (which includes the entire aristocracy); Clergy and Professions; Merchants, Tradesmen and Craftsmen; Yeomen; Husbandmen; and Labourers and Servants.⁹⁷ Keith Wrightson arrives at a slightly different conclusion, noting how the uncertain position of the growing "middling sort" of people "formed a social-structural buffer between the ruling gentry and the mass of the common people... which undermined some traditional group identities without yet creating new ones of a stable nature." From this he calls for the "need to recognize the variety, flexibility and ambivalence of social relations in this period rather than to explain them away."⁹⁸ Sharing Wrightson's general view, Lee Beier asserts that there was no dominant social ideology at the time, only competing discourses. Beier's study traces the role of the metaphor of the body as a means of describing the interdependence of society, noting how it flourished in the early and mid-Tudor period, but was displaced by a different configuration during the reign of Elizabeth:

we now see society as represented as consisting of ranks and orders, whose relations were ultimately lacking in coherence apart from the principles of competition and mobility....Renaissance England moved to a vision of society in

⁹⁶ Lee Beier, "Social Discourse and the Changing Economy," in *A Companion to Renaissance Drama*, ed. Arthur F. Kinney (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2002): 50-67; 51.

⁹⁷ David Cressy, "Describing the Social Order of Elizabethan and Stuart England," *Literature and History* 3 (1976): 29-44; 35. In 1560, Sir Thomas Smith, Elizabeth's ambassador to France, saw only four categories of people: "gentlemen, citizens, yeomen artificers, and laborers."

⁹⁸ Keith Wrightson, "The Social Order of Early Modern England: Three Approaches," in *The World We Have Gained: Histories of Population and Social Structure*, eds. Lloyd Bonfield, Richard M. Smith, and Keith Wrightson (New York: Blackwell, 1986): 177-202; 200-01.

which individualism and competition were of greater significance than the discourse of status, hierarchy, and interdependence of an earlier era.⁹⁹

The relationship between birth and talent had long been a fraught and uneasy one, though birth generally won out over worth in Renaissance courts. However, with the rise of humanism (some humanist scholars rejected birth as the primary qualification for advancement, while others believed that competition and mobility were natural to society) and the expansion of secondary and university education (at least to those who could afford it), all of this helped pave the way for a burgeoning, though sometimes begrudging, acceptance of social mobility. Of course, there were limitations as to who could advance and how far one could move up, and not everyone was affected equally. As a point of fact, this period saw an exacerbation of the inequalities of wealth distribution; the laboring poor “saw both an absolute and relative expansion in their numbers and a deepening of their poverty.” Yet “to those well-placed to take advantage of the market opportunities of the day, notably the gentry, the merchants and the tradesmen of the towns and the yeomanry of the countryside, it brought an unprecedented level of prosperity.”¹⁰⁰ And even to those not well-placed, just knowing that the potential for advancement existed provided a tantalizing possibility. Such a dream of upward mobility must have appealed to more than a few dramatists, many of whom were educated but not born into the gentry.

Perhaps the most significant change of all, which profoundly impacted all levels of society, was a shifting of the economic base. In the past, the ownership of land served as the primary indicator of wealth. However, the early modern period saw the rise of an increasingly more sophisticated money economy as wealth was generated by other

⁹⁹ Beier, 57.

¹⁰⁰ Keith Wrightson, *English Society 1580-1680* (London: Hutchinson, 1982), 223.

enterprises, a point that Beier drives home: “more and more people were not landed, as groups engaged in trade, manufacturing, and the professions were increasingly significant.”¹⁰¹ And with this extra wealth one could, at least once James ascended the throne, purchase titles and honors with relative ease. As Lawrence Stone details, Elizabeth failed to increase the number of knights during her reign, averaging less than 20 newly honored knights per year. However, Elizabethan parsimony quickly gave way to Jacobean largess; during the first four months of his reign, James dubbed over 900 men knights.¹⁰² Though this pace slackened some during the following years, James created thousands more knights in his twenty-five year reign than Elizabeth did in her forty-four year reign. A similar trajectory can be seen when comparing the two monarchs’ in the conferring of new titles:

thanks to the Queen’s ultra-conservative policy, by 1603 the proportion of first or second generation [title holders] had fallen from 46 per cent. to 18 per cent. The inflation of titles by James and Buckingham resulted in a complete reversal of the situation, and by 1628 44 per cent. of the peerage were first generation and 57 per cent. first or second....The peers under Charles I were a more upstart group than at any time in the previous 200 years.¹⁰³

A not insignificant percentage of these titles were bought for money, with the result that a “mere” merchant or merchant’s sons could attain peerage for the right price. Thus, in the Jacobean period, social mobility and international trade were often inextricably linked together, as the rise of the merchant class was due in large part to the expanding enterprises of foreign trade and travel.

¹⁰¹ Beier, 52.

¹⁰² Lawrence Stone, *The Crisis of the Aristocracy, 1558-1641* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), 41. Even though later historians have, justifiably, critiqued Stone’s work and found it wanting in areas, their criticism usually focuses on his conclusions and interpretations, not his data. His later *The Family, Sex and Marriage* in particular has received severe criticism. See Houlbrooke, *The English Family*, for a good overview of Stone’s deficiencies (14-5).

¹⁰³ Stone, *Crisis*, 121-22.

Exploration, Trade and Exotic Contact

While still far from the trading powerhouse that it would become in the eighteenth century, England greatly increased its contact with foreign lands and peoples from non-European countries during the years of 1550-1650. This contact was mediated by trade, with England seeking direct access to the luxury goods (spices, silks, furs, precious metals) that it had previously imported via middlemen. Trade was conducted by joint stock companies, officially chartered and licensed by the monarchy. One of the first was the Muscovy Company, established in 1555 to discover an overland route through Russia to import Persian silks and spices. In 1580 the Turkey Company (later merging with the Venice Company to form the Levant Company) began trading directly with North Africa and the eastern Mediterranean. The East India Company, most famously of all, emerged in 1599, founded to trade goods with the far reaches of Asia. And 1609 saw the establishment of the Virginia Company, which marked the occasion of the first New World colony.¹⁰⁴ By the beginning of the Jacobean period, England was trading with Russia, Persia, Guinea, Barbary, East and Southeast Asia, North America, and the Caribbean, and more and more people were connected – either directly or indirectly – to the industry. In 1599 Thomas Platter, a Swiss physician visiting London, wrote in his diary that “most of the inhabitants are employed in commerce: they buy, sell and trade in all the corners of the globe, for which purpose the water serves them well.”¹⁰⁵ While Platter’s observations are limited and inexact, they do appear relatively accurate, as trade accounted for the single biggest source of revenue in the country: “at least two-thirds

¹⁰⁴ See Kenneth Andrews, *Trade, Plunder and Settlement: Maritime Enterprise and the Genesis of the British Empire, 1480-1630* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

¹⁰⁵ Quoted in William Sherman, “Travel and Trade,” in *A Companion to Renaissance Drama*, ed. Arthur F. Kinney (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002): 109-20; 115.

(and perhaps as much as three-quarters) of the gross national product derived from overseas trade between 1500 and 1700.”¹⁰⁶

While only a small portion of the population actually traveled to these far off exotic locales, the goods and peoples the ships brought back impacted the residents of London directly, even immediately. Clothing, for instance changed. With silks and velvets flooding the market, people now had more access to those items that were once reserved exclusively for the aristocracy. Diet as well became more varied, with items like sugar, currants, spices (nutmeg, pepper, cinnamon), and imported wines more readily available.¹⁰⁷ But food and clothing were not the only things that merchant ships brought back with them. With the mortality rate for sailors quite high during the period, English merchants often resorted to repopulating their ships with foreign sailors from such distant ports as Tangiers, Tunis, Alexandria, or Aleppo. These sailors, in turn, would land back in London, sometimes even staying there. Apparently the presence of these foreigners could stir up a great deal of hostility and anxiety, especially concerning their consumption of food and employment, resources which would otherwise have gone to the native English. In 1601 Elizabeth declared that she was

Highly discontented to understand the great numbers of Negroes and blackamoors which (as she is informed) are carried into this realm since the troubles between her highness and the King of Spain; who are fostered and powered here, to the great annoyance of her own liege people that which co[vet?] the relief which these people consume, as also for that the most of them are infidels having no understanding of Christ or his Gospel: hath given a special commandment that the said kind of people should be with all speed avoided and discharged out of this her majesty's realms.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 116.

¹⁰⁷ Jean Howard, “*Othello* as an Adventure Play,” in *Approaches to Teaching Shakespeare's Othello*, ed. Peter Erickson and Maurice Hunt (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 2005): 90-9; 90.

¹⁰⁸ *Tudor Royal Proclamations, Vol. 3*, eds. Paul L. Hughes and James F. Larkin (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1969), 221. Cited in Loomba, 52.

London's population of resident aliens, as well, included a large number of artisans and merchants from the less-exotic European countries of France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal, and Spain. In short, London was, by 1600, a much more multicultural space than it had been at the middle of the sixteenth century.¹⁰⁹

As a consequence of all of this contact, England began to experience two seemingly contradictory reactions: on the one hand, a new economic and cultural openness (England adopted new systems of credit, debt, currency, exchange, and financial speculation that used to be regarded as “usurious” [Jewish or Italianate practices]), on the other, a growing sense of unease over the “Turkish threat.” With the Ottoman empire expanding rapidly during this period, often through the acquisition of Christian land (principally the territory of Austria), there was concern that the Turks posed a serious threat to Christian rule in Europe. That Muslim-sponsored piracy and slavery preyed upon the English only exacerbated the problem. Linda Colley estimates that over 12,000 sailors from the British Isles were captured by Ottoman Turks during the years of 1600-40,¹¹⁰ while David D. Hebb calculates that Barbary pirates captured, “on average, seventy to eighty Christian vessels a year between 1592 and 1609.”¹¹¹ Although most of this activity took place hundreds to thousands of nautical miles away, Barbary pirates were so bold as to raid the English west coast on several different occasions, kidnapping citizens and either selling them into slavery or holding them for ransom. In October 1617, one of these Turkish pirate ships was captured by the British in the Thames estuary.¹¹² British

¹⁰⁹ See Howard, “*Othello* as an Adventure Play,” for a brief overview of English exposure to the foreign.

¹¹⁰ Linda Colley, *Captives* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2002), 4.

¹¹¹ David D. Hebb, *Piracy and the English Government, 1616-1642* (Aldershot, Hants, UK: Scolar Press, 1994), 15.

¹¹² Daniel Vitkus, “Introduction,” in *Three Turk Plays from Early Modern England*, ed. Daniel J. Vitkus (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000): 1-54; 3-4.

captives, often to avoid being sold into slavery, or to take advantage of economic possibilities, would sometimes “Turn Turk,” or convert to Islam and live in that country. Sometimes these converts made their way back to London and their sensational tales were later repackaged in popular captivity narratives, a few even finding their way to the stage. Perhaps the most notable instance of this type of adaptation comes from Robert Daborne’s dramatization of John Ward’s life in *A Christian Turned Turk* (1612). Ward, a notorious pirate, became a Barbary corsair in the early sixteenth century, operating primarily out of Tunis.¹¹³ The life story of Lording Barry offers a corresponding, yet inverse, example. The author of *Ram Alley* (c. 1606-07) and perhaps *The Family of Love* (c. 1602-07),¹¹⁴ Barry gave up his playwright’s life to sail the high seas as a pirate, an occupation he enjoyed for some years before returning to London as a trader until his death in 1629.¹¹⁵

These last two examples hint at a close and complex relationship between travel, trade, and England’s theaters. As William Sherman observes, it is more than coincidence that two of the prime London playhouses, the aptly named Globe and Fortune, were built in 1599-1600, the same years that the East India Company gained its charter and the Virginia Company received permission to establish a New World settlement.

Financially, London’s playing companies were even modeled after the “joint-stock” structure of the trading companies, where a small group of investors fronted the expenses

¹¹³ See Vitkus, “Introduction,” 23-39. Daborne’s sources for his play included popular ballads and pamphlets detailing and condemning Ward’s life.

¹¹⁴ *The Family of Love*, an incest play, had long been attributed to Middleton, though current critical opinion discredits this attribution.

¹¹⁵ Jeremy Lopez, “The View from *Ram Alley*: Biography, Acting, Canon,” unpublished paper (2007). For more information about Lording Barry’s biography, see Mary Bly, *Queer Virgins and Virgin Queens on the Early Modern Stage* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), and Elizabeth Hanson, “‘There’s Meat and Money Too’: Rich Widows and Allegories of Wealth in Jacobean City Comedy,” *English Literary History* 72:1 (2005): 209-38.

of the venture and then shared in the profits (if there were any).¹¹⁶ As for travel, the vast majority of English citizens did not have the means or desire to risk a long sea voyage to venture to the continent – let alone to the Mediterranean – and thus only rarely encountered any ethnic diversity. Except, that is, when they went to the London theaters, the most likely place that they would encounter foreigners with any regularity.

According to Thomas Platter's diary, "the English pass their time, learning at the play what is happening abroad...since for the most part the English do not much use to travel, but prefer to learn of foreign matters and take their pleasures at home."¹¹⁷ Upwards of 18,000 to 20,000 such "journeys" to the theaters occurred each week; given that these "traveler-spectators" encountered "foreign" lands populated by "foreign" people, the theatre deeply shaped English imaging of outsiders."¹¹⁸

Early modern actors themselves were some of the most visible "travelers" of the period. Between 1500 and 1600, "more than 140 plays, masques, and entertainments were printed featuring at least one traveler or trader in the cast of characters." Using data collated by Berger, Bradford, and Sondergard, Sherman identifies 105 merchants in plays during the last decade of Elizabeth's reign. These numbers

are surpassed only by soldiers (343), prisoners (168), and citizens (159). Counts of related characters offer even more surprising indications of the period's reoccupations: there are nearly as many mariners (24) as kings and queens together (26), and many more travelers (40) and ambassadors (64); and there are almost as many usurers (56 – most of whom are foreigners and many Jews) as magicians (31) and witches (26) combined.¹¹⁹

Perhaps the most startling statistic that Sherman finds is that the total number of Turks and Moors (45 and 55 respectively), "is just one fewer than the 101 characters identified

¹¹⁶ Sherman, 109.

¹¹⁷ Quoted in Loomba, 8.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 8.

¹¹⁹ Sherman, 110.

specifically as Londoners; and when we add the 30 Venitians (and the dozens of others from Milan, Verona, and Malta), it begins to appear that... local characters were actually outnumbered by the foreigners who were the objects of [Londoners'] fear and fascination."¹²⁰

With all of the drama inherent in the enterprise of trade – the pan-cultural curiosity, the obsession with cultures and commodities outside the shores of England, the threat of capture, religious conversion or death – it is no wonder that early modern audiences developed something of a fascination with the contemporary Mediterranean context. As Daniel Vitkus explains,

It was both the exoticism and the profitability of the Mediterranean maritime trade that made it an exciting topic for the London stage. During the late Elizabethan period, there was a growing sense of international commerce as a daring enterprise carried out heroically in dangerously exotic regions where piracy, slavery, fraud, and violence were normal practices with which to be reckoned.¹²¹

Just as the English economy had become financially dependent on foreign trade, the identity of the English theaters had become dependent on foreign travel and contact.

It is, then, within these broad cultural and historical moments that I situate my readings. While not always specifically referenced, they do provide the background – that larger conversation – from which to frame an understanding of how incest and miscegenation function as dramatic tropes. More specifically, the relationship between the two interconnected taboos could be one of a culture with long established institutions – the family, marriage, social hierarchies – navigating the new social terrain opened up by changes in the social, political, and geographic climate; the tensions between incest

¹²⁰ Ibid., 118.

¹²¹ Daniel Vitkus, "Turks and Jews in *The Jew of Malta*," in *Early Modern English Drama: A Critical Companion*, ed. Patrick Cheney, Andrew Hadfield, and Garrett Sullivan, Jr. (Oxford: Oxford University Press UP, 2006): 61-72; 63.

and miscegenation as, in part, a response to the tensions and conflicts brought up with the opening up of the social and geographic spectrums. Just as social and political change can be either exhilarating and rewarding or contaminating, incest and miscegenation both elicit responses that can be simultaneously titillating and horrifying.

Or to phrase things a slightly different way, it is my contention that part of the fascination with incest relates to the seemingly contrary, distantly, and unrelated fascination with exogamy and the conflicting attraction and repulsion of the cultural/racial/social other (which correlates to the attraction and repulsion of the cultural/racial/social similar). Interestingly, both of these dramatic themes occur with much greater frequency during the Jacobean period, when Mediterranean trade and cultural contact really took off. Perhaps, too, this has something to do with England and its nascent nationalism, a culture that was exploring exactly what it meant to be English and even European amidst a broader Mediterranean background. Or in other words, it was during this time that England, insular both geographically and culturally, begun a process of reordering and re-evaluation of what it meant to be English, both within English society and in relation to the larger and ever more expanding world.

* * * * *

Initially, this project began as a study focused on why early modern drama so frequently employed the trope of incest, and what kinds of cultural work such dramatic representations performed. Early on, I assumed that early modern England must have been obsessed with incest and that the drama's preoccupation with this issue in some way reflected an actual societal fixation. I have since realized that incest, though not

unknown in the period, was relatively – if not surprisingly – uncommon and was of little concern to the average citizen in everyday social life. Given this apparent discrepancy between the level of concern about incest in the cultural as opposed to the literary realm, it appears that the preoccupation with incest is peculiarly confined to the stage, where it serves as a means of entering into a larger conversation, one that includes a discussion of the parallel interdiction against excessive exogamy.

Given the prevalence of incest in early modern drama, it should come as no surprise that there exist a number of significant studies on the topic, critical works that seemingly approach this issue from every conceivable angle – from structuralism,¹²² philosophy,¹²³ and anthropology, to psychoanalysis, performance theory,¹²⁴ feminism,¹²⁵ and new

¹²² Lois Bueler tackles the issue from a purely structural perspective, arguing for the theme's "usefulness in complicating and unraveling plots; and its peculiar economy for probing the moral relationships between individual passions and social well-being" (119).

¹²³ Concerned with issues of structure, character, and genre, Marc Shell, in *The End of Kinship: Measure for Measure, Incest, and the Ideal of Universal Siblinghood* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1988), grounds his study in Aristotelian principles, particularly that of *telos* or the notion of the final end. Shell contends that the "sexual act is teleologically conflated with its biological end, so that intercourse is always reproduction and fornication is always bastardizing, hence always eventually incest" (79). Following from this foundational claim, Shell views the end of chastity as the preservation of property, while the "end of lust is incest, whose end is the end of kinship, and therefore, the destruction of the social order and its replacement with natural order" (24). The plots of great drama, such as the "problem play" *Measure for Measure*, must reflect this conflict between nature and culture.

¹²⁴ Consciously eschewing new historicist trends, Zenon Luis-Martinez's *In Words and Deeds: The Spectacle of Incest in English Renaissance Tragedy* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2002) instead adopts a critical approach that combines psychoanalysis with performance theory. His main thesis contends that "desire becomes the underside of representations of incest as dictated by Christian morality, the law, and the rules of literary convention. Here lies the irresistible attraction that playwrights and audience alike felt toward the subject" (5). Calling his work primarily a study of desire, he also argues that the theme of incest is used as a literary motif primarily for its close relation to the problem of private subjectivity and identity formation – that is, "dramatic incest is above all the mimesis of a mode of access of the subject to his/her private desire" (25).

¹²⁵ Maureen Quilligan, *Incest and Agency in Elizabeth's England* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), essentially argues for the positive authorial benefits of using the incest theme. She contends that "incest" (which she views as denoting not only sexual encounters with close relations or marriages within the family, but also close literary and emotional bonds with fathers, brothers, husbands and siblings' husbands) potentially offers women writers literary agency by "halting the traffic of women." Following Lévi-Strauss's argument that the incest taboo was instituted "to extend patriarchal alliances across social groups by making a bond between men," incest – where the woman consciously refuses to take part in this exchange by making an erotic choice of her close kin – thus frustrates this trade in women (2-3). Quilligan argues that the women writers of the period who sought out positions of authority in the canons of literature and utilized incest motifs, "appear to be speaking directly to the thematics of endogamy

historicism.¹²⁶ While I sometimes draw on insights from a variety of critical schools, my study most readily fits into the last category. In order to add further depth, nuance, and even balance to our understanding of how incest functions on the early modern stage, I spend a significant amount of time discussing miscegenation and the ways in which these two taboos interrelate. Surprisingly, not all that much work has been done on miscegenation in the early modern period. Or more accurately, there has not been much extended work solely devoted to this issue, as often discussions of this type of exogamy get folded into books devoted to the more general study of race in the period.¹²⁷ By pairing these two impermissible sexualities together and showing how they complicate

they found there, manipulating this discourse to their own purposes of self-authorization as female storytellers” (8).

¹²⁶ New Historicists, looking at historically contingent environmental factors, have tended to find three main intellectual and social pressures that led to the proliferation of incest stories: the humanistic literary tradition (the Greeks and Romans also frequently wrote about incest), the emotional climate within the family (questions over genetic origin and lineage, the longing for closer emotional affinity with family members which tended to be denied), and recent dynastic history and the theological debates concerning marriage, divorce and remarriage that these events spawned. That is, Henry VIII’s divorce from Catharine of Aragon on the grounds of incest, a move that, more or less, directly led to England’s break with Rome. See Forker’s “‘A Little More than Kin’” for a brief overview of these three explanations.

In *Monarchy and Incest in Renaissance England*, Bruce Boehrer focuses on this last point, undertaking a critical approach that combines New Historicism with Lacanian psychoanalysis. In essence, Boehrer provides a political reading of incest that traces the relationship between identity formation and the monarch through a family-state analogy. Using the Lacanian notion of the Name-of-the-father, which he views as the antecedent authority for all human subjectivity and utterance, he argues that “the prohibition of incest provides the foundation, for any given individual, of phallic law; monarchy then confirms and instantiates phallic law beyond the level of the family” (8). In other words, he proposes that the incest prohibition serves as a means of self-promotion and self-defense, particularly for the monarchy. Arguing that the relationship between royal power and the citizens’ desires can often be interpreted as parent-child incest, Boehrer claims that it becomes an ambivalent image – it can either support a nurturing mother-child relationship or denounce tyrannical monarchical power. For Boehrer, the divorce question of Henry VIII shapes the literature on incest during the period.

Richard McCabe, *Incest, Drama and Nature’s Law 1550-1700* (1993), on the other hand, looks at the first issue, identifying Sophocles’s *Oedipus the King* and Euripides’s *Hippolytus* as the classical literary precedents from which nearly all of early modern incest plays derive as either adaptations, imitations or parodies. More specifically, McCabe argues that dramatic incest portrays early modern responses to changing conceptions of natural law and natural authority. Since incest is the ultimate breach of natural law, it thus becomes a powerful metaphor for other forms of political and social corruption.

¹²⁷ One of the rare book-length studies of miscegenation is Celia R. Daileader, *Racism, Misogyny, and the Othello Myth: Inter-racial Couples from Shakespeare to Spike Lee*. See also Kim Hall’s seminal *Things of Darkness: Economies of Race and Gender in Early Modern England* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995), and Ania Loomba’s excellent *Shakespeare, Race, and Colonialism*.

and complement one another, I hope to provide a useful pattern of reading that will open up a wide variety of plays in intriguing and surprising ways.

I have organized this study into two principal parts: the first focuses primarily on issues of social mobility and miscegenation, and the second concerns issues of exotic cultural contact and ethnic miscegenation. I begin by looking at a phenomenon seemingly confined exclusively to the early modern stage: the incestuous widow (women who either are victims or perpetrators of incestuous advances). Surveying early modern perceptions of widows and widowhood, I trace the ways in which the incestuous widow stands as a subset of the lusty widow stereotype. I argue that the prevalence of this figure on stage stems from her ability to embody the period's ambivalence to both social mobility and female sexuality. On the one hand, marrying a wealthy widow offered men unique opportunities for social advancement. Yet on the other hand, widows posed serious problems to a patriarchal society, since the remarried widow potentially remained outside male control: ungovernable, financially independent, and sexually insatiable. Because her presence tests both the endogamous and exogamous limits of acceptable marriage choices, the insatiable widow only intensifies these issues further, revealing the areas where the competing interests of the individual, family, and state intersect and clash, often on the battleground of the widow's choice of a new husband.

In order to consider the dramatic implications of the incestuous widow on social order, my second chapter compares two closely related revenge tragedies: Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* and John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*, both of which configure incest as a hyper-inflated reaction against the perceived contamination from social miscegenation. Viewing Lorenzo's deep and abiding interest in his sister's love interests

as suspicious, I argue that he is motivated by incestuous longings, which fits a systematic pattern of silences, gaps, and half-truths in the play. I then contend that Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* represents a conscious rewriting of Kyd's immensely popular play, one which brings out and heightens the play's underlying themes of sexual deviancy.

Offering a stronger argument in favor of merit over blood than in Kyd, Webster sharpens his critique of the aristocracy by heightening and making more explicit the incestuous relationship between Ferdinand and the Duchess. Ultimately he elevates the role of incest in the play to a debilitating psychological disorder, a madness that eventually manifests itself as lycanthropy. Unable to control both his mind and his body (its shape, its desires), Ferdinand stands as a representative of a degenerative aristocracy unfit to rule, "noble" in only the most ironic sense. Significantly, by portraying the incestuous widow as a victim of her brother's oppressive sexual and social regulation, both *The Spanish Tragedy* and *The Duchess of Malfi* ultimately provide sympathetic depictions of social and sexual mobility.

In the last chapter, I focus on *Titus Andronicus*, one of Shakespeare's many miscegenation plays. Returning to the question posed at the beginning of this project as to the "significance" of Shakespeare's replacement of incest with miscegenation, I argue that this move radically alters the structure and meaning of Ovid's tale of violation and revenge, turning a story that depicts the abuse of kinship ties into one that, by clarifying one's duty to one's family, at least partially celebrates such bonds. The state, permeable and prone to the corrupting influence of the outside Other, utterly fails to protect or do justice to the Andronici; in turn, highlighting the importance of familial loyalty critiques the nation's fractured relationship to the state. Additionally, by analyzing the

encompassing role of family in the play – including the importance of family to the play’s “barbarians” – I contend that, however powerful and binding familial bonds may be, they simultaneously prove to be violent, wild, and uncontrollable.

The texts that I have chosen to explore in depth might not, at first glance, reflect the most obvious choices. I do not, for instance look at the most well-known and explicit incest drama, such as Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, Beaumont and Fletcher’s *A King and No King*, and Ford’s *’Tis Pity She’s a Whore*. Likewise, I do not consider three of the most critically acclaimed miscegenation plays: Shakespeare’s *Othello*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, and *The Merchant of Venice*. In fact, two of the three plays I focus on in depth – *The Spanish Tragedy* and *Titus Andronicus* – do not technically have incest in them, and even its presence in *The Duchess of Malfi* is not explicit. Yet for this very reason they stand to benefit the most from an exploration that considers the relationship between incest and miscegenation. And since these three plays belong to the loosely conceived genre of revenge tragedy, not only do they all speak to one another, but tracing the ghosted resonances of these sexual taboos opens up the interconnections among these plays in intriguing and surprising ways.

CHAPTER ONE

The Incestuous Widow and Social Mobility in Early Modern Drama

Ever since Frank Whigham's "Sexual and Social Mobility in *The Duchess of Malfi*," which views the play as an "interrogation of the highly charged boundary phenomena of a stratified but changing society,"¹ critics no longer debate questions about morality, decadence, and/or aesthetics, but have instead turned towards situating the text historically and examining the sociopolitical contexts of its making. My study – which focuses on the relationship between incest, exogamy, and social mobility – is no exception. But despite finding Whigham's general contention that the incest in the play somehow relates to the Jacobean crisis of mobility highly suggestive and useful, his lack of concern for gender issues leads to a glaring oversight in how the play configures incest and social mobility: the Duchess' status as a widow.

And the Duchess is not alone. There are at least four other prominent incestuous widows – women who either perpetuate incestuous advances, reciprocate them, or are the victimized object of them – on the early modern stage: Gertrude in Shakespeare's

Hamlet (1600), Gratiana in Middleton's *The Revenger's Tragedy* (1606), Hecate in

¹ *PMLA* 100:2 (Mar, 1985): 167-86; 167. All citations are from this edition. Whigham's article has since been reprinted, sometimes in an abbreviated form and with a slightly altered title, in *Staging the Renaissance: Reinterpretations of Elizabethan and Jacobean Drama*, ed. David Scott Kastan & Peter Stallybrass (New York: Routledge, 1991), 263-74; *The Duchess of Malfi: Contemporary Critical Essays*, ed. Dymphna Callaghan (London: MacMillan, 2000), 167-200; and *Incest and the Literary Imagination*, ed. Elizabeth Barnes (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2002): 59-93. This reading also serves as the basis for chapter four in Whigham's *Seizures of the Will in Early Modern English Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996): 188-224.

Middleton's *The Witch* (1616), and Livia in Middleton's *Women, Beware Women* (1621).² Most likely this number actually represents an underestimate of the total number of incestuous widows, for I am admittedly not familiar with the marital history of all the women in every single incest play. Also, such a categorization can sometimes only be inferred rather than indisputably determined, as often a single mother is never officially declared a widow. In Middleton's *The Witch*, for instance, although the titular character has a seemingly legitimate offspring, the text never once mentions any father, alive or dead; such cases strongly suggest viewing the mother as a widow.

In addition, a surprisingly large number of plays contain both incest and widows, plays where such elements intersect less directly than in the examples cited above. For example, in Shakespeare's *All's Well that Ends Well* (c. 1603-4), the widowed Countess of Rossillion jests with her adoptive charge Helena by insisting that she regard her as a mother, not as a mistress (1.3). Having just learned that Helena loves her son Bertram, the Countess playfully invokes the horror of incest in order to elicit a full confession of love from Helena. Fletcher's *Fair Maid of the Inn* (1626) provides another example: in order to save the life of her son Cesario, the recently-widowed Mariana lies to the Duke, telling him that Cesario is not really her son. The Duke, perceiving that Cesario has been unjustly denied his due inheritance, demands that either Mariana or her lawful daughter Clarissa marry him and give him three-fourths of the estate. Tourneur's *The Atheist's Tragedy* (c. 1609-11) involves a different configuration: Castabella's sickly husband

² Jocasta in Gascoigne and Kinwelmershe's *Jocasta* (1566) could also conceivably be added to this list, though being written decades earlier than any of the others, it is something of a different beast altogether. The story behind the play, however, deserves some consideration. Like Gascoigne's better-known *Supposes*, *Jocasta* was translated from an Italian play, Ludovico Dolce's Senecan-influenced adaptation of Euripides' *Phoenissae*. Interestingly, and fittingly given the topic of this chapter, it was around the time of these translations that Gascoigne himself married a rich widow; the children from the widow's first marriage, suspicious of his intentions, responded with a legal suit in 1568 seeking to protect their financial interests from their new father.

Rousard dies during the course of the play, but at the time that her father-in-law attempts to rape her, she has not yet been widowed. In other plays, such as Fletcher's *Women Pleased* (1620) or Middleton's *The Phoenix* (1604) and *No Wit, No Help Like a Woman's* (1613), the widow has nothing to do with the incest plot. It is also perhaps worth noting that Shakespeare appears to consciously invoke the specter of the incestuous widow in his portrait of Olivia in *Twelfth Night* (c. 1600). Olivia's mourning over her dead brother not only borders on the incestuous since it is so excessive (seven years), but also since it so closely mirrors the mourning of a wife over her husband.³ It is no wonder that John Manningham in 1602 (in one of the few surviving eyewitness accounts of an early modern performance) misidentifies Olivia as a "widdowe."⁴ In total, then, a significant number of incest plays – perhaps as many as twenty to twenty-five – prominently feature at least one widowed character.⁵

³ Kathryn Jacobs, in *Marriage Contracts From Chaucer to the Renaissance Stage* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2001), calls Olivia a "widow in all but name" (153). See pp. 153-4 for a more detailed account of how Olivia consciously resembles a widow.

⁴ Quoted in Jennifer Panek, *Widows and Suitors in Early Modern English Comedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 8. See also Stephen Greenblatt, "Fiction and Friction," in *Shakespearean Negotiations* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988): 66-93, esp. pp. 67-72. Manningham's summary of *Twelfth Night* survives in his *Diary*, which covers the period of January 1602 to April 1603. At the time, he was a student at Middle Temple, where a performance of the play occurred in the Hall on February 2, 1602.

⁵ Somewhat surprisingly, the early modern incestuous widow enjoyed an afterlife that extended into the late eighteenth-century. Horace Walpole, in his 1768 *The Mysterious Mother*, reprises her role in a play that features not just any regular incest, but double incest as its scandalous central theme. The Countess, the otherwise unnamed character alluded to in the play's title, seduces her son Edmund on the night she becomes a widow; she conceives and gives birth to a girl. Years later, a fateful encounter leads to Edmund unknowingly falling in love and becoming engaged to the product of that unnatural union, his daughter-sister Adeliza. While part of Walpole's agenda was surely to provide a shocking story for his audience, one of the more remarkable aspects of Walpole's composition and technique is how eminently suitable he feels his subject matter is for the stage. By consciously imitating the verse style of the great Elizabethan and Jacobean plays, he imagines his play a direct descendant (perhaps even a sibling) of those classic dramas. Apparently Byron shared Walpole's lofty estimation; in 1811, he boldly proclaimed *The Mysterious Mother* as a drama of the "highest order" and the last great tragedy written in the English language. See *The Castle of Otranto, and The Mysterious Mother*, ed. Frederick S. Frank (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 2003), 27.

In and of itself, this association between widowhood and incest may not seem all that remarkable, particularly since widows were often thought to be preternaturally lascivious. According to this prevailing stereotype, a widow, her libido having been inflamed by the conjugal pleasures of married life, desired nothing so much as to resume sexual activities; she often, and aggressively, sought out young male suitors to satisfy her outsized sexual appetites. Two popular proverbs highlight this opinion: “He that woos a maid, must fain lie and flatter, / But he that woos a widow, must down with his breeches and at her,” and “He that woos a maid must come seldom in her sight, / But he that woos a widow must woo her day and night.”⁶ Similar sentiments also crop up in many of the dramas of the period. In Shakespeare’s *The Taming of the Shrew* (c. 1594-5), for instance, Tranio mentions that Licio (Hortensio in disguise), having just formally announced his resolution to quit the Bianca-wooing contest, would rather “have a lusty widow now / That shall be wooed and wedded in a day” (4.2.50-1).⁷ The Cardinal, in Webster’s *The Duchess of Malfi*, resorts to nearly identical reasoning when he scoffs at the notion that the Duchess with never remarry: “But commonly that motion lasts no longer / Than the turning of an hourglass; the funeral sermon / And it, end both together” (1.2.224-6).⁸

Given this affiliation, the incestuous widow could thus be seen as simply a logical extension of the lusty widow stereotype, though here with an added touch of perversity through a more extreme flaunting of sexual and social norms that only acts to emphasize the moral condemnation of her character. It is remarkable, however, that none of the

⁶ Cited in Elizabeth Foyster, “Marrying the Experienced Widow in Early Modern England: The Male Perspective,” in *Widowhood in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, ed. Sandra Cavallo and Lyndan Warner (Harlow: Longman, 1999): 108-24; 111.

⁷ Quoted from the Arden Shakespeare Edition, Third Series, ed. Barbara Hodgdon (London: Methuen Drama, 2010).

⁸ Quoted from the New Mermaids edition of the play, ed. Elizabeth M. Brennan (New York: W.W. Norton, 1989).

numerous non-dramatic texts on widows (treatises, sermons, ballads, pamphlets, conduct books) ever associate this figure with the sexual “crime” of incest. Perhaps the closest non-dramatic reference of this affiliation comes from much later in 1741, in Samuel Richardson’s extremely popular book of model letters, *Letters Written to and for Particular Friends, on the Most Important Occasions*. In a letter “From a Gentleman, strenuously expostulating with an old rich Widow, about to marry a very young gay Gentleman,” Richardson, in something of an Oedipal panic, writes: “It seems to me, to be next to a Degree of Incest for a Woman all hoary and grey-goosed over by Time, or who will be soon so, to expose herself to the Embraces of a young Fellow, who is not so old as her first Son would have been, had he lived.”⁹ Given the lack of association between incest and widows outside of the theater, it appears that the linkage of widows with incest is a peculiarly dramatic phenomenon.

So why is the figure of the incestuous widow so common on the early modern stage? What is so particularly dramatic about this character or the issues and anxieties that she raises? How do incest, miscegenation and widowhood relate to one another? One of the overriding arguments of this and the following chapters is that incest and miscegenation represent an appealing trope for exploring issues of class structure through the figure of the widow since she embodies the early modern ambivalence to both social mobility and female sexuality. On the one hand a wealthy widow stood as a desirable object for young men aspiring for social and economic advancement through marriage; on the other, she remained a threatening figure since she also represented feminine sexual and economic independence.

⁹ Richardson, 210. As a testament to their popularity, six editions of these letter templates were published during his lifetime.

What, then, are the dominant ideologies surrounding her? What do “official” discourses say about her position within the social order? Exploring the prevailing widow stereotypes in conjunction with some of the most popular and influential writings on this figure offers at least a partial answer.

The Widow in Early Modern England

Perhaps the best-known early modern treatise on widowhood is Juan Luis Vives’ *The Instruction of a Christian Woman*, first published in Latin in 1523 and later translated into English by Richard Hyrde in 1529. A Spanish humanist of Jewish descent, Vives dedicated his extensive commentary on Augustine’s *The City of God* to Henry VIII, an act which ultimately led to the royal family inviting him to be the tutor of Princess Mary, for whom he wrote *The Instruction*. A staunch Catholic, Vives fell out of favor with the English crown when he opposed Henry’s divorce from Catherine of Aragon. Despite his faith, Vives’ *Instruction* proved to have lasting popularity in Protestant England; the English edition was reprinted at least eight times up until 1592.

In his discussion on proper widowhood conduct, Vives places the interests of the deceased husband front and center. For Vives, the husband serves a clear role in the family as the protector and ruler – a patriarchal structure of family life that survives even the death of the patriarch. He was and always will be, for the wife, “defender of thyne owne Chastitie, saver and keeper of thy bodie, father and tutour of thy children, wealth of thy house, householde, and thy goods, yea and more too, thy governour and Lord.”¹⁰

¹⁰ M. Lewes Vives, *The Instruction of a Christian Woman* (London, 1585), 368-9. All references are to this paginated edition.

Those widows who find some joy in their new-found freedom and independence are merely delusional and misguided:

Also many be glad, that their husbands be gone, as who were rid out of yoke & bondage: & they rejoyce that they be out of dominion & bondage, & have recovered their liberty: but they bee of a foolish opinion. For the ship is not at liberty, that lacketh a governour, but rather destitute: neither a childe that lacketh his tutor, but rather wandring without order and reason.

Elsewhere Vives does not hold back the severe repugnance he feels towards widows who do not properly lament the loss of their lord and governor, calling them and the “cold love” that they show a “thing... so foule, that none can be more abhominable, nor more cursed.”¹¹ In essence, Vives conceives of the widow as perpetual wife, still obligated to living life in the service of the husband and with his wishes in mind. Since according to Christian theology the soul does not perish when the body dies,

a good Widowe ought to suppose, that ther husband is not utterly dead, but liveth, both with life of his soule, which is the very life, and beside with her remembraunce....let her keepe the remembrance of her husband with reverence, and not with weeping: and let her take for a solemne and greate othe, to sweare by her husbands soul, and let her live and do so, as she shall think to please her husbände, being nowe no man but a spirit purified, & a devine thing. Also let her take him for her keeper and spy, not only of her deedes, but also of her conscience.¹²

According to Vives’ conception of the family after the death of its head, the deceased husband assumes a role of constant omniscient surveillance akin to that of God’s, a form of Foucauldian control that Barbara Todd terms “patriarchal spiritualism.”¹³

Of course widows, particularly young ones, face many temptations that threaten to undermine their ability to live such a chaste and “desolate” life. Vives, much more so than Becon, worries that the “liberty of widowhood” often leads women to perform acts

¹¹ Ibid., 365.

¹² Ibid., 380-1.

¹³ Barbara Todd, “The Virtuous Widow in Protestant England,” in *Widowhood in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, ed. Sandra Cavallo and Lyndan Warner (Harlow: Longman, 1999): 66-83; 69.

of iniquity (from “foule and unclean speach” to extramarital affairs) that they would never have previously done out of fear of their husbands. Although he does ultimately acknowledge remarriage as one option, he makes this concession at the very end of his book and recommends this only as a last resort to avoid burning in hell for committing the sin of adultery. It is quite clear that Vives does not truly endorse remarriage, claiming it tantamount to adultery: “For what bodye would not abhorre her, that after her first husbands death, sheweth her self to long after an other, & casteth away her spouse Christ, and marrieth the divell... being [then] ... wydowe, wife and adulterer?”¹⁴ Vives particularly implores widows with children to remain single, for in bringing home a new husband, “she bringeth upon her children an enemye, and not a nourisher: not a father, but a tyrant”¹⁵ who will strip them of any affection or inheritance to which they are entitled. In Vives, the memory of a husband must be kept, and it cannot exist if the wife has remarried; a remarriage essentially acts as a replacement and erasure of the previous husband.

Vives proposes a list of alternative solutions to dealing with the problems of the headless household, all of which enable the widow to preserve her chastity through the simultaneous withdrawal from worldly activities and the presence of men. For instance, Vives counsels young widows “to put the bringing up of her children unto some good & sad man,”¹⁶ and “if she have a gret house, that requireth much mans service, let her make some well aged man ruler, that is sad & discrete, and of good conditions, whose honesty shall be his masters worship,”¹⁷ a preemptive move meant to eliminate the likely

¹⁴ Vives, 383.

¹⁵ Ibid., 402.

¹⁶ Ibid., 389.

¹⁷ Ibid., 391.

community gossip that would arise if a widow instead employed a young, handsome male servant. Alternatively, Vives suggests that she could follow St. Jerome's words that "best is for a widowe to minish her householde, in especiall of men, and to take unto her some well aged woman, wise and virtuous, with whome she may lead her life: and aske counsaile of her in such matters as pertayne to women," or, "if she be aged her selfe, let her take to her some olde man, that is some kinseman of hers, or of her aliaunce, whome shee may trust unto."¹⁸ And lastly, if she wishes to move in with her kinsman (or is forced to out of financial or other obligations), she should choose those from the husband's side of the family rather than her own: "Let her dwell rather with her mother in law, or her husbands alliance and kinse-folkes, then with her owne, both for the remembraunce of her husband, for whose sake it may appeare, that shee loveth better his kinne and his blood, then her owne."¹⁹ All of these options consciously strip away any worldly power from the widow, delegating all of the household and business duties to others deemed more worthy and qualified to address these issues. Bent on preserving the husband's memory and role in the family even when dead, Vives' account is especially attuned to male anxieties regarding female sexuality and rule, an attribute that helped make it a popular read during the reigns of England's first two ruling female monarchs.

In Thomas Becon's *The New Catechism* (c. 1560), a homiletic work written as a dialogue between a father and his five-year-old son, Becon takes a decidedly more scripture-based approach to the education of widows. One of the most prolific and influential Protestant polemicists of the 1530-50s, Becon wrote dozens of religious and polemical works, many under the pseudonym of Theodore Basil (some during Henry

¹⁸ Vives, 391-2.

¹⁹ Ibid., 392.

VIII's reign and others after he was exiled by Mary I). His *Sick Man's Salve* (1553) in particular enjoyed enormous popularity. Mary Patterson describes the text as "part devotional manual, part cautionary tale, part civic and familial guidebook," and labels it a "best seller": not only did it undergo at least twenty-nine to thirty-one editions, it also remained in demand for some six decades after the author's death.²⁰ Even though his *Catechism* did not enjoy as much commercial success, Becon's readership was overall both widespread and long term. Patterson notes how "already by July 1546, his books were deemed dangerously influential (the assumption follows that notable numbers of people – or perhaps especially notable individuals – were reading them) and no fewer than thirteen of them were condemned by royal proclamation."²¹ Becon's relationship to the crown, however, varied much more widely. Henry VIII declared him heretical (he ended up recanting), while Edward VI promoted him to the chaplaincy in the house of the Lord Protector Somerset. Mary I quickly exiled him after she took over the throne, and Elizabeth I largely ignored him, overlooking him for any significant post, much to Becon's dismay.

In the *Catechism*, Becon begins his brief lesson on the proper office of widows by first dividing them into two camps according to age: younger and older. Younger widows, according to Becon, often "wax wanton against Christ, and follow Satan, breaking their first faith and promise... which is to abstain from all uncleanness both of body and mind, and to lead a pure and honest life."²² Drawing a parallel between looseness of the tongue

²⁰ Mary Patterson, *Domesticating the Reformation: Protestant Best Sellers, Private Devotion, and the Revolution of English Piety* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2007), 24.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 90.

²² Thomas Becon, *The Catechism of Thomas Becon*, ed. John Ayre, Parker Society Reprint (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1968), 365.

and sexual profligacy,²³ Becon contends they also “learn to go from house to house idle, yea, not idle only, but also prattlers and busy-bodies, speaking things which are not comely.” Unable to overcome their “light, vain, trifling, dishonest, unhousewife-like” nature – that is, their inability to control themselves sexually, socially and spiritually – young widows are in constant danger of eternal damnation; channeling Saint Paul, Becon thus advises them to “marry, to bear children, to guide the house, and give none occasion to the adversary to speak evil.” With a proper office to conduct and with a husband to govern over them, young widows that remarry in the name of the Lord “shall answer to their age, live honestly with their husbands, be free from all suspicion of uncleanness, and pass over their time among their neighbours in good name and fame.”²⁴

As for older widows past their childbearing years, Becon finds those who choose to remarry at fault for beginning “to think anew of the world” and “set[ting] their mind on fleshly pleasures.” Some, being nearly eighty years of age, marry with young men of eighteen; others, “so plagued with diseases that they were not almost able to stir in their beds,” marry men who leave them miserable and destitute after they have run through all of their money. In order to avoid such “monstrous” and “prodigious” marriages “in times past hated even of the very heathen and infidels,” Becon recommends that older widows “apply their minds unto the exercises of spiritual and heavenly things, always meditating death, and their departure from this vale of misery.”²⁵ Primarily based on his reading of scripture (during the course of this brief dialogue he quotes or alludes to four different

²³ For a discussion of the connection between the talkative woman and the sexually available woman, see Lynda Boose, “Scolding Brides and Bridling Scolds: Taming the Woman’s Unruly Member,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 42:2 (1991): 179-213, esp. p. 196. See also Peter Stallybrass, “Reading the Body: *The Revenger’s Tragedy* and the Jacobean Theater of Consumption,” *Renaissance Drama* 18 (1987): 121-48.

²⁴ Becon, 365-6.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 366.

biblical passages: 1 Timothy v, Judith viii, Luke ii, and Philippians i), in essence Becon's instruction to older widows amounts to creating a protestantized version of a nun, cleansed of all her popish trappings. Playing off the inherited, though now discredited, conception of the celibate, cloistered nun married to Christ and devoted to doing good works, Becon's ideal older widow devotes all of her time to the service of the church:

about matters of God and about businesses of the congregation, and wholly to give herself to the exercises of the spirit, as to frequent the temple in the time of prayer, to be present at the sermons, to visit the sick, to relieve the needy, to wash the feet of the saints, to be rich in good works, to continue in prayers and supplications both day and night, and to be holy both in body and mind.²⁶

Two character sketches first included in the second edition of Sir Thomas Overbury's *New and Choice Characters* (1615) also proved wildly popular during the early modern period.²⁷ Employing the use of satire, exaggeration, and malicious humor, *Characters* offers a dramatically different tone than the earnestness of Vives and Becon. For Overbury, there are only two kinds of widows: "vertuous" and "ordinarie." Much like the ideal widow in Becon and Vives, the virtuous widow never remarries out of deference to her husband's memory and to the future of her children. Devoting her time to charity,

²⁶ Ibid., 365.

²⁷ In actuality, Overbury most likely did not write these sections on widows, which first appear two years after his death in the second edition of his character sketches. The first edition was originally published a year earlier, and contained only twenty-two characters, some of these which were even written by others than himself ("other learned Gentlemen his friends" as the title maintains). A prominent author well-connected to the Court and literary scene (he was an influential best friend/advisor to James' favorite Sir Robert Carr, and a good friend of Ben Jonson), Overbury died of poisoning in the Tower of London in a political scandal that captivated the nation and irreparably tarnished the image of James' court. After his sensational death and the very public trial of his conspirators, Overbury's writings became extremely popular, especially his *Characters*; in order to capitalize on this popularity, publishers paid anonymous contributors to keep adding to the original collection. By 1622 *Characters* had reached its eleventh edition and had nearly quadrupled in size to some eighty-three entries. The sketches on widows appear in the first group of additions. Interestingly, some critics believe the author of these characters to be none other than John Webster. See Charles R. Forker, *Skull Beneath the Skin: The Achievement of John Webster* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1986), 120-34 for a detailed argument in favor of Webster's authorship; Forker also argues that circumstantial evidence even suggests that Webster was Overbury's literary executor. See also M.C. Bradbrook, *John Webster: Citizen and Dramatist* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), esp. 167-8 for more on the Overbury-Webster connection.

heaven and other pious causes, she is “grave and reverend,” devoid of the baser emotions of hope, longing, fear and jealousy, and “ought to bee a mirrour for our youngest Dames.”²⁸ Perhaps the most noteworthy aspect of Overbury’s portrait of the virtuous widow is how he paints her with the exotic language of commerce, riches and travel to highlight her lustrous desirability and, presumably, her rarity. He begins by calling her a “Palm-tree, that survives not the supplanting of her husband” and then likens her to the “purest gold, only imploid for Princes medals, she never receives but one mans impression.” Rather than engage in any adventures or explore any territory with a new man, she remains chaste since she “thinks shee hath traveled all the world in one man.” Devoting herself to spiritual matters, she instead “stands like an ancient Piramid” that reaches high towards heaven. The sketch concludes by calling her “a Relique, that without any superstition in the world, though she will not be kist, yet may be reverenc’t.” A curious choice of terms that explicitly refers to heretical Catholic objects, the term was apparently meant to reference the awe and reverence that relics, usually locked away behind glass, often inspired in those who beheld them, feelings that were intensified by the fact that the objects could only be seen and not touched. Lady Anne Haklet, a prolific Protestant writer, explains some eighty years later that “Widows in this Country are called...mens Relicts. And Relicts in the Romish Church, as seldom exposed to publick view, and when they are, they are look’d upon with veneration, and stir up peoples affections, to imitate the Vertues of these Holy Saints, to whom, its pretended, they belong.”²⁹ A virtuous widow had to be similarly kept behind closed doors.

²⁸ Sir Thomas Overbury, *New and Choice Characters, of Severall Authors: Together with that Exquisite and Unmatcht Poeme The Wife* (London, 1615). All quotes are from this unpaginated edition.

²⁹ Lady Anne Halket, *Pious Reflections and Observations...Occasional Meditations*, in *Works* (Edinburgh, 1701), 77. Quoted in Todd, “Virtuous,” 82.

If Overbury's virtuous widow strives for the heights of heavenly perfection, then his "ordinarie" widow is only too happy to revel in the earthly delights of the lower stratum, yielding to all of her baser emotions. Taking the notion of remarriage as a betrayal of the deceased akin to bigamy or cuckoldry to perhaps its furthest extreme, Overbury's widow is so eager for remarriage that she already looks for a suitable new partner at her husband's funeral: "The end of her husband beginnes in teares; and the end of her teares beginnes in a husband."³⁰ And one additional husband is not enough to assuage her insatiable lust and greed. Valuing above all how many different men she can lure, "Her chiefest pride is in the multitude of her Suitors" who she methodically goes through one by one, "as Horsecourses doe their Jades." Wielding sexual and marital experience, the ordinary widow dominates the men in her life, cozening her deceased husband's creditors, hiding her wealth from her current one, and, in general, failing to abide by male rule, unless, perhaps, she is drunk on sack or basking in a post-coital glow. Twisting the stereotype of the wealthy widow preyed upon by unscrupulous greedy young men around, Overbury warns men away from this "too ripe Apple", for "hee that hath her, is Lord but of a filthy purchase, for the title is crackt."

Between Vives' ultra-patriarchal configuration smacking of male anxiety, Becon's scripture-based doctrine, and Overbury's over-the-top caricatures lie a whole host of treatises, pamphlets, and conduct books describing, satirizing, and instructing widows of all ages. And while the accounts cited above differ in style, substance, and even composition date, all three share certain points of interest that help flesh out the portrait

³⁰ If Webster did indeed author these sketches, it is perhaps no coincidence that some of the details of the "Ordinary Widow," like this one concerning funerals and weddings, bear a striking resemblance to *Hamlet's* Gertrude. Webster also uses similar imagery in *The Duchess of Malfi*, including likening chaste widows to relics.

of the widow in the early modern period – or at least of the stereotypes of this figure drawn in the literary, devotional, and instructional literature of the period. According to Cavallo and Warner, there are three principal types: the good or the ideal widow, the merry or lusty widow, and the poor widow.³¹ The good widow is identified chiefly through the virtues of chastity and constancy, which she exemplifies by staying true to her late husband through the maintenance of his memory and the refusal to remarry; essentially she lives as a perpetual wife. Chaste and obedient to the end, she channels her energies into spiritual matters and withdraws from the world, remaining silent, sequestered, and self-controlled. On the other hand, the lusty widow lacks all self control. Usually portrayed as rich, worldly, and above all lusty, she is depicted as either ready to enjoy her independence or, alternatively, pathetically eager to remarry (sometimes again and again) primarily for the purpose of sexual gratification. Whether in a marriage or a casual fling with a potential suitor, the lusty widow is often characterized as a domineering and emasculating figure. The last major widow stereotype is that of the poor widow. Weak, vulnerable and poor in the broadest sense, she lacks both financial and protective support. Unable to work or otherwise gain income, and usually with a bevy of dependent children, the poor widow often seeks assistance from the church or the courts. Her portrait stems most readily from the Bible and its numerous examples of innocent, defenseless widows, with Mark 12:42-3, the parable of the widow donating her last two mites to the church, being the most prominent of them. The poor widow, however, rarely makes a stage appearance. As Kathryn Jacobs notes, “of all the men and women in Renaissance England, none were more underrepresented onstage than

³¹ See “Introduction” in *Widowhood in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, eds. Sandra Cavallo and Lyndan Warner (New York: Longman, 1999): 3-23, esp. 6-9.

impoverished and elderly widows.”³² Asking why this figure is so hard to find in the early modern theaters, Jacobs argues that “social ambition and wishful thinking...put the lusty widow on so many Renaissance stages, and kept poor ones off it.”³³

It perhaps goes without saying that real widows (or what we can glean about them from the historical record) bear only a passing resemblance to their constructed stereotypes, but some interesting and surprising conclusions can be drawn if we consider what aspects of the stereotypes are the most and least exaggerated. Perhaps the most distorted type – and not coincidentally the most commonly portrayed in popular literature – is that of the lusty widow desperately impatient to remarry, usually to someone much younger than herself. According to the data compiled by demographic studies concerning remarriage during the early modern period, males remarried more often and more quickly than females, and continued to do so until later in life; Sokol and Sokol claim that the remarriage of widowers was “nearly ubiquitous.”³⁴ On average for the whole of England, the median interval between marriages for widowers was 12.6 months compared to 19.4 months for widows, and widowers remarried up until the age of seventy, whereas widows rarely remarried past the age of fifty.³⁵ These trends most clearly play out in the rural communities and remote villages. For instance, in Colyton, widowers were some nine times more likely to marry younger single women than

³² Jacobs, 133.

³³ Ibid., 134.

³⁴ B.J. Sokol and Mary Sokol, *Shakespeare, Law, and Marriage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 165.

³⁵ Vivian Brodsky, “Widows in Late Elizabethan London: Remarriage, Economic Opportunity and Family Orientations,” in *The World We Have Gained: Histories of Population and Social Structure*, eds. Lloyd Bonfield, Richard M. Smith, and Keith Wrightson (New York: Blackwell, 1986): 122-54; 122. More specifically, 36 percent of all widowers who remarried were between the ages of 50-70, while only 17 per cent of widows were older than 50 (and only one is recorded older than 65).

widows were likely to marry younger bachelors.³⁶ However, when one isolates the data by geography and looks exclusively at the city of London, whose population endured a lower life expectancy, shorter marriages, younger widows and fewer surviving children to burden inheritances, a slightly different pattern emerges.

To begin with, class, like geography, matters when considering which widows eventually found a new husband. Members of the nobility and upper classes remarried at much lower rates than those below them on the social ladder, primarily in order to ensure the smooth transmission of inheritance to their children and to preserve their recently attained independence. Yet despite this, court and church records document an overall high percent of remarriages. According to data amassed by Vivien Brodsky, of all marriages by license in London from 1598-1619, 45 per cent were remarriages, with 35 per cent of all women marrying being widows. The proportion of widows and widowers marrying by banns – the other major method of marriage – are not recoverable, though they could be lower given the possibility that “proportionately more widows and widowers in London were attracted to the licence system because of the opportunity it afforded for a more private marriage.”³⁷ Tim Stretton, extrapolating from numbers provided by Peter Laslett, estimates that widows may have represented 15-20 per cent of the population of women over the age of eighteen.³⁸

Of these unions looked at by Brodsky, widows who married bachelors did indeed tend to be older – an average of 4.5 years – although this tendency primarily applies to younger widows aged 25-40; for older widows aged 40-65, they preferred to marry men

³⁶ Ibid., 126.

³⁷ Ibid., 128.

³⁸ See Tim Stretton, “Widows at Law in Tudor and Stuart England,” in *Widowhood in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, ed. Sandra Cavallo and Lyndan Warner (Harlow: Longman, 1999): 193-208; 196.

(usually widowers) the same age or older than themselves.³⁹ Remarriages also occurred with some speed, which, for widows, often violated the year-long period of mourning prescribed by the church and most conduct books (a sufficient period of time meant to clarify any issues of parentage, a restriction that widowers never had to face). Within a year of their husband's death, 67 per cent of tradesmen's widows had remarried; the median interval to remarriage was nine months, for both widows and widowers alike. Brodsky, who uncovered little to no evidence that the very poor remarried with any frequency, surmises that the very poor rarely remarried, since they would be unlikely to find a spouse willing to take on the financial burden of supporting them and their children; though she does acknowledge that her research skews heavily towards wealthier and middling widows (particularly those of tradesmen and craftsmen), since her archive exclusively consists of marriages by license, which cost a fee that the very poor most likely could not afford. In contrast to Brodsky's findings, other evidence points to remarriage being a popular choice among the city's more destitute citizens. Jeremy Bouton's work with the records of the poor East London parish of Stepney, for instance, shows that between 43 to 45 percent of all marriages during the years 1615 to 1625 were remarriages involving widows. Poor widows also seemed to prefer younger spouses; approximately 46 percent married younger husbands, with 25 percent of these involving an age discrepancy of five years or greater.⁴⁰

All in all, then, the remarriage demographics point (particularly in London and particularly for the widows of craftsmen and tradesmen) to what Brodsky calls a very

³⁹ Brodsky, 130.

⁴⁰ Jeremy Bouton, "London Widowhood Revisited: The Decline of Female Remarriage in the Seventeenth and Early Eighteenth Centuries," in *Continuity and Change* 5 (1990): 323-55; 328, 336.

“active remarriage market.”⁴¹ The numbers also indicate that some of the commonly held opinions of widows do bear some semblance to remarriage trends, though the lusty widow stereotype most certainly represents an exaggerated parody of her historical counterpart.

Why did so many early modern London widows and widowers choose to remarry? Leaving aside the idealized romantic notion of newfound love or the desire for companionship, for men, remarriage most likely made rational sense since wives had long proven indispensable to husbands when it came to raising children and running household affairs. For widows, the issue of whether to remarry or not remains slightly more complicated. Critics have long noted that widowhood, at least in theory, afforded women unique opportunities for financial and social independence that they otherwise could not have enjoyed as either married or single women (where they could be subjected to a father or other male kin for much of their lives). In legal terms, a married woman was a *femme covert* – under the protection and authority of her husband. Once a wife, she had no legal identity separate from that of her husband, which meant that all of her personal possessions and rights were converted to her husband. However, on the day that a woman became a widow, she “shed the restrictive bonds imposed by coverture and regained her independent legal status. Now she could own property, enter into contracts, make a will, buy and sell goods, collect rents, accept gifts and bring legal action,” all of which mark widowhood “as the period of greatest legal independence for women.”⁴²

Especially from a modern feminist viewpoint, the notion that a woman, after gaining these unique rights and privileges for the first time, would then immediately turn around

⁴¹ Brodsky, 123.

⁴² Stretton, 193.

and give them all up to a new husband seems rather unappealing. Thus, until recently, social historians had long thought that widows with sufficient material resources must have resisted all urges to remarry in order to retain their independence. And certainly the data shows that a majority of aristocratic widows – 56 per cent – never remarried (a number doubling that of middle class widows), and over one third of these widows capitalized on their new status by conducting economic and business transactions after their husband's death.⁴³ Stretton goes further in identifying the specific kinds of activities well-to-do widows carried out: "Independent widows ran estates and controlled manors, they established businesses or continued to operate their late husbands' businesses, they employed apprentices, they worked as midwives and healers, they acted as moneylenders. And when transactions failed or disagreements arose, many took their complaints to court."⁴⁴ Sometime a widow's situation demanded such an action, although often widows went to court simply because their new status allowed them to do so.

Yet, a still-significant number of wealthy widows – over 40 per cent – did end up voluntarily entering into coverture again. Most likely, as Dymphna Callaghan notes, both physical and social vulnerabilities provided strong incentives to remarry, regardless of the widow's social standing: "For many widows remarriage in either direction on the social ladder was part of the struggle to stabilize, protect, and maintain rather than necessarily improve their social status."⁴⁵ Poor widows, which made up a significant portion of the total number of widows, were the most defenseless and susceptible to physical and social

⁴³ Brodsky, 123.

⁴⁴ Stretton, 199.

⁴⁵ Dymphna Callaghan, "The Duchess of Malfi and Early Modern Widows," in *Early Modern English Drama: A Critical Companion*, eds. Garrett A. Sullivan, Jr., Patrick Cheney, and Andrew Hadfield (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006): 272-86; 278.

upheaval. According to Jacobs, nearly twenty-five percent of husbands burdened their widows with debt when they died, leaving them little other recourse than to take poor relief; in areas of the country where such data survives, thirty-three percent of widows received poor relief.⁴⁶ Amy Erickson arrives at a similar conclusion in her analysis of probate records: “Many widows who headed their own households had personal estates of less than £20, which was unusual for male heads of household.”⁴⁷ However, it should be noted that the effects of coverture the second time around could be mitigated somewhat by a husband’s will, which “reflect[ed], more often than we might anticipated, a desire to protect vulnerable survivors rather than a wish to prevent remarriage.”⁴⁸ Indeed, most widows enjoyed some financial benefit from what was left them, at least in accordance to the overall proportion of the estate. Erickson points out that “All studies of wills in early modern England agree that in general widows were the principal beneficiaries of their husbands’ wills, almost invariably receiving much more than their legal entitlement of one third.”⁴⁹ Thomas Kuehn shows how these English laws on widows’ legal rights stand in stark contrast to those of other European nations, such as in Italy where widows were only entitled to receive back their dowry if there existed other direct male heirs. And even then, getting back the dowry often proved to be a challenge: “Even if widows stayed with their husbands’ kin, as they usually did, retrieving the dowry...was a perpetual legal headache.”⁵⁰ Elizabeth Foyster also notes that widows who remarried, perhaps wiser in the ways of legal coverture, were twice as likely as

⁴⁶ Jacobs, 165, n. 1.

⁴⁷ Amy Louise Erickson, *Women and Property in Early Modern England* (London: Routledge, 1993), 187.

⁴⁸ Callaghan, 278.

⁴⁹ Erickson, 162.

⁵⁰ See Thomas Kuehn, “Daughters, Mothers, Wives, and Widows: Women as Legal Persons,” in *Time, Space, and Women’s Lives in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Anne Jacobson Schutte, Thomas Kuehn, and Silvana Seidel Manchi (Kirskville, MO: Truman State University Press, 2001): 97-115; 110.

maids to make a settlement, a legal tool that created a separate estate which was preserved in the woman's name.⁵¹

As for the widows of tradesmen, who often were in possession of goods, property and sizable amounts of money, the strong patriarchal structure of the London companies, a type of "institutionalized fraternalism" that ensured the nearly everyone from the apprentices to the masters to the yeomanry was exclusively male, may have provided another incentive to remarry by limiting widows' ability to conduct business.⁵² While there were widows who pursued trades and crafts in London, they were certainly the exception, not the norm. Of 70 widows who were left print shops by their late husbands, as many as 50 of them sold them within the first three years, and "only ten of 200 London widows remembered apprentices in their wills – a figure that suggests that as few as 5 per cent of craftsmen's and tradesmen's widows were exercising their formal rights to take on apprentices."⁵³ These statistics lead Brodsky to conclude that "formal obstacles and informal pressures emanating from well-organized male structures served to make rapid remarriage an attractive alternative to the independent exercising of a craft or trade as a widow."⁵⁴

Even though the common stereotypes propounded by conduct books, the theatre, and other forms of popular literature might be significantly removed from reality, they were widely disseminated, had a long and rich literary history (dating from Petronius' tale of the Widow of Ephesus who is seduced by a Roman soldier in the tomb of her dead husband to Chaucer's Wife of Bath), and seemingly had some cachet – early modern men

⁵¹ Foyster, 115.

⁵² See Brodsky, 141.

⁵³ Ibid., 143.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 142.

appeared to take the stereotypes seriously. Jennifer Panek, for instance, relates the story of one Elizabeth Bennett, a young childless widow whose £20,000 net worth resulted in her being deluged by eager suitors. On a November night in 1628, one of these suitors – a physician by the name of John Raven – gained access to Elizabeth’s bedchamber by bribing several of her servants. Attempting to secure his case for her hand through the act of consummation, Raven proceeded to try and climb into bed with her. Although his seduction tactics ultimately proved unsuccessful (only his leg actually made it into the bed, and his only physical contact that night was to be roughly hauled away by the constable), his actions were apparently based on his firm belief in the notion of the lusty widow;⁵⁵ perhaps even his training as a physician taught him to assume that his advances could not be denied, for medical texts often described a widow’s womb as so frenzied by her hot and prurient seed that it made her “mad for lust, and infinite men.”⁵⁶ In another example, Kathryn Jacobs tells the story of Edward Cleter, who, in the early 1600s, fell deep into debt and married a rich widow under the assumption that she would gladly pay what he owed and urge him to “take more, more yet” from her overflowing coffers, just as the countess Eudora urged Tharsalio in Chapman’s *The Widow’s Tears*. However, after revealing the size of his debts only on his wedding night, he found his new wife far different from the generous wealthy widows portrayed on the early modern stage. Just one day after marrying her, and just one day after being denied any of his wife’s money, he allegedly said before witnesses, “Thinkst thou that I can love such a mustie rustie

⁵⁵ Panek, 1-2.

⁵⁶ From Nicholas Culpeper, *Dictionary for Midwives* (London, 1662). Quoted in Foyster, 111.

widow as thou art thou has a face that loketh like the back of a tode [?] I married the[e] but to be mayntayned like a man, and so I will be.”⁵⁷

Other evidence of the stereotypes’ credulity can be found in the work of Tim Stretton, who, analyzing court records concerning cases involving widows, shows that “counsel for both plaintiffs and defendants drew upon stereotypical images to bolster their arguments, suggesting, for example, that widow opponents were loud, immodest and sexually incontinent, or that they were bad mothers guilty of shaming the memories of their late husbands (accusations of a type rarely leveled at widowers).”⁵⁸ Although at a distinct disadvantage in knowledge of and prowess with the law, widows and their lawyers attempted to draw upon other stereotyped views of widows to achieve the opposite effect, making “active attempts to align themselves with universal images of ‘good’ widowhood, good not just in the sense of admirable or ideal, but in the sense of deserving – deserving of sympathy and therefore of legal protection or remedy.” In order to appear more worthy of the court’s pity, lawyers tended to emphasize widows’ poverty, which apparently worked, as “masters and scribes regularly attached the epithet ‘poor’ to widows’ names, using it in the court’s decision books to mean blameless and deserving of relief as well as lacking in property or income.”⁵⁹

Such widespread belief in the common widow stereotypes shows that the figure of the widow loomed large in the cultural imaginary of early modern England, with her conspicuously different portraits – each contradictory and competing – variously marking her as an object of veneration and desire or of ridicule and scorn. In short there persisted, to use Dymphna Callaghan’s terms, “a pervasive cultural ambivalence about widows who

⁵⁷ Jacobs, 147.

⁵⁸ Stretton, 205.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 205, 207.

wed again.” On the one hand there was “considerable social support” for remarriage, especially for young widows who were in the prime of their reproductive years and especially for wealthy widows, of all ages, since such a redistribution of wealth primarily benefited the financial and social prospects of men aspiring for advancement.⁶⁰ As Stephen Greenblatt states, “the lady richly left was a major male wish-fulfillment fantasy in a culture where the pursuit of wealth through marriage was an avowed and reputable preoccupation.”⁶¹ Widow-hunting ballads, a popular sub-genre of this form, capitalized on the power of this wish-fulfillment fantasy. One such ballad, “Strike While the Iron is Hot,” boldly claims the existence of a vast sea of available rich widows, though it encourages men to act quickly before the market dries up:

Wealthy Widowes now are plenty.
Where you come in any place,
For one Man theres Women twenty...
But wealth which their first Husband got,
Leet Young-men poore
Make haste therefore,
Tis good to strike while the Irons hott.⁶²

This rich-widow fantasy most likely had particular appeal to the young working and middle class men of London, many of whom were forced to marry at a much later age than their country-dwelling counterparts, who tended to marry by their early to mid twenties. In the work environment of the city, however, dominated by the guilds and companies,

apprentices were forbidden to marry for the duration of their bond, some ten to twelve years. Since London apprenticeships did not begin until ages seventeen to

⁶⁰ Callaghan, 272, 273.

⁶¹ Greenblatt, “Fiction and Friction,” 69.

⁶² Cited in Jacobs, 145. She also cites another ballad, “This Wiving Age,” which laments the fact that so many bachelors are marrying widows that young virgins cannot find husbands: “though widowes be chosen and maids be rejected, / They wil be esteemed, though now they’r neglected. / Yet not in this wiving age” (146).

nineteen on average, this meant that they could not marry until they were almost thirty at the earliest. And those who wished to thrive would frequently delay still longer, until they were masters of their own shops.⁶³

The rich widow fantasy, however, offered an enticing possibility of circumnavigating these considerable financial, social, and sexual obstacles.

On the other hand, widows who wed again – especially those with children – were subject to intense public suspicion and long-held, deeply-ingrained prejudices against them, perhaps lingering from medieval conceptions of chastity, where widows often remarried with less frequency and where nunneries provided a prominent and appealing destination that embodied the idealized conceptions of the good widow. Calling widowhood an “intensified condition of early modern femininity,” Callaghan concludes that remarried widows “remained threatening figures... insofar as they brought together categories that, theoretically at least, were posited as mutually exclusive, namely femininity and power.”⁶⁴

Many critics view the intended consequences of the degrading lusty widow stereotype as a means of controlling this threatening figure – as essentially a smear campaign meant to dissuade widows from remarrying again: “widows were slandered as lustful in an effort to shame them out of fully realizing their legal independence and, above all, to prevent them from using their sexual independence to take a new husband of their choice.”⁶⁵ Simultaneously, the stereotype also functioned to scare off would-be suitors through the fear that marriage to an older, wealthier, maritally experienced widow would emasculate a new husband. Thus, critics have long argued that men, “faced with the threat of a woman who was legally, economically, and sexually independent, ...

⁶³ Jacobs, 148.

⁶⁴ Callaghan, 274.

⁶⁵ Panek, 8.

constructed and deployed the notion of the sexually rapacious widow as a kind of ideological substitute for the official male control from which she had slipped free.”⁶⁶

Jennifer Panek, however, takes issue with this prevailing critical attitude, which she claims makes little sense when considered alongside the behaviour of dramatic widow-wooers. Noting that “the remarriage of widows was not only a common fact of life in early modern England, but a socially, economically, and morally approved fact as well,” she instead views the lusty widow stereotype as an enabler rather than a preventer of marriage:

in most cases the lusty widow of early modern England appears to be less a *manifestation* of male anxiety (the fear that widows’ desire for sexual pleasure will drive them into second marriages or into disruptive non-marital sexual activity) than a notion which functions (imperfectly) to *assuage* a rather different kind of male anxiety, centering around money, domestic government and the remarried widow as wife.⁶⁷

Panek contends that the acts of wooing and marrying – which ultimately place the widow again under coverture – enabled a widow’s “suitors to regain their masculinity, under threat from the dominant, wealthier widows.... A fantasy in which a young man’s sexual mastery of a widow allowed him to seize the economic opportunity she offered.” For Panek, early modern comedies acted to assuage masculine sexual, social and financial insecurities by showing that wealthy widows could be tamed and controlled by deserving young men of lesser means.

Panek’s argument offers an interesting and at times useful “alternative deployment” of the lusty widow stereotype, especially in how it accounts for the discrepancy between the accepted formulation that the stereotype was deployed with the intent of dissuading marriage as opposed to how it is used in so many of the period’s comedies. However,

⁶⁶ Ibid., 7.

⁶⁷ Panek, 9-10.

Panek's reconfiguration only has limited application when it comes to considering the incestuous widow, which can be considered a subset of the lusty widow stereotype. Perhaps this has something to do with genre, as the incestuous widow occurs most frequently in tragedies, and Panek chooses to focus exclusively on comedies: "My focus on comedy... recognizes the fact that in the early modern theatre, remarriage *is* primarily a comic, not a tragic subject, but also seeks to investigate a facet of urban, middle-class English culture through the genre most frequently adapted to represent it."⁶⁸ While the general claim that comedy and marriage go hand-in-hand rings true, such a statement discounts the importance of the subject to tragedies, many of which do indeed contain some sort of marriage plot, whether it be in the main or secondary storyline. At times Panek seems so intent on proving just how morally and socially permissible – even encouraged – remarriage to a widow was that she tends to ignore, or at best minimize, the cultural tensions of social advancement, which seem to run parallel to the cultural ambivalence directed towards widows. And lastly, her explanation also fails to adequately account for the type of sexual, social and religious deviancy that the incestuous widow represents. In general, Panek's argument runs the risk of simplifying the complex and varied ideological work that the lusty widow stereotype performs.

I will be the first to say that the dramas I find intriguing do not conform to any ideologically consistent viewpoint or propound any ideologically consistent message. Indeed, an incestuous widow like Middleton's Livia (who has a largely negative portrayal) can almost be seen as the categorical opposite of an incestuous widow like Webster's Duchess (who has a largely sympathetic portrayal). However, even though the incestuous widow assumes a variety of different depictions, all of them are part of a

⁶⁸ Ibid., 10.

larger cultural conversation about the changing landscape of marriage and union, family and class structure – about the social order in flux. And it is no accident that the widow comes to represent these issues, for she stands as a unique and complex site for interrogating matters of class hierarchies and social mobility. On the one hand marrying a wealthy widow offered men the possibility of immediate and perhaps dramatic social promotion, a level of advancement they might otherwise never be able to achieve. On the other, widowhood, by reinstating and conferring new rights and transmitting property and money, provided the widows themselves with a significant elevation in social status, a rise that, as the ungovernable widow as wife stereotype attests to, posed the threat of remaining permanent even if she did decide to remarry. Desired yet feared, embraced yet shunned, the ambivalence over the figure of the widow seems to run consonant with the ambivalence over social mobility and rigid class hierarchies. The two mirror one another, or, rather, the ambivalence concerning social mobility seems to be oddly concentrated in the figure of the widow, who perhaps best represents these tensions. The incestuous widow, by testing both the endogamous and exogamous limits of acceptable marriage choices, only intensifies these issues further, revealing the areas where the competing interests of the individual, family and state intersect and clash, often on the battleground of the widow's choice of a new husband.

As a subset of the lusty widow stereotype, the incestuous widow reveals some rather illuminating patterns about the kind of ideological work that this stereotype does. Primarily performing two different functions, the incestuous widow first acts, to use Panek's phrase, as an enabler of marriage (although not exactly in the same way that she describes). By portraying a widow as the victim of incestuous longings that seek to

control a widow's choice in a husband, works of this type (primarily tragedies) critique a social system that attempts to perpetuate social and sexual hierarchies. On the other hand the stereotype also marks the widow as a site of dangerous attraction. In a patriarchal society built on the fundamentally masculine principles of primogeniture and male rule, widows posed serious problems. With a potentially ungovernable, financially independent, and sexually insatiable widow as wife, the remarried family constantly veers towards becoming an institution with a woman at its head – a monstrous perversion of the orderly state which threatens its very stability. The incestuous widow, in short, is something of a wild card, occupying a precarious ideological space that is variously stabilizing and unsettling, offering either the promise of progressive change or becoming the displaced source of the downfall of civilization. Perhaps it is no mere coincidence that the incestuous widow most prominently makes her appearance on the stage during a gynocracy, a fact that only intensifies the competing anxieties over female rule.

CHAPTER TWO

Aristocratic Endogamy and Social Miscegenation in Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* and Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*

In order to consider the implications of the incestuous widow on conceptions of social order, I want to look at two closely related revenge tragedies: Thomas Kyd's Elizabethan *The Spanish Tragedy* (c. 1589-90) and John Webster's Jacobean *The Duchess of Malfi* (1614), both of which configure incest as an exaggerated, grotesque reaction against the perceived contamination from social miscegenation. In these two plays incest represents something akin to a social disease afflicting the aristocracy who wish to maintain the existing social and sexual hierarchies. By portraying the incestuous widow as a victim of her brother's oppressive regulation, both plays cast social miscegenation, even as it remains potentially disruptive, in a much more sympathetic light than the strictures of social endogamy.

"Ambitious villain, how his boldness grows!": Class Strife in Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*

That Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* is fundamentally concerned with issues of class and social hierarchy is apparent from the play's opening lines.¹ In his introductory

¹ For other readings analyzing the role of class in the play, see Kay Stockholder, "'Yet can he write': Reading the Silences in *The Spanish Tragedy*," *American Imago* 47:2 (Summer, 1990): 93-124, which provides a good overview of the many different ways that class conflict is manifested in the play. See also Katharine Maus, both in her introduction to *Four Revenge Tragedies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995): ix-xxi, and in her chapter on the play in *Inwardness and Theater in the English Renaissance*

monologue, Andrea's ghost begins the tale of his death by revealing only a few, yet vitally important, details of his life:

I was a courtier in the Spanish court.
My name was Don Andrea, my descent,
Though not ignoble, yet inferior far
To gracious fortunes of my tender youth:
For there in prime and pride of all my years,
By duteous service and deserving love,
In secret I possessed a worthy dame,
Which hight sweet Bel-imperia by name.
(1.1.4-11)²

Nearly every line here accentuates Andrea's inferior social standing to that of Bel-imperia, the King's niece: the double-negative "not ignoble" (rather than not noble) to describe his lineage; "inferior far" to suggest not just a gap but a gaping social chasm separating the two; "gracious fortunes" with its connotations of undeserved luck; and "duteous service" which, by conspicuously coming before "deserving love," suggests that Bel-imperia's love for Andrea stems from his assumption of a servant-like role in the relationship, rather than from his merit or worth. Yet the story of the two socially disparate lovers remains tantalizingly incomplete. Although this opening strongly hints at a court scandal and perhaps even suggests that Andrea's death (the narrative of which immediately follows) possibly stands as some sort of a punishment for his social transgressions, the text neither definitively makes such an announcement nor

(Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1995), 55-71. MarliSS Desens' "Marrying Down: Negotiating a More Equal Marriage on the English Renaissance Stage," *Medieval and Renaissance Drama in England*, 14 (2001): 227-55, offers a brief, though useful, contextualization of how some female characters in early modern drama "use their superiority in wealth and social status to create a condition of equality in marriage" (227). Christopher Crosbie, in "*Oeconomia* and the Vegetative Soul: Rethinking Revenge in *The Spanish Tragedy*," *ELR* (2008): 3-33, argues that Kyd "imagines his protagonists collectively as an ambitious household...and presents their success as informed by prudent *oeconomia*, or household management" (3). Crosbie contends that by depicting ambition as a "natural product of a human psychology informed by Aristotle... and a legitimized rationale for middling aspiration," Kyd portrays revenge as "*instinctively* reproductive, a mode of production that functions as an outlet for thwarted material fecundity" (4).

² All quotes come from the New Mermaids edition of *The Spanish Tragedy*, ed. by J.R. Mulryne (New York: W.W. Norton, 1994).

conclusively connects the two incidents as cause and effect.³ The rest of the play proves just as frustratingly indeterminate; even though the play again references this scandal three other times (2.1.45-8, 3.10.54-5, 3.14.111-2), we never learn more about this intrigue, except that the “secret” possession of Bel-imperia was never that secret to begin with, as her whole family was aware of – not to mention disgusted by – “that old disgrace” (3.10.54).

But then again, perhaps we do not need to know the details of their story, for a strikingly similar romantic tragedy gets played out in full before us and essentially serves as a surrogate for the other. In one of the more peculiar cases of doubling on the early modern stage, Horatio and Andrea mirror one another so closely that there seems little to distinguish one from the other. The best of friends, both characters are martially skilled, fall in love with the same woman, have the same woman fall in love with them (Bel-imperia even claims that it is Horatio’s affection for his best friend that initially incites her passion for him: “Had he not loved Andrea as he did, / He could not sit in Bel-imperia’s thoughts” [1.4.62-3]), and both die at the hands of the same man. Perhaps even more oddly, Andrea, who witnesses the intimate courtship and near consummation of Horatio and Bel-imperia’s relationship, never once evinces any jealousy that Bel-imperia’s love has so quickly shifted to his best friend (though, of course, he could act

³ David Bevington, in the introduction to his Revels Student Edition of Kyd’s play (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1996), goes one step further in identifying a potential royal conspiracy against Andrea. Noting that Lorenzo stands to gain politically if his sister marries his good friend and king-in-waiting Balthazar, Bevington contends that her attempt to thwart his ambitions “casts a whole new light (for us and for Andrea as audience) on the question of Andrea’s defeat and death in war. Bel-imperia suspects foul play in the use of superior numbers to overwhelm one warrior on the field of battle, but the iniquity may go deeper than that. Is it a coincidence only that Balthazar and his troops ganged up on Andrea and that Lorenzo then moved in on Horatio’s capture of Balthazar, claiming the prince for himself? The play invites us to wonder if a conspiracy preceded the battle, and that the death of Andrea was all choreographed by Lorenzo and perhaps his family as a means of taking Bel-Imperia away from the hated Andrea and bestowing her on the man who has killed Andrea” (8). Bevington also claims that this reading also helps explain how Andrea’s desire for revenge remains central to the overall plot of the play.

jealous as he watches them). After Horatio's murder and Bel-imperia's imprisonment (which immediately follows the bower scene), Andrea notably never comments on the lovers' proclamations of affection; instead, he focuses exclusively on the outrage he feels from watching his dear friends so unjustly abused:

Brought'st thou me hither to increase my pain?
I looked that Balthazar should have been slain;
But 'tis my fried Horatio that is slain,
And they abuse fair Bel-imperia,
On whom I doted more than all the world,
Because she loved me more than all the world.
(2.6.1-6)

Andrea's refusal to acknowledge that he is no longer Bel-Imperia's (only) love strikes me as peculiar, particularly given the prevalence of Vives' notion that remarriage represents a form of betrayal of the deceased, not to mention that this reaction certainly veers wildly from the traditional emotional trajectory of a normal dramatic love triangle. It is almost as if Andrea does not register any difference between Bel-imperia's love for Horatio and her (past) love for him, which only reinforces the idea that the two are essentially identical or interchangeable.

The play's most prominent stage prop – the bloody handkerchief/scarf⁴ – serves as a potent symbol for just how intricately intertwined their stories are. Originally given to Andrea by Bel-imperia as a love token to wear on the battlefield, the scarf soon finds its way into Horatio's hands when he takes it from Andrea's "lifeless arm" to wear "in

⁴ This prop goes by different names in the play; Horatio and Bel-imperia call it a scarf, while Hieronimo variously refers to it as either a handkerchief, handker, or napkin. Despite all of the name changes, it is clear they all reference the same item. This prop has received quite a bit of critical attention concerning its symbolic meaning. See, for instance, Andrew Sofer's "Absorbing Interests: Kyd's Bloody Handkerchief as Palimpsest," *Comparative Drama* 34:2 (Summer, 2000): 127-53, where he traces the ways in which Kyd's prop invokes and reshapes the religious symbolism of the Catholic Mass' Host. While some critics view the handkerchief as a coded comment on Catholicism (either anti or pro – opinions vary widely), Sofer argues that Kyd appropriates the handkerchief to serve commercial, not religious, purposes, "an opportunistic bid to recast the late medieval 'contract of transformation' embodied by bloody cloth as an addictive 'contract of sensation'" (129).

remembrance” of him (1.4.42-3). When he shows this to Bel-imperia, she then bestows it on Hortatio, an indication that her love has now been transferred to him: “But now wear thou it both for him and me, / For after him thou hast deserved it best” (1.4.48-9). The last recipient of the scarf is Hieronimo, who removes it from Horatio’s murdered body and carries it around with him, a token reminding him that he must punish those responsible for his son’s death. Now stained with the lifeblood of two different men – inseparably mixed together – this layering and weaving of the scarf’s meaning as it travels through the play thus makes the final act of vengeance against Balthazar and Lorenzo serve the double-purpose of simultaneously avenging both deaths. But most importantly, Horatio, like Andrea, comes from the “middling” class⁵ that, while “not ignoble,” is nevertheless still “inferior far” to that of Bel-imperia. In Horatio’s case, however, what had previously been only an undercurrent of class conflict becomes intensified and explicit, as Lorenzo and Balthazar very consciously kill Horatio because of his middling social status. After hanging up his murdered body in the arbor, Lorenzo exclaims: “Although his life were still ambitious proud, / Yet is he at the highest now he is dead” (2.5.60-1). And what these two parallel narratives establish is a pattern of abuse inflicted upon the lower classes who threaten to pollute the nobility with their intimate touch.

The stories of Bel-imperia’s two doomed courtships are not the play’s only instances of abrasive class conflict. The play opens with the decisive Spanish victory over Portugal

⁵ “Though not a middle class, but like the middle class,” the middling sort was comprised of a varied and substantial constituency. See Theodore B. Leinwand, “Shakespeare and the Middling Sort,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 44:3 (Autumn, 1993): 284-303; 292. See also Christopher Brooks, “Apprenticeship, Social Mobility, and the Middling Sort, 1550-1800,” in *The Middling Sort of People: Culture, Society, and Politics in England*, ed. Jonathan Barry and Christopher Brooks (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1994): 52-83.

and the promise of a lasting peace treaty between the two nations which quickly gives way to tensions within the Spanish army itself, ultimately pitting Hieronimo's family against that of the ruling nobility. The source of this conflict stems from a quarrel over who should have rightful possession of Balthazar, the prince of Portugal and thus, since he will command the highest ransom, the battle's prize prisoner – both symbolically and materially. Both Horatio and Lorenzo (the King's nephew) lay claim to the prince – Horatio for knocking him off of his horse and disarming him in single combat; Lorenzo for being the first person to seize his horse and weapon. The more deserving soldier seems obvious. After all, we have just heard the General summarize the battle's events to the King, an account of unmitigated praise for Horatio's brave exploits. He makes it clear that Horatio's defeat of Balthazar single-handedly won the battle, while at the same time he conspicuously fails to mention anything of Lorenzo and his "heroics." Although Balthazar's rather peculiar assertion that he yielded to both parties – the one "perforce" and the other since he "promised life" (1.3.161; 1663) – complicates matters, the essence of the conflict boils down to Horatio feeling he deserves the glory for doing all the hard work and Lorenzo wanting in on the reward purely on the grounds of a technicality. Hieronimo applies a similar logic when he petitions the King to rule in favor of his son, claiming that the "law of arms" forces him to side with Horatio rather than Lorenzo, since the one actually hunted and slew the lion, while the other simply found a dead lion's skin and wore it – a claim of victory that amounts to nothing more than a hare pulling "dead lions by the beard" (1.3.72).

The King, though, arrives at a slightly different conclusion, dividing the spoils between the two since he deems that "both deserve and both shall have reward"

(1.3.179). While Horatio receives the larger material share – the ransom and armor compared to Lorenzo’s receipt of the horse and weapon – he nevertheless loses out symbolically in that he has to share the honor of the capture, a point underscored by the King when he tells Lorenzo, “But nephew, thou shalt have the prince in guard, / For thine estate best fitteth such a guest” (1.3.185-6). By sandwiching this decree announcing the two rewards for Horatio (the ransom comes first, the armor afterwards) and by stressing his kinship to Lorenzo (he calls him “nephew” rather than by his first name or some impersonal pronoun), the King clearly means this hosting as an honor rather than an onerous duty, implying, at the same time, that a fellow member of the nobility represents a much more fitting captor of a prince than does Horatio. Horatio’s designation as the cupbearer of the banquet is a similarly disquieting backhanded compliment. Having just asked Balthazar, the Duke, and Lorenzo to take their places at the table, the King does not invite Horatio to sit and dine with them, but instead commands him to “wait thou upon our cup, / For well thou hast deserved to be honoured” (1.4.130-1). Ostensibly meant as a privilege for his distinguished service on the battlefield, Horatio’s role nevertheless amounts to little more than that of a glorified servant (according to the *OED*, wait (9a) means, “to be in attendance as a servant; to attend as a servant does to the requirements of a superior”). “Our” could, of course, refer only to the royal plural, but it also could just as likely refer to the cups of all four in attendance at the table, which would mean that Horatio, while besting the prince on the battlefield some few hours earlier, is now put rightfully back into his place by serving him wine like a household servant. The role of cup-bearer could also carry rather severe negative sexual

associations, stemming from Ganymede's well-known role as cup-bearer to Zeus, a job description that essentially came to be code for "foule Sodomitan."⁶

The king's decision to split up the battle's spoils also acts as an implicit rebuke to Hieronimo himself, whose counsel as the Knight Marshal of Spain (the chief judge in the Spanish court) he largely ignores. Of course Hieronimo, even though he is a member of the court, does not belong to the nobility, and it is clear that the King does not take him or his interests all that seriously. Holding the rather dubious distinction of being both the court's Knight Marshal and Entertainer (an oddly hybrid position somewhere between a Gloucester and a Feste), the only official duties we see Hieronimo perform are to stage "pompous jest[s]" (1.4.137) for the King's benefit and amusement.

In fact, Hieronimo shares more in common with the play's poor characters than with its elite, even if it takes him a long time to reach this conclusion. Indeed, his realization occurs more than three quarters into the play when a group of three "poor petitioners" begs Hieronimo to "plead their cases to the king" (3.13.48). Apparently since Hieronimo has long known to be a champion of the underprivileged, the first citizen confidently explains to the other two,

So, I tell you this, for learning and for law,
There's not any advocate in Spain
That can prevail, or will take half the pain
That he will, in pursuit of equity.
(3.13.51-4)

After hearing each of the citizens' complaints, Hieronimo appears willing to take up their causes, until he notices another poor citizen standing, silently, apart. When he discovers that this old man's case concerns a grieving father seeking justice for his murdered son, Hieronimo immediately thinks of his own strikingly similar situation, a

⁶ See the discussion of Peacham's emblem above on pp. 29-31.

reminder driven home when he searches for a clean handkerchief with which to dry the Senex's tears and instead pulls out Horatio's bloodied scarf. Plagued by grief and shamed with guilt in equal measure, Hieronimo challenges himself to act by comparing his torpidity with the old man's initiative:

If love's effects so strives in lesser things,
If love enforce such moods in meaner wits,
If love express such power in poor estates –
Hieronimo, whenas a raging sea
Tossed with the wind and tide, o'erturneth then
The upper billows, course of waves to keep,
Wilst lesser waters labour in the deep,
Then sham'st thou not, Hieronimo, to neglect
The sweet revenge of thy Horatio?
(3.13.99-107)

Although Hieronimo begins this passage by conspicuously describing the old man in terms of his inferior class status ("lesser," "meaner," "poor"), he clearly holds him in higher regard than himself, particularly as it concerns performing the duties of a loving father for his son. By the end of the passage, Hieronimo places himself below the level of the Senex, reversing their positions: the upper billows represent the emotional agitation of the poor old man who is actually doing something to seek justice for his murdered son, while the "lesser" waters laboring quietly and fruitlessly below represent Hieronimo's seeming apathy and inactivity. Chastising himself for not being more like the impoverished old man, Hieronimo envies the power that exists even in such "poor estates."

The process of identifying with the old man reaches a climax at the scene's end, where Hieronimo, after tearing up the citizens' papers and being chased offstage by the angry group, reenters and sees the old man again standing by himself. Still suffering from his episode of madness, he first mistakes him for the ghost of Horatio and then a Fury,

though his confusion finally abates when the old man tells him that “I am a grieved man, and not a ghost, / That came for justice for my murdered son” (3.13.159-60). When Hieronimo next looks at him, he sees not the subject of his anguish but rather a version of himself – a reflection of his own inner turmoil, as if looking into a mirror that sees into the depths of one’s true soul:

Thou art the lively image of my grief:
Within thy face my sorrows I may see....
And all this sorrow riseth for thy son:
And selfsame sorrow feel I for my son.
Come in old man, thou shalt to Isabel;
Lean on my arm: I thee, thou me shalt stay,
And thou, and I, and she, will sing a song,
Three parts in one, but all of discords framed.
(3.13.162-3, 168-75)

The result of this mirror scene is a moment of empathic identification. Leaning on one another for physical support, the two merge together, until they are no longer just similar to one another but a single entity, a unified body and voice crying out for justice. Having lost his son, sanity, and remaining influence at court, Hieronimo imagines himself the poorest of the poor – a process of consolidating revenges that we have seen earlier in the play with the doubling of Andrea and Horatio. Revenge has become less and less strictly a personal vendetta – less and less about any one single wrongful death – but instead about a series of crimes inflicted against a group of people most noticeably bound together by their class.

Significantly Hieronimo’s association with the poor grieving man occurs immediately following his *Vindicta mihi* soliloquy, perhaps the play’s most important (not to mention most famous) monologue. Entering the stage carrying a copy of Seneca’s tragedies – a text full of model revenge narratives – Hieronimo finally, after all the hesitation and

debate, vows to take revenge against those responsible for his son's death. Yet as the speech ends, he is vacillating still, delaying his vengeance until he can find the proper time and method to carry out his plan – a deferment due in no small part to acknowledging that the class discrepancy between himself and the people he seeks to punish poses substantial difficulties. Hieronimo knows that he cannot directly threaten or accuse Lorenzo and Balthazar, since they, “as a wintry storm upon a plain, / Will bear me down with their nobility” (3.13.37-8). Rather, he concludes that he must use mild speech and the guise of subservience to bide his time and avoid suspicion: “Thy heart to patience, and thy hands to rest, / Thy cap to courtesy, and thy knee to bow, / Till to revenge thou know, when, where and how” (3.13.42-4). It is not until after the recognition scene with the Senex that Hieronimo finally begins to take action and puts together the details of the plot to destroy them all – the “when, where and how.” When next we see him, he dutifully performs his bowing and scraping to the Duke and Lorenzo, an act of obeisance and reconciliation that partly assuages Lorenzo's growing apprehension of him – enough, at least, to allow Hieronimo to cast Lorenzo and Balthazar as the two male leads in his fatal play.

Ironically, it is not until Hieronimo, like Lear, identifies with the lowest of the low – the poor old man who, according to the standard dictates of a hierarchical society, seemingly has the least power, resolve, and capacity – that he feels capable, compelled to take action against the highest of the high. And the method of his delivery seems particularly appropriate: Hieronimo ingeniously subverts the relative powerlessness of his position as the official court entertainer by using his play *Soliman and Perseda* as a vehicle for meting out the justice that has been denied to him (and to the others – Andrea,

Bel-imperia, Horatio, Isabella, the old man) throughout the play. Although *The Spanish Tragedy* is often described as a play primarily concerned with the morality of revenge and the corruptibility of worldly justice, the play's story is, at its heart, about class warfare: the lower classes taking revenge against the ruling elite who have relentlessly and ruthlessly abused, mistreated and taken advantage of them.

What I find most interesting about the play's configuration of class antagonism is how the method of preserving strict class boundaries – Lorenzo's policing of Bel-imperia's choice of romantic interests – is depicted as an incestuous desire coupled with an equally intense miscegenistic fear and loathing. Admittedly, *The Spanish Tragedy* cannot precisely be called an incest play, let alone an incestuous widow play as outlined in the previous chapter. However, although the text neither contains any explicit instances of incest nor any overt declarations of illicit love, it clearly colors Lorenzo's obsessive preoccupation with his sister's selection of sexual partners with incestuous overtones that can easily be brought out in performance. And although Bel-imperia is technically not a widow since she never married either Andrea or Horatio, she is certainly as widow-like as any other early modern stage widows. She loses not just one but two lovers, perhaps an unprecedented occurrence in early modern drama where unmarried female characters only rarely experience the death of their beloved; many married women, however, become widowed during the course of a play.⁷ At the play's beginning Andrea even describes his separation from his Bel-imperia as a "divorce" (1.1.14), a curious choice of terms that perhaps hints at another possible reading of the purposefully vague scandal

⁷ It is much more common for male, rather than female, characters to lose their fiancée. Vindice in Middleton's *The Revenger's Tragedy* (1606), who carries around his betrothed's skull, represents just one example.

surrounding Andrea and Bel-imperia's relationship: a clandestine marriage.⁸ All these elements – an incestuous desire for class containment and separation, an abhorrence of social miscegenation, and the widow as one of the primary loci for exploring these issues – receive a more explicit and fully realized portrayal in the Jacobean *Duchess of Malfi*, a much later revenge tragedy that is, in part, a conscious rewriting and reimagining of *The Spanish Tragedy* and its themes.

“Young Virgins Must be Ruled By Their Friends”: *The Spanish Tragedy* and Incest

Even from the beginning of the play, something seems just a bit off about Lorenzo's relationship with his sister. Lorenzo's first line to Bel-imperia – “Sister, what means this melancholy walk?” (1.4.77) – comes across at best as ill-timed or, at worst, as disingenuous, derisive, and even confrontational, since Lorenzo knows that his sister has only just recently learned of Andrea's death. To add insult to injury, Lorenzo then proceeds to present Bel-imperia with his choice of a new marriage prospect, a person whom he deems a much more appropriate match for one of her station: the prince Balthazar, who also just happens to have killed her beloved. Given this fact, coupled with Bel-imperia's vow to “love Horatio, my Andrea's friend, / The more to spite the prince who wrought his end” (1.4.67-68), the wooing goes significantly less well than planned, despite all of Lorenzo's efforts to ensure a successful meeting. When Balthazar's feeble attempts at flirtatious banter fall woefully short of charming, Lorenzo directs the prince to “let go these ambages, / And in plain terms acquaint her with your love” (1.4.90-1). After these subsequent protestations of love fall on deaf, if not openly

⁸ Again, we cannot be sure since the text purposely never reveals the exact nature of the scandal between the two, though a secret marriage seems a plausible explanation given her family's level of vitriolic condemnation of her previous actions.

hostile, ears, Lorenzo comforts Balthazar, telling him that “You know that women oft are humorous; / These clouds will overblow with little wind” (1.4.105-6). In fact, Lorenzo claims that he will assume full responsibility for making it all happen: “Let me alone, I’ll scatter them myself” (1.4.107).

A short time later, when an excessively depressed and heartbroken Balthazar can only mope around in despair about Bel-imperia’s cold, “coy” treatment of him,⁹ Lorenzo steps forward and takes charge of the situation. Suspecting that his sister’s affections might already lie elsewhere, he reveals that he has devised a plan – bribing her servant and confidant Pedringano – to confirm his suspicions:

I have already found a stratagem,
To sound the bottom of this doubtful theme.
My lord, for once you shall be ruled by me:
Hinder me not whate’er you hear or see.
By force or fair means will I cast about
To find the truth of all this question out.
(2.1.35-40)

During these first few encounters between Lorenzo, Bel-imperia, and Balthazar, it quickly becomes apparent that the hapless Balthazar operates under the direct tutelage of his new best friend Lorenzo, who takes a very personal and prominent role in playing matchmaker between his sister and the prince. “Do you but follow me and gain your love” (2.2.134), a confident Lorenzo proclaims to Balthazar. Apparently he has given more than a little thought as to how best to win over his sister’s affections.

On the surface Lorenzo’s match-making between his sister and the prince of Portugal might appear innocent, or at the least logical, enough. Ostensibly, he hopes that

⁹ J.R. Mulryne notes that Balthazar’s speech at 2.1.9-28 “became famous, and was often parodied. The parodists, like modern readers, are no doubt reacting against this highly artificial and self-conscious way of dramatizing indecision and self-doubt. Balthazar must of course be at least half-ridiculous here, being excessively in love, and being in any case a weak nature” (30, n. 11-18).

such a wedding will secure a more binding alliance between the recently warring nations through the indissoluble bonds of marriage, a powerful symbolic gesture of unity and magnanimity, as well as assimilation, that is itself a common tactic employed by conquering nations.¹⁰ Indeed, the King of Spain discusses just such a rationale with the Duke of Castille and the Portuguese ambassador, urging the latter to “Advise thy king to make this marriage up, / For strengthening of our late-confirmed league; / I know no better means to make us friends” (2.3.10-2). However, there are a number of peculiarities about this Spanish-Portuguese match. Despite the desirable alliance-forming capabilities of such a union, it is never entirely clear why Balthazar receives such extravagant, flattering treatment at the hands of the Spanish court. He remains, after all, a prisoner of war from a bloody conflict that has only just concluded. However, the text goes to great lengths to show that he is a captive in name only; by the end of his first scene – which begins as he is triumphantly paraded before the court as a war trophy – the King of Spain is already calling him “our friendly guest” (1.3.197), a title that proves remarkably fitting

¹⁰ Perhaps the best known dramatic representation of this kind of marriage comes from Shakespeare’s *Henry V*, where King Henry takes Katharine of Valois as his wife after the English defeat the French at the battle of Agincourt. The peace that both France and the pope so desperately want – and plead for in the first half of act 5, scene 2 – hinges on Katherine acquiescing to marry Henry, who labels her his “capital demand” (5.2.96). After the princess finally relents to Henry’s wooing, the Queen gives voice to an idealized conception of the indivisible healing power of this type of peace treaty:

God, the best maker of all marriages,
 Combine your hearts in one, your realms in one!
 As man and wife, being two, are one in love,
 So be there ‘twixt your kingdoms such a spousal,
 That never may ill office, or fell jealousy,
 Which troubles oft the bed of blessed marriage,
 Thrust in between the [paction] of these kingdoms,
 To make divorce of their incorporate league;
 That English may as French, French Englishmen,
 Receive each other. God speak this Amen!

(5.2.359-68)

The irony of this situation – neither the union between Henry and Katharine nor England and France survives more than a few years – is mentioned just moments later in the epilogue.

Shakespeare makes a somewhat similar move in *Titus Andronicus* when the Roman emperor Saturninus marries Tamora, a recent prisoner of war and the queen of the Goths. However, *Titus* offers a much more cynical and perverted take on cross-national royal weddings. See Chapter three for a full discussion.

since his movements and desires are not restricted but, rather, encouraged. Indeed, when he describes his daily routine to the Portuguese ambassador, he sounds like a pampered celebrity boasting of VIP treatment at the Chateau Marmont: “I frolic with the Duke of Castile’s son, / Wrapped every hour in pleasures of the court, / And graced with favours of his majesty” (1.4.123-25). Certainly the Spaniards’ affectionate reception of Balthazar – which he enthusiastically embraces and reciprocates – represents a rather extreme, if not downright befuddling, reversal of attitude. It’s one thing to be respectful, perhaps even collegial, with members of the nobility that one has captured in combat; it’s another thing entirely to immediately start “frolicking” with them.

The King of Spain demonstrates a parallel display of puzzling selective memory loss when it comes to establishing the precise terms of the peace treaty between the two countries. In the Portuguese court, unfettered despair and remorse reign. After receiving news that his son was slain in battle, the Portuguese King falls to the ground and throws away his crown, lamenting the misguided ambition which led him to the “bloody wars” that “spent my treasure, / And with my treasure my people’s blood” (1.3.35-6). Although it would appear that Spain would thus be in a position to make exorbitant demands on this thoroughly defeated enemy, the King makes it clear that he believes any chance of a successful peace hinges on uniting the two royal families. As he tells his brother the Duke, Bel-imperia must be persuaded to marry Balthazar:

The prince is amiable, and loves her well,
If she neglect him and forgo his love,
She both will wrong her own estate and ours.
Therefore, whiles I do entertain the prince
With greatest pleasure that our court affords,
Endeavour you to win your daughter’s thought:
If she give back, all this will come to naught.

(2.4.44-50)

In fact, the King is so desperate to make the match that he tells Portugal that not only will Bel-imperia be accompanied by a “large and liberal” dowry, but that he will also “grace her marriage with an uncle’s gift”: “The tribute which you pay shall be released, / And if by Balthazar she have a son, / He shall enjoy the kingdom after us” (2.3.17, 19-21). That the King considers willingly giving up the tribute – the sole reason for the war in the first place – as well as showering the Portuguese with additional rewards, honors, and even the rule of his country, begs the question of why he regards this marriage as so important. Of course one could attribute this to a simple textual inconsistency, one of those pesky authorial oversights that tend to jump out on the page but go unnoticed during performance. However, two other possible explanations exist: Bel-imperia’s dalliance with the inferior Andrea has pushed everyone into a mode of hysterical overcompensation; or, perhaps on a related note, since the King has no heirs and Lorenzo, apparently, has been deemed unfit to rule, Spain suffers from a crisis of succession. Given these discrepancies, the official court policy of regarding the Balthazar-Bel-imperia marriage as an act of reconciliation appears to be a red herring.

The mysteries surrounding the royal wedding only deepen when one considers Lorenzo, whose own motivations remain highly suspect. Even though he plays such an instrumental role in furthering his father’s and uncle’s agendas, it is unclear how much, if at all, this influences his actions: he does not take part in the talks between Spain and Portugal, which occur after he first introduces the prince to his sister, and he never mentions such a reasoning himself in any of his numerous speeches about the match. While it is conceivable that Lorenzo, who apparently has something of a reputation and has fallen out of favor with his father (the Duke reminds him that “I have been ashamed /

To answer for thee, though thou art my son” [3.13.59-60]), acts in order to claw his way back into his father’s graces, familial loyalty does not seem to be one of his chief motivating factors as he does not inform his father of his actions. Although Lorenzo’s father has heard rumors that his son “wrong’st Hieronimo, / And in his suits towards his majesty / Still keep’st him back, and seeks to cross his suit” (3.14.54-6), he suspects nothing regarding Horatio’s murder or his daughter’s imprisonment, and it is almost certain that he would not approve of the extreme measures his son takes in order to achieve these goals – no matter how well they coincide with his own directive from the King that he “must take some little pains / To win fair Bel-imperia from her will” (2.4.41-2).

Lorenzo’s close relationship with Balthazar also turns out to be nothing more than an elaborate sham. Despite his efforts to help his new friend win over his sister – including all of the time spent plotting, planning, and bolstering his deflated ego – Lorenzo soon reveals that he neither respects nor even likes Balthazar. Not only does he secretly have the prince’s trusted servant killed, but then, after sending Balthazar to the marshal sessions to ensure Pedringano’s speedy execution for the murder, he boasts of how easily he manipulated his “friend”:

I lay the plot, he prosecutes the point;
 I set the trap, he breaks the worthless twigs,
 And sees not that wherewith the bird was limed.
 Thus hopeful men, that mean to hold their own,
 Must look like fowlers to their dearest friends.
 He runs to kill whom I have help to catch,
 And no man knows it was my reaching fatch.
(3.4.40-6)

By equating Balthazar to a limed bird and by exploiting his “hopeful” nature (here, for revenge for his servant’s death, though more generally his desire for Bel-imperia),

Lorenzo reveals that he holds the prince in little more regard than the lowly Pedringano and Serberine, whose greed for wealth and advancement he similarly exploits.

Seemingly motivated by neither furthering the interests of the crown, his father, or Balthazar, Lorenzo instead appears driven by reasons more selfish and deeply personal, compulsions that combine his deep-seated hatred for his social inferiors with his need to control his sister's sexuality.

Lorenzo's impulses become clearer as the play progresses and his role in attempting to bring about the royal wedding grows larger and more expansive. He is the mastermind behind everything – he finds out the identity of his sister's new lover, sets up the ambush in the bower, first stabs Horatio, imprisons Bel-imperia, and arranges the deaths of Serberine and Pedringano. In true Machiavelian form, Lorenzo proudly boasts about these schemes, strategies, and achievements in his soliloquies, even at times usurping the royal plural to describe himself: “Now stand our fortune on a fickle point, / And now or never ends Lorenzo's doubts” (3.5.78-9).¹¹ All the while, Balthazar repeatedly takes a back seat to Lorenzo and does nothing. The stark difference between the two characters' dispositions is perhaps best exemplified by the parallel yet contrasting reactions they have to witnessing the passionate intimacy between Bel-imperia and Horatio:

BALTHAZAR: O sleep mine eyes, see not my love profaned;
Be deaf, my ears, hear not my discontent;
Die, heart, another joys what thou deserves.

LORENZO: Watch still mine eyes, to see this love disjoined;
Hear still mine ears, to hear them both lament;
Live, heart, to joy at fond Horatio's fall.

(2.2.18-23)

¹¹ During his soliloquies Lorenzo even, for good measure, throws in the hallmark of the Senecan villain: referring to oneself in the third person.

The passive Balthazar seeks to shut everything out, to deny the reality of the situation so that he can live in a state of ignorance and self-pitying despair. Lorenzo, on the other hand, actively challenges his senses to drink in the offending sights and sounds, which incite him into an emotional frenzy. Feeding off these images, Lorenzo can think only of turning the lovers' bliss into heartbreak and violence.

This last moment – which confirms the identity of Bel-imperia's new lover – marks a turning point for Lorenzo: suddenly, his interest in assigning his sister's romantic partner suddenly erupts into an outright obsession. Desperate to prevent a repeat occurrence of the scandalous social and sexual indiscretions she committed with Andrea, Lorenzo bends all of his will towards removing the latest interloper. Apparently assuming that her affections are endless, constant, and easily transferrable (after all she quickly, seamlessly shifted from Andrea to Horatio when the former died) – a logic indebted to the lusty widow stereotype where a woman's desire becomes unquenchable after it has first been ignited – Lorenzo claims that “Her favour must be won by his remove” (2.2.136), as if simply eliminating Horatio will allow Balthazar to fill the void he leaves behind. However, Lorenzo seems particularly keen on one main goal: preventing any sexual contact between Bel-imperia and Horatio. Spying on the lovers during their first secret meeting, Lorenzo ironically counters Horatio's “Dangers of war and pleasures of our love” (2.2.30) with the promise of “Dangers of death, but pleasures none at all” (2.2.31).

Lorenzo makes good on his threat during the bower scene, when he and his confederates forcefully break up the lovers' nighttime assignation. After initially beginning with a propitious sense of apprehension, the courting more or less follows the basic precepts of early modern stage seduction: feigned hesitation, mock combat,

voluminous compliments, and extravagant comparisons to the gods, all of which lead, finally, to an exchange of kisses and a mutual embrace with arms intertwined like “elms” and “vines.” Horatio’s last lines to Bel-imperia – “O stay a while and I will die with thee, / So shalt thou yield and yet have conquered me” (2.5.48-9) – anticipate the act of consummation that would surely have occurred had the love scene been carried out to its logical conclusion. But it is precisely here – at the play’s most erotically charged moment – that Lorenzo springs his ambush and interrupts the lovers. With somewhat heavy-handed irony, he takes Horatio’s sexual pun of “die” and literalizes it some seven lines later. Stabbing Horatio “thus, and thus,” Lorenzo co-ops the act of penetration that Horatio was about to perform on his sister and inverts it, using it instead to pay Horatio with what he calls “the fruits of love” (2.5.55).

Taken at face value, there is nothing all that suspicious or sinister about a brother’s interest in his sister’s marital affairs, even when he tries to exert a controlling influence over them. According to English law, brothers over the age of eighteen assumed legal guardianship over their single, never-married sisters at the death of their father, and they would thus have a say in whom their sisters married.¹² But one of the things that makes the Lorenzo-Bel-imperia relationship so bizarre is that he acts like his sister’s legal guardian when he is, in fact, no such thing – their father the Duke of Castile remains very much alive, even if he plays only a limited role in the drama and almost never interacts with his daughter. Just as Lorenzo overreaches in appropriating the royal plural at

¹² See Elizabeth Foyster, “Marrying the Experienced Widow,” 117-20. As mentioned in the previous chapter, widows circumnavigated these laws of male rule as they retained their financial and sexual independence after the death of their husbands; however, this still did not stop some brothers and other male kin from trying to control their remarriage choices. See, for example, Andrew Kingsmill’s *A Viewe of Man’s Estate... Where Unto is Annexed a Godly Advise Given by the Author Touching Marriage* (1576). Kingsmill’s advice on proper Christian conduct in marriage is specifically written for his sister, who had recently lost her first husband and was considering remarriage.

various points in the play, he attempts to usurp patriarchal privilege in overseeing one of the most important duties that an early modern father had towards his daughter: wedding her to a suitable husband. One of the more egregious displays of attempting to monitor Bel-imperia's sexuality comes when Lorenzo imprisons his sister after killing Horatio. Ostensibly meant "for a policy / To smooth and keep the murder secret" (3.10.9-10) – to keep Bel-imperia from telling her father or uncle about Horatio's death – this imprisonment instead reenacts an incest folktale motif where the father locks up his daughter to save her for himself.¹³ Yet in this incarnation, the act is doubly-incestuous for Lorenzo plays both the lustful father-tyrant and the archetypal hero who frees the daughter and then steals her away to be his bride. Lorenzo tells Bel-imperia that he took such drastic measures against her and Horatio in order to protect her from their father's wrath should he find her "so meanly accompanied" (3.10.57). However, it is not his father's wrath he speaks of but his own; here, as at 3.2.57-8 where he answers Hieronimo's inquiry concerning Bel-imperia's whereabouts with the lie that "The duke my father hath / Upon some disgrace awhile removed her hence," Lorenzo describes his own feelings and actions as if they were his father's.

So why, if Lorenzo indeed harbors an incestuous desire for his sister, would he actively seek to give her to a rival male? As Georges Bataille speculates in his work on eroticism and taboo, the "spending-gift" nature of marriage is itself a displacement of incest:

The gift itself is a renunciation... Marriage is a matter less for the partners than for the man who gives the woman away, the man whether father or brother who might have freely enjoyed the woman, daughter or sister, yet who bestows her on someone else. This gift is perhaps a substitute for the sexual act; for the

¹³ See Lynda E. Boose, "The Father and the Bride in Shakespeare," *PMLA* 97:3 (May, 1982): 325-47, esp. pp. 331-36.

exuberance of giving has a significance akin to that of the act itself; it is also a spending of resources.¹⁴

On a more practical level, keeping Bel-imperia locked up for himself is simply not a viable option. Somehow Lorenzo has managed to keep her “sequestered from the court” for as long as he does, though he certainly cannot maintain his sister-imprisonment fantasy for much longer, as the inquiries into her whereabouts would only grow louder and more insistent. Passing Bel-imperia off to Balthazar appears the best alternative; not only is he an aristocrat with royal blood, but, more importantly, he is feckless, excessively emotional, martially inept, and a loyal follower of Lorenzo’s. Unlike the ambitious, virile and martially skilled Andrea and Horatio – representatives of the aspiring “middling sort” – Balthazar does not pose a physical, social or sexual threat.

When these actions are taken together, Lorenzo’s relentless insistence of pushing Balthazar on Bel-imperia eventually takes on the unsightly sheen of pandering; and his voyeuristic impulse to spy on his sister during her most intimate moments, coupled with his frantic, ruthless drive to prevent any sexual contact between her and Horatio, borders on the actions of a jealous man. Perhaps it is no mere coincidence that Lorenzo’s final threat to Horatio suggestively employs that very term: “Ay, danger mixed with jealous despite / Shall send thy soul into eternal night” (2.2.56-7).¹⁵ While jealous can mean “Vehement in feeling... wrathful, furious” or “suspiciously careful or watchful” (*OED* 1a, 3a) – thus the phrase “jealous despite” could be glossed as “furious contempt” or

¹⁴ Georges Bataille, *Death and Sensuality: A Study of Eroticism and the Taboo* (New York: Arno Press, 1977), 218. Cited in Boose, 327. Boose goes on to say that “The wedding ceremony ritualizes this notion of bounty as the gift of life by having the father give the groom the family treasure, which the father cannot ‘use’ but can only bequeath or hoard” (n.11, 344).

¹⁵ I retain here the original spelling of “jealous” from the 1592 quarto, which most modern editors likewise use (such as Katherine Maus in her 1995 *Four Revenge Tragedies* edition). J.R. Mulryne, however, emends the word to “jealous,” citing the line’s metrical need for three syllables as justification for creating this peculiar spelling of his own devising.

“watchful scorn”¹⁶ – the much more common usage of the term means “Ardently amorous; covetous of the love of another” (*OED* 2). Therefore, the phrase – which establishes the intense emotional foundation for Lorenzo’s mortal hatred towards Horatio – could just as well mean that he threatens to kill Horatio out of a contempt bred from jealousy over his sister’s love. This curious choice of phrase also opens up the possibility that Lorenzo’s intense hatred of Horatio (and Andrea before him) stems as much from sexual jealousy as from social disdain.

A final, albeit small, piece of evidence for incest in *The Spanish Tragedy* comes from the ending play-within-a-play *Soliman and Perseda*, where Lorenzo is cast as Erastus and Bel-imperia plays his faithful wife Perseda. Granted, this “marriage” occurs in a production with only four available actors – which necessarily limits possible marital configurations – and the tragedy is, after all, a fictional device where Lorenzo and Balthazar play characters written for them. But the play, of course, represents much more than simply a piece of “fruitless poetry” (4.1.72) meant solely for the entertainment of the Spanish and Portuguese courts. As in his previous *Masque of Peace*, which advocated humility in the face of resounding military success, Hieronimo’s second work also “Contain[s] matter, and not common things” (4.1.161). Most noticeably, Hieronimo ingeniously uses this staging as the means to execute his revenge publically and bring to light all of the wrongs committed against him and his family. As such, he makes the basic plot of *Soliman and Perseda* mirror the events of the larger play in none-too-subtle ways: Soliman, a king, falls in love with Perseda, the wife of the knight Erasto, whom he

¹⁶ Mulryne glosses this word using this last definition (“watchful, suspicious”), though “watchful/suspicious contempt” doesn’t make a whole lot of sense, even if Lorenzo’s comment picks up on the “Dangerous suspicion” (2.2.55) from Horatio’s previous line. Additionally, the *OED* notes that this definition requires a construction with “of (for, over),” none of which occur here.

response that the text provides to the couple's onstage interaction comes from the smitten Balthazar/Soliman's discovery that the object of his desire is married to his best friend. After witnessing the joyous reunion between Lorenzo/Erasto and his wife Bel-imperia/Perseda, whom Lorenzo/Erasto thought was killed in the Siege of Rhodes, Balthazar/Soliman laments to his bashaw/Hieronimo, "here is love between Erasto / And fair Perseda" (4.4.39-40). Just exactly what this display of "love" is, and just how passionately (or awkwardly) it is performed, remains unknown, for the text gives no stage directions. However, given that the performers speak in a linguistic cacophony of "unknown languages" that the audience would probably not comprehend, it stands to reason that some sort of obvious gesture of affection accompanies these lines, presumably something more than a warm handshake (although possibly less than an explicit embrace).

In a play-within-a-play that consciously exploits and blurs the boundaries between fiction and reality – the "fake" deaths turn out to be "real" deaths, the "fake" revenge of Perseda turns out to be the "real" revenge of Bel-imperia and Hieronimo, the "fake" roles in *Soliman and Perseda* turn out to mirror their "real" roles in the larger play – the incestuous pairing of Lorenzo with his sister suddenly seems like something more than mere accident or fiction. What at first glance appears a minor, irrelevant detail instead comes across as a moment of inspired, revelatory casting by Hieronimo. Perhaps this performance even influences Andrea's own "casting" decision at the play's end. When Revenge gives Andrea the power to assign his friends and foes their destination in the underworld, he chooses to have Lorenzo replace Ixion on his endlessly spinning wheel of torture, so that "the lover's endless pains surcease" (4.5.34). Ixion, brought to Olympus

to feast at the table of the gods, defiled the sacred laws of hospitality when he became lustful towards his host's wife. Zeus foiled his guest's plan to rape Hera, blasting him with a thunderbolt and then binding him to his fiery wheel for all of eternity. Given the nature of Ixion's crime and the violation of "love" that it represents, it would perhaps seem a more fitting punishment for Balthazar, who instead gets hung "about Ch'mera's neck" (4.5.36).

Another peculiar yet illuminating aspect of *Soliman and Perseda* concerns the play's setting, which takes place on the eastern Mediterranean island of Rhodes. Although not dated, the events of the play most likely occur in 1523, sometime shortly after the five-month siege of Rhodes (June to December, 1522) where Suleiman the Magnificent used 400 ships and 100,000 soldiers to overpower the 700 Knights of Rhodes¹⁹ and 6,800 mercenaries holed up in their stronghold. Heirs to the Knights Templar, who dissolved in 1312, the Knights of Rhodes had long been a thorn in the Ottomans' side, so much so that the Ottomans had already tried twice – once in 1444 and again in 1480 – to eradicate the Order. Having become heavily involved in the lucrative trade industry in the Aegean Sea, the Knights often fought with Barbary pirates and became particularly adept at raiding Turkish shipping vessels. It was for this last reason – the Knights' interference with the Ottoman's trading in the Levant – that Suleiman decided to bring such an overwhelmingly large force to expel the Europeans. The victory proved strategic for Suleiman; not only did it help increase the security of the Ottomans' maritime trade and communications, but it also helped them consolidate their power over the entire eastern Mediterranean. For Europeans, the fall of the last remaining Christian military

¹⁹Perhaps better known as the Knights Hospitaller (they originated in the eleventh century as a group tending to sick Christians on pilgrimage to the Holy Land), the order has also been popularly referred to as the Order of St. John and, later, the Knights of Malta.

stronghold in the east proved anxiogenic: they feared that the growing infidel empire would soon spread over all of Europe.

When Hieronimo describes *Soliman and Perseda* to Lorenzo and Balthazar, he claims this episode comes from “the chronicles of Spain” (4.1.108), thus providing a tenuous justification for staging this particular story for the King and the Viceroy.²⁰ However, it is not entirely clear why the Spanish histories would include this story, since none of the characters have Spanish roots and none of the action occurs on Spanish soil.²¹ But the setting does prove remarkably appropriate in accentuating one of the play’s major themes: the contradictions and threats inherent in international political marriages.²² The text first dramatizes this subject matter in the various battles waged over Bel-imperia’s hand, which pit lower-class, yet valiant and deserving, fellow countrymen against an aristocratic, yet weak and contemptible, foreign enemy. By depicting the Spanish ruling elite as primarily interested in furthering their own political and dynastic ambitions, *The Spanish Tragedy* reveals the paradoxes in popular political thought that regard certain forms of miscegenation acceptable over others. In this case, international miscegenation

²⁰ This explanation provides yet another parallel between the two entertainments that Hieronimo produces: he likewise gleaned the lessons from his *Masque of Peace*, which depicted English conquests over Portugal and Spain, from the annals of history.

²¹ Perhaps one of the only connections between the Knights of Rhodes and Spain during this period was that the Order was divided into seven different geographic-cultural subgroupings (called *langues* or *tongues*), with one of them being Spain (the others were Provence, Auvergne, France, Italy, England, and Germany). Or Kyd possibly could have confused the Siege of Rhodes with the Siege of Malta (1565). After their defeat at Rhodes, Suleiman proved remarkably generous, offering the remaining Knights free passage to leave Rhodes; after seven few years of wandering, Charles V of Spain gave them Malta to settle on. The Knights quickly re-established themselves and, much to Suleiman’s displeasure, resumed their plundering of the Ottoman fleet. In 1565 Suleiman decided to once again lay siege to the Knights’ island stronghold, though the Ottomans were eventually defeated when a relief force from Spain came to the Knights’ aid. In the anonymous full-length version of *Soliman and Perseda* (first printed in 1599; some attribute this to Kyd, though this designation remains quite doubtful), Erastus does not hale from Spain. The text does, however, contain a “Spaniard” – a Knight who has only one speaking part.

²² The Turkish displacement of the play-within-a-play also serves another important function: it allows Hieronimo to finally avenge the murder of his son. In order to assume the blood-red mantle of revenge – a violation of ecclesiastical and civil law – Hieronimo first has to abandon his civilized position of Knight-Marshall (relatively speaking, that is; we are talking about Spain after all), and adopt the more passionate, violent, barbaric role of bashaw, an officer for the Turkish emperor.

is much more acceptable than social miscegenation: the nobility of a foreign nation provides a much more fitting marriage partner than one's own countrymen of a lower class. Or to put it in the play's stark terms, the loyal hero of the war gets passed over for the enemy who killed the most Spaniards on the battlefield (or, according to some accounts, had his men kill the most Spaniards, since he lacked the martial prowess of doing so himself).

The love triangle in *Soliman and Perseda* not only reinforces this notion, but also accentuates and heightens it. By transforming the composition of the larger play's triangle from Spanish-Spanish-Portuguese (Horatio-Bel-imperia-Balthazar) to Christian-Italian-Muslim, the text takes what could have been regarded as a relatively minor case of national exogamy and elevates it to an extreme form of ethnic and religious miscegenation.²³ With Balthazar undergoing the most significant transformation of the characters (from Portuguese prince to Ottoman king) but with the others maintaining a similar ethnicity and social standing (Bel-imperia becomes an Italian "dame," Horatio stays a Christian knight, though of indeterminate origin), what is at stake is no longer just a difference of class, but a difference of religion – a move that essentially equates the Catholicism of Portugal (and, by extension, Spain/Italy) with the Islam of the Ottomans.

It is perhaps not too much of a stretch to detect here a noticeable undercurrent of political

²³ Most likely an English audience would have regarded the Spanish and Portuguese – two neighboring states who "jointly knit / Their frontiers" (1.2.22-3) – as more similar than different. The two nationalities are, after all, virtually interchangeable in the play. Spectators may have been more aware of relatively recent 800-year Moorish occupation of the Iberian peninsula. In Spenser's *A View of the Present State of Ireland* (1595-6), Irenius claims that this long comingling resulted in Spanish blood being the most "mixed" of all European nations: "the Moors and Barbarians breaking over out of Africa, did final'y possess all Spain, or the most part thereof, and did tread under their heathenish Feet whatever little they found yet there standing. The which though after they were beaten out by Ferdinando of Arragon and Isabella his Wife, yet they were not so cleansed, but that through the Marriages which they had made, and mixture with the People of the Land, during their long continuance there, they had left no pure Drop of Spanish Blood, no more than of Roman or Scythian. So that of all Nations under Heaven (I suppose) the Spaniard is the most mingled, and most uncertain" (*A View of the State of Ireland as it was in the Reign of Queen Elizabeth*, [Dublin, 1763], 68-9).

criticism directly aimed at the English Crown's penchant for considering international marriages, particularly for their last two monarchs. Certainly the controversial and unpopular marriage between Mary I and Philip II of Spain – which many objected to out of fear that England would lose its autonomy and become a Spanish colony²⁴ – reverberates most strongly, since this is the same king who, some thirty years later, would launch the Spanish Armada with the vague intent of establishing a Catholic monarch on the English throne. Perhaps not coincidentally, this invasion occurred right around the time Kyd's play was written.²⁵

Elizabeth also entertained a number of possible international political marriages, from the aforesaid Philip II of Spain to the Archduke Charles of Austria to Henri and François, the two French Valois princes. As much as any of these marriages could have proved beneficial by helping establish international relations and cementing important military alliances, they also, given Mary and Elizabeth's gender, posed substantial threats. In a patriarchal society, a foreign king poses a greater danger to a nation's culture, religion and military than a foreign queen would. Although some nobles and pamphleteers were vocal in their opposition of these types of royal weddings, such criticism could come at a steep price. In the 1579 *The Discovery of a Gaping Gulf Whereunto England is Like to be Swallowed by Another French Marriage*, John Stubbs protested the proposed marriage between Elizabeth and the Duke of Alençon. Worried that Protestant England would become subordinate to Catholic France (its longtime enemy), Stubbs called the match a

²⁴ Lord Chancellor Gardiner in particular opposed the marriage. He vociferously argued that Mary should wed an Englishman.

²⁵ Accurately dating the play has proven notoriously difficult. Most scholars agree that the play could not have been written before 1582 (it adapts material from Thomas Watson's *Hekatompathia* from that year, although some argue that Kyd knew Watson and could have thus read the work in manuscript) or after February 23, 1592 when the Lord Strange's men performed it for Henslowe. The lack of any specific references to the Spanish Armada (1588) cause some to date it pre-1587, though the general consensus favors a slightly later date range, from 1587-91. See Mulryne, xiii-xiv.

“contrary coupling,” comparing it to all manner of unnatural union: “the uneven yoking of the clean ox to the unclean ass, a thing forbidden in the law”; “health to be joined in marriage with any foul disease”; “beauty with deformity, youth with decrepit age, or to tender a townsman’s daughter to a gentleman of birth”; and a citizen of Rome with a barbarian, or an Hebrew with a Canaanite.²⁶ Outraged by this challenge to her royal authority, Elizabeth demanded the right hands of Stubbs, his publisher William Page, and his printer Hugh Singleton. Although she later pardoned Singleton, Stubbs and Page had their hands cut off in a widely-viewed public dismemberment.²⁷ Obviously, the issue of Elizabeth giving her own hand away to a foreign prince caused a great deal of consternation during the period. Perhaps this also helps to explain the vexing plot-point in *The Spanish Tragedy* of why the King of Spain chooses to have the line of succession flow through his niece rather than his nephew: to draw out the vague comparisons between Bel-imperia and Elizabeth.

One of the more remarkable aspects of *The Spanish Tragedy* lies in not what it says, but in what it leaves unsaid. Years before Shakespeare “learned...to create ambivalence” in *Julius Caesar* (1599),²⁸ Kyd produced his groundbreaking masterpiece where silences, gaps and miscommunication reign: letters sent but never read, secret explanations whispered but not heard, intriguing backstories hinted at but never completely filled in.

²⁶ John Stubbs’s *Gaping Gulf with Letters and Other Relevant Documents*, ed. Lloyd E. Berry (Charlottesville, VA: The University Press of Virginia, 1968), 9.

²⁷ According to William Camden’s eyewitness account, the crowd was oddly silent during the mutilation. Camden offers three possible explanations: “either out of horror at this new unwonted kind of punishment or out of commiseration towards the man, as being of an honest and unblemished repute; or else out of hatred of the marriage, which most men presaged would be the overthrow of religion.” Cited in Sid Ray, *Holy Estates: Marriage and Monarchy in Shakespeare and His Contemporaries* (Selinsgrove, PA: Susquehanna University Press, 2004), 107-08. Ray connects this incident of dismemberment and marital politics to the severing of hands in *Titus Andronicus* and *The Duchess of Malfi*. See “‘Thy Servant and Thy Handmaid’: Mutilation and the Politics of Consent in *Titus Andronicus* and *The Duchess of Malfi*,” pp. 106-37.

²⁸ Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, ed. David Daniell, Arden Third Series (Walton-on-Thames, Surrey, UK: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1998), 1.

All of this creates a compelling yet frustrating world full of half-stories and indeterminacies, tempting audiences – and critics – to fill in these narrative and motivational gaps. One of the more intriguing silences in the play stems from the Spanish court suffering from an understated crisis of succession on two fronts: first, since the King has no heirs of his own producing, he undertakes a most elaborate and contrived marriage to establish a suitable line of descent; and second, Bel-imperia poses a serious problem to the stability of the court and, by extension, to the country. An uncontrollable member of the royal household, she, widow-like, freely dispenses her sexual (and, by extension, financial) gifts where she deems fit, moves that threaten to bring the whole house of cards down. Lorenzo's desperate, relentless attempts to govern her manifest themselves as an incestuous desire to keep her for himself, or, since that is not a viable option, for one similar enough in status who can serve as a suitable stand in.

Admittedly this case for incest in the play is not ironclad. However, given Lorenzo's suspiciously deep and abiding interest in his sister's romantic pursuits, the possibility that incestuous longings motivate Lorenzo fit a pattern of what Carol Kay calls the systematic and unsettling denial of information to the theater audience.²⁹ Although the play clearly does not contain any "real" incest, its specter just as clearly haunts the play. At the very least, one can imagine how another dramatist could pick up on these underlying themes, heighten them, and explore them in his own rewriting of this very popular play. In fact Webster is not alone in this endeavor, as two other incestuous widow plays – Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and Middleton's *The Revenger's Tragedy* – are also heavily influenced by *The Spanish Tragedy*.

²⁹ See Carol Kay, "Deception Through Words: A Reading of *The Spanish Tragedy*," *Studies in Philology* 74:1 (Jan., 1977): 20-38.

“I have not gone about ... to create / Any new world”: Social Mobility and the Widow’s Choice in *The Duchess of Malfi*

From one perspective *The Spanish Tragedy* and *The Duchess of Malfi* seem worlds apart. The first is a play consciously epic in scope and subject: beginning in the underworld and constantly evoking the classical gods, the play concerns itself with warring nations, peace treaties, and the happenings of kings, princes, and their armies. Primarily about a father’s search for justice for his murdered son, the play closely models itself on the revenge tragedies of Seneca. Decidedly un-Senecan in flavor, the second is a much more domestic affair. Taking place mostly in intimate settings – bedchambers, closets, prison cells – *Malfi* is a dark and foreboding drama centering on a perverse family who seeks to control, and ultimately consume, its own members. Although *The Spanish Tragedy* contains its fair share of death and even dismemberment, its violence pales in comparison to the sadistic physical and psychological horrors that permeate the latter play.³⁰ If the mood of *The Spanish Tragedy* is colored a dark gray, then that of *The Duchess of Malfi* is an impenetrable, pitch black.

However, if one strips away these surface details, one can see that at their narrative core these two plays bear a striking resemblance to one another. Thematically, both deal with issues involving social ambition, justice, revenge, and madness. Plot-wise, both dramatize the secret relationship between a strong-willed, independent aristocratic woman and her newly-chosen lover, a social inferior. The two plays also contain overly

³⁰ Perhaps with tongue firmly planted in cheek, the New York based Red Bull Theater company included a program credit for “violence” in the playbill for their 2010 production of the play. It was listed right after “lighting and sound” in the technology lineup. More famously, George Bernard Shaw labeled Webster the “Tussaud Laureate,” the bard of the Chamber of Horrors. And *Shakespeare in Love* (1998) noticeably featured a young Webster torturing mice and proclaiming his admiration for *Titus Andronicus*, Shakespeare’s bloodiest drama.

protective brothers who discover these clandestine affairs via planted servant-informants, confirm this information by spying on their sisters at very private moments, and then kill their sister's new love interest out of a possible incestuous jealousy. Many of the play's principal characters also mirror one another: the widow-like Bel-imperia becomes elevated as the widowed Duchess; Horatio, a soldier of the middling sort, becomes Antonio, a soldier and household steward; Lorenzo gets split into the two Aragonian brethren, though he most closely resembles Ferdinand; and the servant Pedringano, eager to do anything for the promise of gold, morphs into Bosola, a servant who also yearns for recognition and advancement.³¹ It is almost as if Webster takes the familial heart of *The Spanish Tragedy* story and focuses exclusively on it, amplifying and making explicit its themes of social and sexual antagonism.³² Of course the two texts do treat these issues differently, and it is to these differences that I would like to turn. More specifically, I want to focus on two areas where *Malfi* significantly alters its predecessor: how it depicts the aristocracy, and how Ferdinand's incestuous desire to control his sister's sexuality affects/infects him.

³¹ It may seem obvious that Kyd was an influence on Webster, if not simply for the fact that Kyd exerted some effect on nearly every tragedy that followed his. As Fredson Bowers notes, Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* set the major pattern for tragedies that did not imitate Marlowe's *Tamburlaine* for years to come. Though Bowers claims that the first period of Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy ends with Middleton's *The Revenger's Tragedy* (1606-07), the second period, ending with Fletcher's *Valentinian* (1610-14), still includes tragedies inspired by the Kydian form. See Fredson Bowers, *Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy 1587-1642* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1940), "The School of Kyd," 101-53. Even though Bowers does not include Webster among the dramatists from "The School of Kyd" (he instead lists him under "The Reign of the Villain" type), he still regards him as a direct descendant of Kyd, Marlowe, Marston and Tourneur. For a more detailed analysis of Webster's debt to Kyd, see Elmer Edgar Stoll, *John Webster: The Periods of His Work as Determined by His Relations to the Drama of His Day* (New York: Gordian Press, 1967), 93; 118-45.

³² Webster's primary source for the play's basic characters and plot comes from William Painter's *The Palace of Pleasure* (1566-7), which recounts the tragic true story of Giovanna d'Aragona, the Duchess of Amalfi. However, this fact does not preclude the play's indebtedness to *The Spanish Tragedy*, as Webster takes quite a few liberties with his primary source material. For more details concerning Webster's sources for his play, see Brennan, ix-xii.

**“He and his brother are like plum trees, that grow crooked over standing pools”:
The Corruption of the Aristocracy in *The Duchess of Malfi***

The play begins by introducing Antonio in a rather dubious – if not downright suspicious – fashion. We learn from the opening conversation with his good friend Delio that not only has Antonio just returned from France “A very formal Frenchman” (1.1.3),³³ but that he also greatly “admire[s]” the French court. As Antonio explains,

In seeking to reduce both State and people
To a fix’d order, their judicious King
Begins at home. Quits first his royal palace
Of flatt’ring sycophants, of dissolute,
And infamous persons.

(1.1.5-9)

Antonio here shows his veneration for a strict hierarchical social order, particularly for the Prince’s court which he calls, parroting the French King, the “Master’s master-piece, the work of Heaven” (1.1.10). Sanctioned by God and positioned as the head of the metaphorical body politic, the court functions, when working properly, as a “common” fountain of riches from “whence should flow / Pure silver-drops in general” (1.1.12-3). However the system can fail if the King becomes unduly influenced by unscrupulous, avaricious courtiers: Antonio warns that “if’t chance / Some curs’d example poison’t near the head, / *Death and disease through the whole land spread*” (1.1.13-4). Antonio then concludes his portrait of an idealized humanist state by claiming that a “blessed government” is one where “a most provident Council” will “dare freely / Inform him [of] the corruption of the times” (1.1.17-8). When we are then immediately introduced to Bosola, the “only court-gall,” “as lecherous, covetous, or proud, / Bloody, or envious, as

³³ All citations come from the New Mermaids edition of the play, ed. Elizabeth M. Brennan (New York: W.W. Norton, 1989).

any man” (1.1.23; 1.1.26-7), we are led to anticipate seeing an Italian court desperately in need of a similar purging of its “sycophants” and “infamous persons.”

We get, however, a very different reality, and we quickly realize that Antonio mistakenly locates the source of Italian court’s corruption “near” its top rather than at it; the problems of the court do not stem from the courtiers, but rather from the ruling powers themselves.³⁴ Noticeably, with the exception of Bosola, none of the courtiers – neither those who play bit parts like Silvio, Castruchio, Roderigo and Grisolan, nor those with more substantial roles like Delio and Antonio – seem particularly noxious; and even Bosola, despite all of his flaws, is more corrupted than corrupting. Even Antonio acknowledges that his treatment at the hands of the Cardinal helped lead him astray: “‘Tis great pity / He should be thus neglected, I have heard / He’s very valiant. This foul melancholy / Will poison all his goodness” (1.1.73-6). His eventual partial redemption and sympathetic portrayal at the play’s end further support this claim. The two brothers, on the other hand, have virtually no redeeming characteristics. The “great” man the Cardinal uses his political influence to destroy his enemies with “worse plots... than ever was impos’d on Hercules” (1.2.83); lying, cheating, bribing, and blaspheming, “the devil speaks in [his lips]” (1.2.108). Ferdinand, his brother’s twin “in quality,” similarly abuses his station, manipulating the law “like a foul black cobweb to a spider, / ...To entangle those [that] shall feed him” (1.2.100-02). Of a “most perverse and turbulent nature” (1.2.91), he seeks to “laugh / All honesty out of fashion” (1.2.93-4). In fact, it would be difficult to find an early modern villain who sinks to lower levels of moral and

³⁴ Or what we get for ruling powers in the play. While the text mentions the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V and the pope, neither make an actual appearance on the stage. Ferdinand (the Duke of Calabria), the Cardinal, and the Duchess are the highest ranking nobility we actually see. Duchies, in early modern Italy, were considered sovereign, independent territories; the title of Duke or Duchess was hereditary.

religious depravity than these characters. Ferdinand, for instance, gives his sister a dead man's severed hand, saying it belongs to Antonio; to further torment her, he then shows her a set of wax statues he claims belong to the corpses of her murdered husband and children. And then there is the Cardinal with his popish ambitions, who murders his latest mistress with a kiss from a poisoned bible. Seemingly reveling in outlandish excess, Webster portrays the moral degeneracy of these two ruling powers with all the subtlety of a sledgehammer.

Admittedly the early modern stage is populated by any number of notorious stage Machiavels, many as debauched and powerful as the brothers. Consider, for instance, the gloriously perverse, unabashedly evil D'Amville from Tourneur's *The Atheist's Tragedy* (1611). The quintessential aristocratic endogamist, D'Amville desires nothing so much as to establish a powerful dynasty through his children's offspring, since, as the atheist of the play's title, he mistakenly identifies this as the best way of achieving immortality. As he says when he first introduces his sons,

Here are my sons...
There's my eternity. My life in them
And their succession shall for ever live,
And in my reason dwells the providence
To add to life as much of happiness.
(1.1.123-26)³⁵

His dynastic ambitions, however, run into problems when it looks like his sons will not be able to provide him with the legitimate issue he so fervently craves: his first son, married to Castabella, the daughter of a Baron, proves impotent, while his youngest son's "loose humour will endure / No bond of marriage" (4.2.36-7). D'Amville's solution? To

³⁵ All citations taken from the New Mermaids edition of the play: Cyril Tourneur, *The Atheist's Tragedy*, ed. Brian Morris and Roma Gill (New York: W.W. Norton, 1989).

father an heir on his daughter-in-law himself, an incestuous act he attempts to complete in the church's charnel house while chasing Castabella around piles of skulls and bones.

Despite D'Amville's condemnatory behavior, the text does not challenge aristocratic rule; rather, it targets those aristocrats who get too greedy, lose their way, and divorce their actions from God. D'Amville acquires his barony illegally by violating the laws of primogeniture, first by murdering his elder brother and then by cheating his elder brother's eldest son out of his inheritance (as well as his fiancée). Tourneur infuses the play with a strong sense of religious providence, making sure that it is God, not man, who avenges the injustices in the play. "Leave revenge unto the King of kings," the Hamlet-esque ghost of the murdered Montferrers commands his son, an order he obeys, even if he has to hear it repeated three or four times. And God certainly works in mysterious ways in this play, most notably in His disposal of D'Amville, who famously "strikes out his own brains" (5.2.241 SD) with an axe-swing meant to kill his nephew. Ultimately the text upholds the importance of noble blood when Charlemont, the rightful heir, assumes the title of Baron and reunites with his fiancée at the play's close. The will of Heaven, which first established aristocratic rule, acts to purge the system of its impurities, and, in the process, re-sanctifies it.

Yet what makes the censorious depiction of the aristocracy in *Malfi* all the more remarkable is that it comes accompanied by a surprisingly strong and unrelenting argument in favor of merit over blood. This argument starts early: the first act sets the stage in establishing a link between actions, rather than blood, reinforcing or creating character. Castruchio, for instance, counsels the Duke against going to war, arguing that "It is fitting a soldier arise to be a prince, but not necessary a prince descend to be a

captain” (1.2.14-5). Given that Antonio has just proved his martial prowess by winning the jousting ring the “oft’ nest,” this comment foreshadows Antonio’s rise. Antonio himself makes a similar statement a few moments later: when Ferdinand asks him of his thoughts about good horsemanship, he answers, “Nobly, my lord: as out of the Grecian horse issued many famous princes: so out of brave horsemanship, arise the first sparks of growing resolution, that raise the mind to noble action” (1.2.64-7).

Of course the character of Antonio makes the most dramatic and explicit case that true nobility stems from character and action rather than bloodline. Faithful, humble, and consciously not ambitious, he is nearly universally regarded as a forthright and upstanding citizen, and not just by the Duchess, who obviously finds him a worthy companion – and husband – for one of her standing. When Ferdinand suggests that Antonio would be in a better position than Bosola to spy on the Duchess, the Cardinal rejects him as an intelligencer, claiming, “His nature is too honest for such business” (1.2.151). The Marquis of Pescara not only regards Antonio in a positive light, but also upholds his marriage to the Duchess and his right to the lands that this union affords. When confronted by Delio as to why he gave away the citadel of Saint Bennet – part of the Duchy of Amalfi – to the Cardinal’s mistress rather than to him, Pescara replies,

Do you know what it was?
It was Antonio’s land: not forfeited
By course of law; but ravish’d from his throat
By the Cardinal’s entreaty: it were not fit
I should bestow so main a pieve of wrong
Upon my friend: ‘tis a gratification
Only due a strumpet; for it is injustice”
(5.1.40-6).

Even Bosola comes to view Antonio in a favorable light. After murdering the Duchess, Bosola sees Antonio as the last shining beacon in the corrupted darkness of the *Malfi*

world, the one hope he has for finding some sort of redemption for the wrongs he has committed. In short, the contrasts between the characters of Antonio and the hereditary ruling elite, as embodied by the brothers, could not be drawn more starkly. And, unlike comedies, where the ending traditionally reveals that the noble-acting but lowly-born peasant betrothed to the princess is actually a long-lost prince (or one in disguise), *Malfi* offers no such compromise; Antonio remains, until the very end, “basely descended” (3.2.258).

In *The Spanish Tragedy* Kyd pulls some of his punches in his critique of the aristocracy. Despite the moral bankruptcy of Lorenzo and Balthazar, the play’s highest ruling powers – the kings of Spain and Portugal – are by no means reprehensible figures. The King of Spain, for instance, appears genuinely shocked at Hieronimo’s distracted state and concerned for his welfare, refusing to dismiss him as Knight Marshall out of concern that it will only increase his melancholy (3.13). And the viceroy of Portugal gives a humbling and rather moving speech when he learns of his army’s defeat and the supposed death of his son (1.3). Although the two kings suffer losses – one, a son; the other, a nephew – to Hieronimo’s revenge, both escape ultimate punishment and survive the end of the play. Kay Stockholder reads this tension in the play as the “dual impulse to blame and protect the King”: “the fact that Lorenzo is nephew rather than son to the King is the principal device by which Hieronimo protects the image of ultimate authority, and the separation of the Viceroy from his son duplicates this central configuration.”³⁶ *The Duchess of Malfi*, however, contains no such equivocation, for Webster swings freely at his aristocratic subjects. True, the Duchess herself presents a notable example of an

³⁶ Kay Stockholder, ““Yet Can He Write,”” 107-8.

honorable member of the gentry;³⁷ her surprisingly sympathetic portrayal – her strong-willed, independent, and sexually-free character is lauded, not condemned – challenges all of the prevailing stereotypes of the lusty widow.³⁸ But even the fact that she represents “sacred innocence” (4.2.349) while her brothers personify malice and corruption, suggests that blood has little to nothing to do with character. After all, how could she and her brothers be so vastly different if they all have the same noble blood running through their veins, especially with Ferdinand and her not being just siblings but also twins? Clearly the textual relationship between noble character and noble blood remains ambiguous at best.

In *The Spanish Tragedy* the system of courtly reward, at least as it applies to the King himself, essentially functions as designed, as a means of distributing wealth and compensating desirable activities. For instance, the King rewards Horatio for his brave exploits on the battlefield, although his designation as the official “cup-bearer” of the banquet simultaneously serves as an honor and a reminder that his proper role is one that attends on the royalty. The King also ensures that Horatio receives the ransom for the prince’s capture; however, when Horatio attempts to reward himself with more than his fair share – the king’s niece – Lorenzo, playing the role of a debauched king, takes it upon himself to repay his overreaching with an immediate and ruthless, not to mention unjust, punishment. Similarly, Lorenzo rewards Pedringano for his services with only an empty box and a full noose. Thus, at least part of the system functions properly in *The*

³⁷ Another possible example is the Marquis of Pescara, who holds a rank just below that of Duke/Duchess in the early modern Italian hierarchy. However, Pescara, quite frankly, does little in the play other than serve as an example of a “noble old fellow” (5.1.59) who recognizes Antonio’s worthiness and also stands up for his rights.

³⁸ See Dymna Callaghan’s “*The Duchess of Malfi* and Early Modern Widows” for a more complete, extended discussion of Webster’s “extraordinarily sympathetic” (272) literary rendition of the remarrying widow.

Spanish Tragedy, even as other parts remain corrupt and the fairness of the whole enterprise is called into question.

In *Malfi*, however, the political and social system appears almost completely broken; punishment, rather than reward, seems to be the only promise for services rendered to the state. Keenly aware of this, Antonio, who has “long serv’d virtue, / And nev’r tane wages of her” (1.2.355-56), fears the effects of ambition, which he calls “a great man’s madness” that makes one “lunatic, beyond all cure” (1.2.337, 341). Initially balking at the Duchess’ wooing and promise of social elevation, he sees in the wedding ring she presents him with not a symbol of unity, love, and eternity, but rather “a saucy and ambitious devil / ... dancing in this circle” (1.2.28-9). The lynchpin, though, for reading the play as a sympathetic portrayal of social mobility rests even more with Bosola, who perhaps best represents the degree to which the corruption of the *Malfi* court extends beyond that in *The Spanish Tragedy*. While initially presented as the avaricious, unscrupulous courtier in the vein of *The Spanish Tragedy*’s Pedringano, we quickly realize that he is infinitely more complex than his bumbling, simplistic dramatic predecessor.

Of course, Bosola would never be canonized by the church: he’s a murderer, misogynistic (especially in his interactions with the Old Lady), greedy, and bitter, extremely bitter. But his acrimony has a basis in a legitimate, even understandable, grievance: once a soldier ill-rewarded for risking life and limb in the service of the state, he then turns to the Cardinal’s employment, becoming his personal enforcer. Here, again, his service is ill-rewarded: a seven-year stint as slave labor in the galleys. Continually rebuffed in his attempts to receive payment for his services, Bosola remains

deeply skeptical of how this court's economy functions. When finally offered gold by the Cardinal's brother, Bosola knows that such a seemingly generous act does not come without significant strings attached to it: "So: / What follows? (Never rain'd such showers as these / Without thunderbolts I'th' tail of them) / Whose throat must I cut?" (1.2.167-70). Even though he still participates in this system where those with power and money entice those without to do all of their dirty work for them (and then take the blame for it), he does so only begrudgingly and with the full realization of just how unjust and exploitative the whole operation is. Equating himself and courtiers like him to the eternally striving yet eternally unsatiated Tantalus, he laments in the beginning, "Who would rely upon these miserable dependences, in expectation to be advanc'd tomorrow?" (1.1.54-6), a question he reiterates throughout the play as he is called on to perform more and more barbaric acts.

Intelligent, servile, violent, angry, self-loathsome, and yet compassionate, Bosola is a deeply conflicted and complex character, a hybrid mix of any number of early modern dramatic types: villain, avaricious servant, melancholic, court fool, and, ultimately, revenger hero (or revenger anti-hero). The discord at the center of his character stems from his being all-too-knowledgeable about the world yet, at the same time, perpetually striving towards some inarticulable ideal, something much more profound than mere gold or advancement. Just exactly what goal Bosola desires becomes clearer later in the play during his long conversation with the Duchess in the third act, where he provides some of the most articulate and impassioned arguments in favor of evaluating a man according to his "virtues" rather than his "pedigrees" (3.2.260). When the Duchess reveals that she secretly married Antonio, Bosola responds:

Do I not dream? Can this ambitious age
Have so much goodness in't, as to prefer
A man merely for worth: without these shadows
Of wealth, and painted honours? possible?
(3.2.76-9)

Bosola then praises her for this remarkable deed, a private act that will have far-reaching, long-lasting, and beneficial social effects. He imagines a new world of peace and learning which gives scholars, dowerless maids, and poets newly found hope and inspiration, and will even “make the very Turks and Moors / Turn Christian” (3.2.289-90).

Of course Bosola serves as the Duke's intelligencer, and he carefully exploits this moment of weakness in the Duchess to extract a most vital piece of information from her. But even though Bosola crafts his comments with cold calculation to learn the name of the Duchess' husband, he cannot hide the sincerity they also convey, how they depict a system of reward, preferment and evaluation that he has hitherto only dreamt about.³⁹ Long overlooked and exploited by those in power, this new world order that he imagines is just what he needs to cure himself of his melancholy – his bitterness at having to be a dependent and his self-hatred for allowing this to make him commit such dreadful acts. After strangling the Duchess and receiving only a pardon as payment (though to Ferdinand “'tis the largest bounty I can study to give thee” [4.2.291]), he again returns to this same language, “I stand like one / That long hath tane a sweet and golden dream. / I am angry with myself, now that I wake” (4.2.317-19) and “Off my painted honour!”

³⁹ Another similar moment when Bosola mixes cunning with sincerity comes from a conversation he has with Antonio concerning the sanctity of noble blood: “Say you were lineally descended from King Pippin, or he himself, what of this? Search the heads of the greatest rivers in the world, you shall find them but bubbles of water. Some would think the souls of princes were brought forth by some more weighty cause, than those of meaner persons; they are deceiv'd, there's the same hand to them: the like passions sway them; the same reason, that makes a vicar go to law for a tithe-pig, and undo his neighbours, makes them spoil a whole province, and batter down goodly cities with the cannon” (2.1.101-10).

(4.2.330). Just a few lines later, crying over the Duchess' lifeless body, Bosola laments, "where were / These penitent fountains while she was living?" (4.2.358-59), an invocation of the opening image of the prince's court as "a common fountain, whence should flow / Pure silver-drops in general" (1.1.12-3). Here, however, the pearls have been transformed into tears; while the humanist ideal of the state promises bounty and riches for all, in reality it yields only despair and loss.

Clearly the political and social world of *Malfi* – a fixed hierarchical order where rulers are determined by birth alone – fails to function properly on any level; with two monstrous, evil despots at its head, the whole of the body politic has become infected. As Bosola charges in his farewell speech to Ferdinand, "Your brother and yourself are worthy men; / You have a pair of hearts are hollow graves, / Rotten, and rotting others" (4.2.312-14). The play's relentlessly dark, superstitious atmosphere – the "gloomy world... or deep pit of darkness" (5.5.99-100) filled with all manner of beastly and occult imagery – attests to just how diseased the land and its people have become. Following Antonio's logic of how to cleanse the infected body politic – by removing the offending source of the poison – it stands to reason that the ruling powers themselves have to be eliminated. When Bosola vows to search out the exiled Antonio and champion his cause, even if it means taking on "a most just revenge" (5.3.338), he seeks to destroy this infected world and install, in its place, the new world order he fantasizes where "some preferment in the world can yet / Arise from merit" (3.2.285-86). Although Bosola kills the very person he sets out to save in a moment of pure tragic irony, he nevertheless ultimately helps usher in his dream world by killing the two brothers, an act which allows Delio and Pescara to establish Antonio and the Duchess' last remaining son – a mix of

royal and “desertless” blood – as the new Duke of Malfi.⁴⁰ As the Duchess remarks to Bosola concerning the growing of apricots, created from the “pretty art, / This grafting” – the merging of two seemingly disparate and incompatible bodies – “‘Tis so: a bett’ring of nature” (2.1.148-9).⁴¹

“A most perverse and turbulent nature”: Lycanthropia and Incest in *The Duchess of Malfi*

As in *The Spanish Tragedy*, the word “incest” never appears in the text of *The Duchess of Malfi*, nor does Ferdinand ever explicitly declare any illicit desire towards his sister. However, unlike the earlier play, the ground establishing Ferdinand’s incestuous yearnings has been well trod. Starting with F. L. Lucas’ first tentative suggestion that the play contained a hint of incest, though “an inessential one,” many other critics have been

⁴⁰ Many critics point out that the play exhibits, perhaps purposefully, a certain vagueness or confusion about issues of hereditary inheritance. Apparently the Duchess did have at least one child with her former husband, from whom she must have inherited her sovereignty; this male child, above any subsequent children with subsequent husbands, would thus have the strongest claim to inherit the Duchy once he reaches of age. Only mentioned once and then quickly forgotten, this child is only brought up by Ferdinand: “Write to the Duke of Malfi, my young nephew / She had by her first husband, and acquaint him / With’s mother’s honesty”(3.368-70). Here, Ferdinand here is already more than half-mad, and these lines occur right after he finds out about the Duchess’ marriage and children with Antonio, information that only furthers his descent into madness. Conceivably, the Duchess never had any children with her first husband at all, and the mention here of a child of pure noble blood seems designed to represent a wish-fulfillment fantasy on Ferdinand’s part.

⁴¹ The image of grafting was commonly used in discussions concerning social exogamy. In *The Winter’s Tale*, for instance, Perdita and Polixenes debate the merits of this “art.” Perdita disapproves of it as an artificial means of reproduction, while Polixenes argues that the process works in conjunction with nature to better it:

Yet nature is made better by no mean
But nature makes that mean: so, over that art,
Which you say adds to nature, is an art
That nature makes. You see, sweet maid, we marry
A gentler scion to the wildest stock,
And make conceive a bark of baser kind
By bud of nobler race. This is an art
Which does mend nature – change it rather...
(4.4.89-96)

Polixenes here imagines that it is the force of the father’s high-born blood that “mends” the “wildness” of the mother’s lower stock, a common belief that regarded the male’s seed as genetically dominant in conception. Notably, Webster inverts this relationship in *Malfi*.

quick to run with this notion and have since strongly argued in favor of its presence.⁴²

Such a reading translates well to the modern, post-Freudian stage, as most productions now rely on incestuous jealousy as the chief motivating factor behind Ferdinand's bizarre fascination with controlling and fantasizing about his sister's sexuality. The National Theatre's 2003 production had Ferdinand "leap... on his sister in bed, French-kiss... her and shove... a pistol first into her mouth, then into his own."⁴³ Not to be outdone by such brazen stage antics, Peter Hinton's 2006 production at the Stratford Festival of Canada also included a forcible kiss between the Duke and his sister and then went one step further, featuring a naked Ferdinand jumping out of a tub to deliver the infamous lines:

You are my sister,
This was my father's poniard: do you see,
I'll'd be loath to see't look rusty, 'cause 'twas his.
I would have you to give o'er these chargeable revels;
A visor and a mask are whispering-rooms
That were nev'r built for goodness: fare ye well:
And women like that part, which, like the lamprey,
Hath nev'r a bone in't.

(1.2.249-56)

Here, the father's sword essentially serves as the father's phallus; Ferdinand, through the simple possession of the sword, declares his assumption of the fatherly role as his sister's "protector," an incestuous return of the widowed daughter; Hinton's staging bluntly clarifies the incestuous sexual violence implied in Ferdinand's threats by having both his poniard and penis clearly visible and pointing towards his sister.

⁴² See, for instance, Whigham, "Sexual and Social Mobility in *The Duchess of Malfi*"; Charles Forker, *Skull Beneath the Skin: The Achievement of John Webster*; and Richard McCabe, *Incest, Drama and Nature's Law 1550-1700*, pp. 244-56.

⁴³ Benedict Nightingale, review in *The Times*, January 29, 2003. From the National Theatre's website, <http://www.nationaltheatre.org.uk/?lid=2458&dspl=reviews>, November 3, 2010.

Since the presence of incest in *Malfi* has become such a standard, accepted reading of the play and its evidence has been so thoroughly documented elsewhere,⁴⁴ I will not rehearse that terrain. Instead, I wish to take up the case of Ferdinand's incestuous impulses and fold it into the larger discussion about the play's depiction of the aristocracy. Other critics have made similar moves,⁴⁵ most notably Frank Whigham in "Sexual and Social Mobility in *The Duchess of Malfi*." Conceiving of Ferdinand as "a threatened aristocrat, frightened by the contamination of his ascriptive social rank and obsessively preoccupied with its defense," he argues that the Duke's "incestuous inclination toward his sister is a *social posture*, of hysterical compensation – a desperate expression of the desire to evade degrading association with inferiors."⁴⁶ Despite this highly suggestive premise that the play's use of incest pertains to the Jacobean crisis of mobility, Whigham mistakenly applies this reading to "reclaim Ferdinand for understanding (if not sympathy) by reading his motives as the absolutized and finally self-destructive core of the nobility's project for dominance."⁴⁷ Not only does garnering sympathy for Ferdinand tend to come at the expense of that directed towards the Duchess (as well as Antonio and even Bosola), but this type of reading also drains the play of its potentially potent critique of class hierarchies. While Whigham seems to look at Ferdinand's incestuous yearnings as a symptom of his embattled status as an aristocrat, I view them as a social critique of a blind adherence to a strictly stratified social structure. Barbara Correll offers a related criticism, arguing that Whigham's analysis:

⁴⁴ For a thorough, detailed overview of the evidence for incest in the play, see Charles Forker, *Skull Beneath the Skin*, 304-12.

⁴⁵ See John L. Selzer, "Merit and Degree in Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*," *English Literary Renaissance* 11:1 (December, 1981): 70-80, for an early account of how the tension between merit and blood inform the play.

⁴⁶ Whigham, "Sexual and Social Mobility," 169.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 169.

produces a strongly masculinizing reading ...that obscures gender issues....Whigham sees the duchess not as a class or gender transgressor but as a social and sexual predator who coerces a markedly reticent Antonio into a relationship that dooms him precisely because it makes him a victim of the lethal triumvirate of undifferentiated 'masculine' figures of aristocratic power and privileged self-authorization: Ferdinand, the cardinal, the duchess.⁴⁸

Other critics question the very relationship between incest and social mobility in the text. Richard McCabe, for instance, argues that Whigham's formula "seems unduly prescriptive, particularly in the context of a play which... elevates sexuality to equivalent importance with politics."⁴⁹ Contending that "repression plays a large part in this: one might even say that Ferdinand's overtly canvassed pride is at best a *sexual* posture," McCabe asserts that "Ferdinand is not representative of any class or social outlook, but remains imprisoned within his own private melancholy, and the contrast with his brother enforces this isolation."⁵⁰ While McCabe's critique of Whigham's formulation as overly rigid mostly hits the mark, I think he overcompensates when denying any real connection between Ferdinand's obsession with his sister and the play's concern with social status. *Malfi* certainly tends to differentiate the brothers (who are essentially interchangeable in the source material) by conveniently splitting the modes of controlling the Duchess between the two of them: the Cardinal mostly wants to regulate her lands, money, and lineage, while Ferdinand mostly wants to govern and contain her sexuality, a divide that is particularly evident at the play's beginning during their joint intervention to inform their sister about the perils of remarriage. The Cardinal, who voices the strongest

⁴⁸ Barbara Correll, "Malvolio at Malfi: Managing Desire in Shakespeare and Webster," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 58:1 (2007): 65-92; 70. On a related note, scholars of sexuality criticize Whigham's analysis for rejecting entirely the role of the erotic in the play. See Mary Beth Rose, *The Expense of Spirit: Love and Sexuality in English Renaissance Drama* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), 157-62. See also Lynn Enterline, "'Hairy on the In-side': *The Duchess of Malfi* and the Body of Lycanthropy," *Yale Journal of Criticism* 7:2 (1994): 85-129, esp. 90-2.

⁴⁹ McCabe, 251.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 251, 252.

concerns about preserving class lines, does not press his sister into forswearing remarriage altogether; however, he does fear her susceptibility to being seduced by the eloquence and charm of a young, lowly courtier, warning her not to allow “anything without the addition, Honour, / Sway your high blood” (1.2.217-8). Later, when he learns that she has had a child – presumably, given the secrecy of the conception and birth – out of wedlock by some unworthy father, he implores, “Shall our blood? / The royal blood of Aragon and Castile, / Be thus attainted?” (2.5.21-3).

Ferdinand, on the other hand, does not want his sister to marry at all, as he tells Bosola: “she’s a young widow, / I would not have her marry again” (1.2.176-77).⁵¹ Appearing to base his knowledge of widow conduct almost exclusively on the likes of Overbury’s “Ordinarie Widow” sketch – which Webster himself just happened to write – Ferdinand first attempts to force his sister into remaining chaste through a shaming ritual, telling her that “they are most luxurious, / [That] will wed twice” (1.2.218-19), and later likening remarried widows to “witches” that “give the devil suck”(1.2.231-32). When alone with his sister, Ferdinand ups the ante by turning his verbal slanders into physical threats of violence, as when he confronts his sister with his father’s poniard. Yet Ferdinand also shows a preoccupation with keeping the Duchess’ noble blood pure. Although the play hints at his mental instability early on, Ferdinand’s first truly “stark mad” (2.5.67) scene occurs immediately after reading Bosola’s letter about the Duchess’ newly born son. Granted, Ferdinand gets worked up into his “palsy” primarily by the mere thought that his sister has resumed sexual activities (which he charmingly refers to

⁵¹ Seemingly contradicting this, Ferdinand approaches his sister with a proposed match between her and the “great Count Malateste” (3.1.41). But this appears far from a genuine offer. Rather, it seems a test meant to prove her guilt and/or a moment of sadistic psychological torture: this proposal immediately follows his “tempest,” “rage,” “rupture,” “palsy,” and “stark mad” scene brought on by his learning of his sister’s resumption of sexual activities.

as being “loose, i’t’h’ hilts” [2.5.3]), but in fantasizing about her sexual encounters, he can only imagine her partner as a laboring-class worker whose job demands a certain kind of physicality:

Happily, with some strong thigh’d bargeman;
Or one o’t’h’ wood-yard, that can quoit the sledge
Or toss the bar, or else some lovely squire
That carries coals up to her privy lodgings.
(2.5.43-6)

When Ferdinand finally discovers that the identity of his sister’s husband turns out to be none other than her household steward, he sneers at his lowly station: “Antonio! / A slave, that only smell’d of ink and counters, / And nev’r in’s life look’d like a gentleman, / But in the audit time” (3.3.70-3). And near the end, as he deliberates on the Duchess’ final fate, he curses her profligate abuse of what she should have regarded as her most prized possession: “Damn her! that body of hers, / While that my blood ran pure in’t, was more worth / Than that which thou wouldst comfort, call’d a soul” (4.1.119-22).

So far the above description of Ferdinand’s incestuous impulses – the aristocratic disdain, the anger at the presumptuous underling, the fear and disgust at class contamination – closely recall those governing Lorenzo’s actions in *The Spanish Tragedy*. But Webster’s depiction of a brother guided by a swirling nexus of primal drives – desire, hate, guilt, and fear – differs markedly from Kyd’s. Webster creates a deeper, darker psychological portrait of illicit yearning, increasing the intensity of the conflicting emotions of desire and guilt. Ultimately, this elevates the significance of incest in the play into that of a debilitating psychological disorder, leading to madness and eventually manifesting itself as lycanthropy. As Brent Hirsh points out in his analysis of lycanthropy in the early modern period, while continental Europe tended to

explain the condition through supernatural means (i.e., humans literally transformed into wolves, and/or were possessed by the devil), the English mostly regarded the phenomenon as a psychological or medical condition where the person, usually due to an excess of melancholy, only imagines themselves transformed into a wolf.⁵² Indeed, this corresponds closely with the Doctor's definition of Ferdinand's "pestilent disease": "In those that are possess'd with't there o'erflows / Such melancholy humour, they imagine / Themselves to be transformed into wolves" (5.2.8-10). Although the text calls Ferdinand a melancholic on numerous other occasions and subscribes his madness to an excess of that humor, it is not too much of a stretch to imagine that the root cause of his humoral imbalance resides in his repressed desire for his sister.⁵³

Indeed, lycanthropy proves an extraordinarily fitting pathology for Ferdinand. In a play abounding in animal imagery – a veritable bestiary which names more than two dozen different species – no other character gets described as more beast-like than Ferdinand, who at various stages of the play becomes associated with a variety of sinister, malevolent beings: scorpions, basilisks, screech-owls, dogs, monkeys, salamanders, mandrakes, witches, badgers, and, of course, wolves. Similar to lycanthropy, which obviously blurs the boundary between human and animal, incest likewise threatens to erase the distinction between man and beast, civilized and uncivilized. The standard early modern rationalization in favor of incest (at least in the drama of the period when an

⁵² Brett D. Hirsch, "An Italian Werewolf in London: Lycanthropy and *The Duchess of Malfi*," *Early Modern Literary Studies* 11:2 (September, 2005): 2.1-43 <<http://purl.oclc.org/emls/11-2/hirswere.htm>>, esp. 2.5-15.

⁵³ There are actually a rather large number of other incestuous melancholics, from D'Amville in *The Atheist's Tragedy* to Malefort in Massinger's *The Unnatural Combat* (c. 1624-5) to Giovanni in Ford's *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* (c. 1629-32). See McCabe's Chapter Nine, "Tragedy and Melancholia," 240-63.

antagonist tries to seduce one of his relations)⁵⁴ comes from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, and argues that man, lord of all beasts, should be allowed to enjoy the same sexual freedoms afforded to them:

This love infringeth not the bonds of godliness a whit.
For every other living wight Dame Nature doth permit
To match without offence of sin. The heifer thinks no shame
To bear her father on her back; the horse bestrides the same
Of whom he is the sire; the goat doth buck the kid that he
Himself begat; and birds do tread the selfsame birds, we see,
Of whom they hatched were before. In happy case they are
That may do so without offence. But man's malicious care
Hath made a bridle for itself, and spiteful laws restrain
The things that Nature setteth free.

(10.358-67)⁵⁵

But Ferdinand's transformation hints at a level of social and sexual deviancy that exceeds mere incest. Most obviously, his condition first turns his incest into bestiality, arguably, since sexual congress occurs between species, the most extreme form of radical exogamy. But in describing the symptoms of lycanthropy, the Doctor also reveals that those afflicted with the disease "Steal forth to churchyards in the dead of night, / And dig dead bodies up" (5.2.11-2). Thus Ferdinand's final metamorphosis reduces him to what can be called a quadumvirate of unnatural appetites: incest, bestiality, cannibalism, and necrophilia (one could even call it a quintumverate if one includes sodomy in the list, since Ferdinand is found "with the leg of a man / Upon his shoulder" [5.2.14-5]).

In fact, The play hints at these associations earlier, when Ferdinand gives his sister a dead man's hand he first presents as his own and then pretends belongs to her husband Antonio. The scene begins with Ferdinand threatening the Duchess with the death of her

⁵⁴ For instance, see D'Amville in *The Atheist's Tragedy* (4.3.124-31), and Malefort in *The Unnatural Combat*.

⁵⁵ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. Arthur Golding. 1567. Ed. Madeleine Forey (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002).

bastard “cubs,” to which she responds: “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). Ferdinand then offers the promise of peace. Employing language from the “Solemnization of Matrimony” from the *Book of Common Prayer*, Ferdinand first gives her “his” hand with a ring on it “To which you have vow’d much love,” which she then “affectionately kiss[es]” (4.1.44-5). When he departs, he leaves the ring with her “for a love-token” (4.1.47), assuring her she will also have the hand and heart it belongs to. The whole demented scene plays like a perverted, macabre marriage ceremony between Ferdinand and his sister, solemnized over a dismembered chunk of dead man’s flesh.

By having Ferdinand’s sexual and social deviancies multiply and transmogrify, Webster also employs Ferdinand’s lycanthropy in the service of challenging the lusty widow stereotype, a strategy that also perhaps helps to explain why Ferdinand is so often associated with sorcery and the occult. Besides lifting up mandrakes, howling at the moon, changing into a wolf, and “hunt[ing] the badger by owl-light” (4.2.328), Ferdinand also gets yoked to witches and witchcraft at numerous points. For instance, when he draws his brother aside to reveal Antonio’s identity as their sister’s husband, Delio remarks at the private interaction: “In such a deformed silence, witches whisper their charms” (3.4.57-8). Or the Duchess, in discovering just what kind of hand her brother has left her with, exclaims, “What witchcraft doth he practice, that he hath left / A dead man’s hand here?” (4.1.54-5). Compared to the Duchess, then, Ferdinand offers a distorted, inverted reflection of his twin sister’s qualities – it is he, not she, that is truly uncontrollable, lusty, and profane. As Judith Bennet and Amy Froide point out, singlewomen and widows provoked widespread anxiety among their contemporaries

since they lacked a male presence in the household to ensure they were well behaved, “and these anxieties found their fullest expression in the witch craze.... Of those suspected of communion with the devil, women outnumbered men, the poor outnumbered the rich, the old outnumbered the young, widows outnumbered singlewomen, and singlewomen outnumbered wives.”⁵⁶ In inverting and redeploying the association between widows and witches, Webster reveals the hypocrisy underlying Ferdinand’s attempts to displace the “downfall” of the aristocratic class on the shoulders of the ungovernable, lascivious woman.

By increasing the intensity and the explicitness of the incestuous relationship between Ferdinand and the Duchess, Webster sharpens his critique of the aristocracy. At first merely repressed, Ferdinand’s private desire to keep his sister for himself – arguably the basis for all of his ills – soon manifests itself as an insanity that threatens to become a social contagion. With the madhouse show he arranges for his sister becoming, in a way, a version of his own warped and perverted court, Ferdinand’s tyrannical, diseased rule seemingly endorses Antonio’s opening aphorism that if the head of state becomes poisoned, “*Death and diseases through the whole land spread*” (1.1.15). Unable to control both his mind and his body (its shape, its desires), Ferdinand stands as a representative of a degenerative aristocracy unfit to rule, “noble” in only the most ironic sense. With long-established hierarchies in the process of fracturing, Ferdinand and his ilk attempt to hold onto power by whatever means they can, though their effort comes

⁵⁶ Judith M. Bennett and Amy M. Froide, “A Singular Past,” in *Singlewomen in the European Past, 1250-1800*, ed. Judith M. Bennett and Amy M. Froide (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999): 1-37; 14. See also Peter Laslett, *The World We Have Lost: Further Explored* (London: Methuen, 1983), 115: “The lonely old widowed woman, witch in possibility and sometimes in her own opinion of herself, is a familiar figure also.”

across as a delusive howling at the moon, a futile resistance to a world gradually, albeit irrevocably, changing.

A Lingering Influence

Even though Webster wrote *The Duchess of Malfi* almost thirty years after Kyd's play was first performed, the two existed alongside one another on the early modern stage. To say that *The Spanish Tragedy* was very popular is an enormous understatement.

According to Henslowe's diary, the play was performed at least twenty-nine times from early 1592 to late 1597, making it the third most popular play during this five-year span.

However, it may have already been an old favorite by this time, since if the play was composed earlier than 1592 (most critics date it sometime in the mid-to-late 1580's), it must have already been staged many times previous to Henslowe's first recorded entry.⁵⁷

Subsequent decades saw the play continue as a box-office staple, what Peter Womack calls "a dependable old warhorse that would always find an audience"⁵⁸; many theatre historians believe the play remained in repertoire right up until the theatres closed in 1642. As for print, the play existed in quarto in at least ten or eleven editions from the 1590s to 1633, thus making it widely available for traveling troupes where "city companies would have little power to inhibit provincial players from using the book."⁵⁹

Evidence also indicates the possibility that at least four companies – Strange's Men, the Admiral's Men, Pembroke's Men, and the Chamberlain's/King's Men – performed the play at a number of the notable London playhouses, from The Rose, The Fortune, The

⁵⁷ See D.F. Rowan, "The Staging of *The Spanish Tragedy*," in *The Elizabethan Theatre V*, ed. G.R. Hibbard (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1975): 112-23.

⁵⁸ Peter Womack, *English Renaissance Drama* (Malden, MA: Backwell, 2006), 127.

⁵⁹ Arthur Freeman, *Thomas Kyd: Facts and Problems* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), 125.

Theatre, and the Second Blackfriars, to The Cross Keys Inn, Newington Butts, The Curtain, and the first Globe.⁶⁰ Perhaps the most compelling example of the lingering influence and popularity of *The Spanish Tragedy* comes from an anecdote told during the 1630s of an English “Gentlewoman of good ranke” who “daily bestow[ed] the expense of her best hours upon the stage.” On her deathbed, rather than focusing on spiritual matters, she instead cried out: “Hieronomo, Hieronimo; Oh let me see Hieronimo acted.” Apparently she was worried that the Great Theater in the Sky would be performing some other, less desirable, play.⁶¹ When all is said and done, *The Spanish Tragedy* is one of the most – if not *the* most – popular and influential early modern play during the period. Endlessly imitated, satirized, and reinvented, Claude Dudrap identifies at least one hundred and eleven direct allusions in other plays of the period.⁶² The play became a dramatic repository from which other playwrights continually raided and poached – an incest, of sorts, among dramatists. Seen from this perspective, *The Spanish Tragedy* is one of the most incestuous of all early modern dramas.

In a day and age when theatrical tastes prefer their Shakespeare to their Kyd by a ratio of at least 100 to 1, the unparalleled success and longevity of *The Spanish Tragedy* tends to mystify modern theater goers (as well as more than a few critics). However, *The Spanish Tragedy*’s continued popularity during the early modern period – both as a staged play and a source of inspiration – suggests that *what* it says matters at least as much as *how* it says it; the play must have touched on issues of continuing importance and relevance for its contemporary audiences. With that said, perhaps it should come as

⁶⁰ See Mulryne, xxxi and Rowan, 113-14.

⁶¹ From William Prynne, *Histrionastrix* (1633), fol. 556b. Cited in Rowan, 112.

⁶² Claude Dudrap, “La Tragédie Espangnole Face à la Critique Élizabéthienne et Jacobéenne,” *Dramaturgie et Société*, vol. 2 (Paris: Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, 1968): 607-31. Cited in Rowan, 113.

no surprise that issues such as class, hierarchy, social mobility, and meritocracy should be addressed by early modern dramatists, since so many of the most prominent writers came from families of the middling sort: Henry Chettle, son of a London dyer; Ben Jonson, raised since age two by a master bricklayer; Thomas Kyd, son of a scrivener; Christopher Marlowe, son of a shoemaker; Thomas Middleton, son of a bricklayer who eventually raised himself to the level of a gentleman; William Shakespeare, son of a glove-maker, and John Webster, son of a coach maker. Presumably, at least some of these playwrights regarded themselves as intelligent, well-educated, capable, and deserving – just the sort who might prosper in a meritocratic environment. Indeed some, not the least being Shakespeare, benefited from the newfound social mobility that the theater business provided. But what is surprising – given the pace of and suspicion surrounding social change and the level of censorship to which plays were subject – is the radical nature of the social and sexual politics that both *The Spanish Tragedy* and *The Duchess of Malfi* seemingly endorse. While each play is radical in its own unique way – the first in dramatizing what amounts to class warfare and the second in its unyielding advocacy of talent over birth – they both ultimately provide sympathetic depictions of both social and sexual mobility, which become inextricably, intricately intertwined. In these plays, the freedom for aspiring men to rise to stations fitting their ability is intimately connected to strong women being able to choose whom they wish to marry. While these plays do not necessarily represent a call to arms, they do call into question the oppressive aristocratic regulation of two seemingly related disenfranchised classes: the members of the middling sort and women.

CHAPTER THREE

“Unkind and Careless of Your Own”: Incest, Miscegenation, and Family in Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus*

Shakespeare, perhaps more so than any of his contemporary playwrights, was intrigued by the dramatic possibilities of miscegenation. From Theseus and Hippolyta (Greek and Amazonian) to Lorenzo and Jessica (Christian and Jew) to Anthony and Cleopatra (Roman and Egyptian) to Othello and Desdemona (Moor and Venetian),¹ Shakespeare continually populates his stage with couples of differing ethnic and religious backgrounds. I opened this study by observing that another of Shakespeare’s miscegenation plays – *Titus Andronicus* with its Roman-Goth-Moor triangle – takes a story primarily about the sexual and social violence of incest and rewrites it as story primarily about the sexual and social violence of radical exogamy. What, I asked, was the “significance” of this transposition? I would now like to return to that question and venture an answer: in replacing incest with miscegenation, Shakespeare takes a tale of a family ravaged by internal kinship predation and turns it into a story which, in part, celebrates family bonds. By exposing Titus and his family (and, by extension Rome and the civilized world) to the dangers of a larger, multi-ethnic world, Shakespeare creates a xenophobic play that not only challenges the ideology of the family-state analogy, but also calls into question the family’s duties to the state.

¹ Although they are not quite on the same level of difference as the rest, Romeo (Montague) and Juliet (Capulet) might also be added to this list.

Incest in *Titus*' Source Material

It has long been a critical commonplace that *Titus Andronicus* luxuriates in a sense of overindulgence and excessiveness, particularly as it applies to the multiple buckets of stage blood required for any full-scale production of the play. And certainly the play is, quite simply, spectacularly violent. Here we have a Revenge Tragedy worthy of being called a Tragedy of Blood, for *Titus*' dizzying list of atrocities covers nearly the whole catalogue of possible stage grotesqueries. According to S. Clark Hulse's tally, the play treats its viewers to "14 killings, 9 of them on stage, 6 severed members, 1 rape (or 2 or 3, depending on how you count), 1 live burial, 1 case of insanity, and 1 of cannibalism – an average of 5.2 atrocities per act, or one for every 97 lines."² Yet as impressive as this final body count is, what stands out most about the play's violence is not just its sheer amount but its intensity. The violence begins early – Act I alone contains three killings, the first occurring a mere 132 lines into the play – and continues to build, an insistent crescendo that climaxes with the cannibalistic feast and subsequent massacre. *Titus Andronicus* ranks as Shakespeare's bloodiest and cruelest play, and there is indeed something extraordinary about its relentless, almost overwhelming, violence – something peculiar and insistent, something even anxious.³

² S. Clark Hulse, "Wresting the Alphabet: Oratory and Action in *Titus Andronicus*," *Criticism* 21:2 (Spring, 1979): 106-18; 97.

³ The opinion that *Titus* is in "bad taste," an indecorous play meant to cater to the bloodthirsty desires of the vulgar masses who were captivated by unseemly scenes of gruesome spectacle, held sway for centuries and caused many a Shakespearean critic to dismiss it completely from the canon. Edward Ravenscroft, who wrote his own *Titus Andronicus* in 1686, a self-proclaimed masterpiece adaptation of Shakespeare's play, was the first to cast doubt on the play's authorship (Shakespeare, he contends, in the preface to his play, did not predominantly author *Titus* but merely "gave some Master-touches to one or two of the Principal Parts or Characters"). He also dismisses *Titus* as the "the most incorrect and indigested piece in all his Works; It seems rather a heap of Rubbish then a Structure" (A2^r, *Titus Andronicus, or The Rape of Lavinia* [London, 1687]). And T.S. Eliot, in his introduction to the reprint of the 1581 collection of Seneca's tragedies,

In *The Gods Made Flesh*, Leonard Barkan, noting this combination of anxiety, excess, and violence, discovers that Shakespeare's use of mythological references in the play displays a need to constantly outdo his source material, most notably Ovid's tale of Philomel. "For worse than Philomel you used my daughter, / And worse than Progne I will be revenged," (5.3.194-95)⁴ cries Titus to Lavinia's rapists, a vow that he soon makes good on. Yet, as I mentioned earlier, there is one noticeable, even glaring, omission – one violation, one horror, one crime that Ovid includes but that Shakespeare curiously excludes. Granted, Shakespeare often takes liberties with his source; *Titus* is certainly no exception to this general rule, and the slight, and not-so-slight, modifications between the two texts ultimately prove quite numerous. But in a play so consciously concerned with textuality, reading and writing, with revisiting classical sources, and especially with going one step above and beyond the outrages depicted in his classical sources, it seems rather remarkable that Shakespeare elects to leave out incest – that most taboo of taboos – from his own rendition of the myth. For in Ovid, Tereus' rape of Philomel is that of a brother-in-law with his sister-in-law, a clear act of incest that violates the second degree of affinity prohibitions.⁵

Significantly, *The Metamorphosis* does not rank as *Titus*' only classical source that deals with incest; Seneca's *Thyestes* touches on this theme as well.⁶ While scholarly

contemptuously calls it "one of the stupidest and most uninspired plays ever written" (*Seneca, His Tenne Tragedies* [London: Constable and Co, 1927], xxviii).

⁴ All citations of *Titus* are keyed to Jonathan Bate's Arden 3 edition (1995).

⁵ See Archibald, 12-21 for a detailed discussion of Graeco-Roman attitudes towards incest. In general, ancient Greece was much more permissive when it came to endogamous relationships (apparently they lacked a concept of affinity prohibitions and Athenian law contained no formal punishments for incest unless some third party was harmed). Roman law, on the other hand, forbade a wide variety of affinity relations, and made some incest violations punishable by death.

⁶ In *Titus*, Shakespeare draws from and synthesizes material from a wide variety of classical texts (Seneca, Ovid, Livy, Plutarch). The end product thus resembles more of an aggregate of Shakespeare's knowledge of and reading on ancient Rome than an accurate rendering of any precise moment in historical time. As

consensus no longer holds *Thyestes* as the major source behind Shakespeare's play, little doubt exists that he was familiar with Seneca's drama, and that it most certainly, at the least, lay in the back of his mind during *Titus'* composition.⁷ Besides displaying some of the general influences that Seneca exerted on early modern tragedies in both form and style (the play even quotes Seneca on two occasions), *Titus* also shares with *Thyestes* a

T.J.B. Spencer claims, "the play does not assume a political situation known to Roman history; it is, rather, a summary of Roman politics. It is not so much that any particular set of political institutions is assumed in *Titus*, but rather that it includes *all* the political institutions that Rome ever had. The author seems anxious, not to get it all right, but to get it all in" (32). From "Shakespeare and the Elizabethan Romans," *Shakespeare Survey* 10 (1957): 27-37.

⁷ The debate over the extent of Senecan influence on early modern dramatists has raged now, off and on, for some 70 years. John Cunliffe, in his 1893 dissertation *The Influence of Seneca on Elizabethan Tragedy* (New York: G.E. Stechert & Co., 1925), was the first to seriously consider a link between Senecan and early modern drama, arguing that Seneca was *the* supreme influence on Tudor tragedy. His theory held sway for many years, until Howard Baker vigorously attacked his claims in his *Induction to Tragedy: A Study in a Development of Form in Gorboduc, The Spanish Tragedy and Titus Andronicus* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1939). Baker finds fault with nearly every aspect of Cunliffe's work, from his methodology to his evidence to the texts he analyzes (oddly enough Cunliffe spends the most time on Hughes' minor and little read *The Misfortunes of Arthur*). As for *Titus*, Baker argues that Seneca's *Thyestes* is not really a major source, if a source at all. Baker's critique never caught on; in fact, Cunliffe's monograph was reprinted even as late as 1965. In response to this, G.K. Hunter, in two articles ("Seneca and the Elizabethans" [1967] and "Seneca and English Tragedy" [1974]), reminds critics of Baker's overlooked assertions, and as well argues that the extent of Senecan influence on early modern drama has been greatly exaggerated. Baker's and Hunter's arguments did provide an important and necessary corrective to those who viewed Senecan influence as monolithic and omnipresent; Hunter in particular helped critics recognize the diverse influences on Elizabethan and Jacobean drama, such as continental and English medieval drama, the informal Tudor interlude, English chronicles, and other classicists like Terence and Ovid. However, Baker and Hunter, understandably enough, swung the pendulum too far in the other direction, finding little to no Senecan influence at all on the Renaissance stage.

Recently, the backlash against Seneca has substantially subsided. Most critics now view a relatively "heavy" Senecan sensibility in early modern writing, though the understanding of the precise nature of Senecan influence is now more complex and nuanced. In Robert Miola's words, "Since Seneca is both a text and a tradition for Shakespeare, the tracing of these patterns requires a flexible approach" (*Shakespeare and Classical Tragedy* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992], 9). Miola provides a useful list of many of the Senecan elements – formal, stylistic and thematic – that critics have claimed find their way, in various forms, into early modern tragedy: "The five-act structure and retention of the unities; the use of stock characters, such as the ghost, nurse, servant, messenger, tyrant, and chorus; a fondness for melodramatic narration, the rhetorical setpiece, self-absorbed soliloquy, and stichomythia; a fascination with lurid violence; the habit of including ruminative passages on the instability of fortune, the power of time, the dangers of wealth, the benefits of poverty, the advantages of the country over the city, the problems of kingship, the habits of tyrants; and a general concern with madness, passion, vengeance, and the supernatural" (3).

See also A.J. Boyle, *Tragic Seneca: An Essay in the Theatrical Tradition* (London: Routledge, 1997), especially p. 141-207, for an attempt "to describe the Renaissance achievement in such a way as to expose the lines of a Senecan Tradition" (142). For a concise yet thorough overview of the Senecan "penetration" debate, see M. Frank, "Did Shakespeare Owe Anything to Seneca? The Debate Outlined," *Akroterion* 42:1 (1997): 36-42.

number of striking thematic issues and plot points. For instance, Atreus' maxim that "Thou neuer dost enough reuenge the wronge, / Exept thou passe" (2.1.20-1)⁸ seems exactly the imperative by which Titus operates, and Titus' "irreligious piety" that demands the sacrifice of Alarbus recalls the cool religious precision with which Atreus dispatches his nephews (he performs the killing in a perverted ceremony of sacrificing to the gods). Most importantly, *Thyestes* contains the archetypal dramatic representation of the cannibalistic feast – often referred to simply as the Thyestean banquet – which serves as the dramatic model for Titus' ultimate act of vengeance on Tamora.⁹ And just as Atreus' act of revenge stems from Thyestes' incestuous adultery with Atreus' wife, incest, though not directly represented in the text, nevertheless permeates the play. But most tellingly, the specter of incest haunts *Thyestes* in another, more horrendous form, for just offstage lurks the incestuous act that will avenge Thyestes on his brother Atreus for the murder and consumption of his children: Thyestes' rape of his own daughter to produce the next generation of revenger. In this play, an act of incest leads to an vengeful act of filicide and cannibalism which in turn leads to vengeful act of incest.

In fact, a quick scan of the mythological events radiating from the action dramatized in *Thyestes* shows that incest, revenge, and cannibalism are all recurring elements that precede and proceed from this part of the lengthy, tragic tale of the House of Atreus. The beginning threads of the narrative stretch all the way back to Tantalus, who unwisely decided to test the omniscience of the gods by, logically enough, baking his son Pelops in

⁸ Seneca *His Tenne Tragedies, Translated into Englysh* (London, 1581).

⁹ See, for instance, Karen Robertson, "Rape and the Appropriation of Progne's Revenge in Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*, or 'Who Cooks the Thyestean Banquet?'" in *Representing Rape in Medieval and Early Modern Literature*, eds. Elizabeth Robertson, Christine Rose, and Christopher Cannon (New York: Palgrave, 2001): 213-37. Roberts' reading centers on another major difference between Ovid and Shakespeare: the change in gender of the revenger.

a pie and serving him up to the gods at a special banquet. All but Demeter were wise to the trick, and after sentencing Tantalus to perpetual deprivation, they restore Pelops to life with an ivory shoulder as replacement for the one that the goddess consumed. When Pelops comes to choose a wife, he becomes enamored of Hippodamia, the daughter of the Pisan king Oenomaus, who, for his part, also lusts after his daughter. To keep Hippodamia unmarried without raising suspicion about his own incestuous desires, he challenges all potential suitors to a chariot race, where he then proceeds to kill them during the fixed match. Pelops ends up foiling Oenomaus by loosening the linchpins on his chariot's wheels, an act that sends the king plunging to his death off the side of Mount Olympus.

The heart of the story, though, lies with Pelops and Hippodamia's issue, the twin brothers Atreus and Thyestes, and the intensities of their heated sibling rivalry. Their feud ranged long and far, but to boil the tale down to its most essential details (which fill in the gaps in the story told above):

- Thyestes seduces Atreus' wife, Aerope, and attempts to usurp the throne of Mycenae from Atreus;
- Atreus reacts by exiling his brother;
- deciding this punishment too lenient, he then dusts off the old family recipe for *pie à la puer*;
- Atreus lures Thyestes back to court by extending an olive branch and announcing a lavish reconciliation feast;
- finding out that the dish's principal ingredients are his sons, Thyestes runs mad;

- Thyestes (apparently on the advice of an oracle) then seduces his daughter Pelopia to sire the next generation's avenger, Aegisthus;
- Atreus then unknowingly marries his pregnant niece Pelopia, who is herself unaware of the identity of her rapist;
- Pelopia, also apparently unaware of her kinship ties to Atreus, exposes the child to hide this pregnancy from her new husband;
- Aegisthus then finds his way back to his mother-sister and uncle-father-in-law, when a shepherd finds the exposed child and brings him to Atreus to raise as his own;
- years later, Pelopia, finding out her lineage and her multiple incestuous affairs, commits suicide;
- Aegisthus, finding out his true identity, kills Atreus.

The story then dovetails into the far more familiar Trojan war saga, picking up with Atreus' sons Menelaus and Agamemnon and their quest to re-secure the wayward Helen. In order to sail to Troy, they first need to appease Artemis with a suitable human sacrifice so that she will stir up favorable navigational winds. Agamemnon obliges by offering up his daughter Iphigenia, an act that incurs the displeasure of his wife Clytemnestra. She, in turn, takes a lover, the aforementioned Aegisthus, who assists her in killing Agamemnon when he finally returns home from the war. Orestes (Agamemnon and Clytemnestra's son) then assumes the revenge mantle and avenges his father's murder by killing the two conspirators (Seneca also dramatizes this portion of the House of Atreus saga, in the appropriately titled *Agamemnon*). Hounded by the furies for this act of matricide, Orestes is only saved from certain madness and death by the intervention of

Athena and her court of Attic judges. In all, this exhaustive, tragic story chronicles the cyclical, endless nature of transgression, vengeance, and violence. It also happens to be one of the foundational revenge plots, complete with all the incest, cannibalism, and infanticide that can be packed into the family history of four generations.

Arguably, Seneca, *Thyestes*, and the House of Atreus mythology lie mostly in the background of *Titus*. Ovid, on the other hand, is thrust to the foreground, surfacing in some six explicit references (not the least being an actual copy of *The Metamorphoses* brought on stage)¹⁰ and providing “the play’s main structural model.”¹¹ In Ovid, the tale of Philomel, Procne, and their revenge begins with the siege of Athens by the king of Pontus and his “host of savage people” (6.540).¹² Unable to defend himself and his city, King Pandion enlists the aid of the Thracian king Tereus, who sweeps onto the scene and quickly dispatches the invaders. To reward Tereus and to ally himself with a superior military power, Pandion gives him his daughter Procne as a wife. Returning to Thrace, Procne soon gives birth to a son, Itys. Eventually, Procne becomes homesick for her sister’s company and sends Tereus to Athens to persuade her protective father to let Philomel come for a visit. When the two siblings-in-law meet, it turns into a case of lust

¹⁰ Most likely this is a direct reference to Kyd’s *The Spanish Tragedy*, where Hieronimo carries around a copy of Seneca on stage. Using it as a source of inspiration and motivation, Hieronimo swears on it that he will take revenge for Horatio’s murder (3.8). Kyd’s play is the single-largest contemporary influence on Shakespeare’s play.

¹¹ Jonathan Bate, *Shakespeare and Ovid* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 102.

¹² All Ovid quotes are taken from Arthur Golding’s 1567 translation, ed. Madeleine Forey (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Press, 2002). Most scholars regard Shakespeare’s “small Latin” as still more than enough to handle Ovid in its original language. Ovid’s *The Metamorphoses* would have been standard reading for any school boy. See R.W. Maslen, “Myths Exploited: *The Metamorphoses* of Ovid in Early Elizabethan England,” in *Shakespeare’s Ovid*, ed. A.B. Taylor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000): 15-30. Most critics likewise feel that Shakespeare was familiar with Golding’s translation, and some even argue that he used this translation as the basis for *Titus*. See Anthony Brian Taylor, “Shakespeare’s Use of Golding’s Ovid as Source for *Titus Andronicus*,” *Notes and Queries* 35 (233): 4 (December, 1988): 449-51. See also Bate, *Shakespeare and Ovid*. As for the Progne/Procne variations in spelling, both were used interchangeably during the early modern period. Although Shakespeare uses the first form in *Titus*, I use Procne throughout for the sake of consistency with Forey’s edition of Golding’s translation.

at first sight: Tereus immediately burns for Philomel and her maiden beauty. “Love gave him power to frame / His talk at will” (6.599-600), which prevails upon Pandion to let his other daughter leave. But rather than bringing Philomel to the Thracian castle for a happy reunion with her sister, he instead leads her to an overgrown forest rapes her, cuts out her tongue so she can neither tell of her abuse nor identify her attacker, and locks her up in a secure cabin in the dark bowels of the woods. Unbeknownst to her sister, who was told that she died on the voyage to Thrace, Philomel stays captive for over a year, during which time she weaves her famous tapestry and sends it to Procne, who, after reading the arras, rescues her sister. Back at the castle, Procne’s thoughts bend towards revenge. When she sees her son, and marks just “how like thou art / Thy wicked father” (6.787-8), she knows what form her vengeance will take: Tereus will pay for his crimes with the blood of his first born and only son. The two sisters kill Itys (both give him killing blows) and then dish him up to his father at a special dinner. When he asks for his son to be brought to him after the meal, Philomel not only reveals herself but also Itys’ severed head. Tereus then gives chase to the sisters, but he never catches them, as all three are first transformed into birds.

In *Inventing the Barbarian*, Edith Hall points out that historically Athenians derided the Thracians as barbarous since they lacked the sophistication of Greek culture and language.¹³ Noting that Tereus was originally not Thracian but a Megarian cult hero, Hall contends that his ethnic redefinition most likely came at the hands of Sophocles, who transplanted Tereus to Thrace in a popular play that dramatized Philomel’s rape. John Gillies, in *Shakespeare and the Geography of Difference*, seizes on this detail of

¹³ Edith Hall, *Inventing the Barbarian: Greek Self-Definition through Tragedy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989). See pp. 103-5 for her reading of Tereus and the Philomel story. See also pp. 18, 41, and 122-23 for a more general discussion of Thracians and their barbarian associations.

Tereus' shift in ethnicity, claiming that Sophocles' play "reshaped a myth on incestuous rape into a parable of miscegenation."¹⁴ Though the Greek tragedy is now lost, Gillies argues that the legend and its altered details survive in Ovid's rendition, which he views as "a mature expression of the Athenian myth of the barbarian" that shows just "how completely that myth is assimilated into the Roman discourse of the barbarian."¹⁵ Gillies believes that Shakespeare picks up on this underlying thematic; since Ovid represents the "mythological blueprint" for *Titus Andronicus*, it provides the "principal means by which the classical myth of the barbarian is transmitted to Shakespeare."¹⁶ And Shakespeare, ever the astute reader, "meticulously preserves and intensifies the deep structural logic which makes the Tereus myth so compelling an instance of the ancient narrative of barbaric intrusion."¹⁷

While Gillies' reading anticipates my own in a number of ways (he is one of the only critics to discuss, however fleetingly, the links among Ovid, incest and *Titus*), I find his analysis of the Tereus story and its relationship to Shakespeare's play slightly off the mark. If Ovid's tale represents "a mature expression of the Athenian myth of the barbarian," then it must be quite mature indeed, as virtually all overt traces of Tereus' ethnicity are erased from Ovid's narrative. Perhaps all that remains is a single line describing Tereus' first sighting of Philomel: "to fleshly lust even nature did him move; / For of those countries commonly the people are above / All measure prone to lechery" (6.585-7). Unlike the King of Pontus' "host of savage people" – the Athenian threat that Tereus destroys at the behest of Athens – the King of Thrace is never labeled with such

¹⁴ John Gillies, *Shakespeare and the Geography of Difference* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 15.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 103.

an epithet. Of course his actions bespeak otherwise, as they can certainly be deemed savage and barbaric, though even this fails to stand out much in a text that collects many a story in which both man and god commit a multitude of barbarous acts. In short, the text never really underscores a deep connection between Tereus' ethnicity and his barbaric ways. Moreover, in all likelihood, early modern readers may have lacked the knowledge that ancient Greeks viewed Thracians as barbarians. After all, Orpheus – the minstrel so adept at the art of the lyre that he could charm rocks, trees and even the dead into following him – was himself Thracian.

In fact, this historical detail seems to have escaped the observations of Golding himself. In the Epistle of 1567 – the prefatory poem in which he tries to present a Christian justification for translating such a lurid and graphic piece of pagan poetry – he provides a full list of the story's morals:

The tale of Tereus, Philomel and Procne doth contain
That folk are blind in things that to their proper weal pertain,
And that the man in whom the fire of furious lust doth reign
Doth run to mischief like a horse that getteth loose the rein.
It also shows the cruel wreak of women in their wrath,
And that no heinous mischief long delay of vengeance hath,
And, lastly, that distress doth drive a man to look about
And seek all corners of his wits, what way to wind him out.

(ll. 135-42)

Although Golding's morals have to be taken with a grain of salt (they often seem forced, if not inappropriate), he never once mentions Tereus' barbaric roots as he rattles off the lessons one should glean from the tale; rather, he simply uses generic references, noting how "man" and "folk" can be driven mad by lust and distress. Golding does not say, for instance, that the story shows us how barbarians are prone to lust and lunacy, or that it provides an exemplum of the dire consequences of marrying off a daughter to a

barbarian. This stands in stark contrast to other early modern tales of miscegenation, such as the story of the Moor from Cinthio's *Hecatommithi* (*Othello*'s most immediate source). There, Desdemona, concerned over the Moor's changed attitude towards her, gives voice to what ultimately turns out to be one of the most likely morals of her tragedy: "I fear greatly that I shall be a warning to young girls not to marry against their parents' wishes; and Italian ladies will learn by my example *not to tie themselves to a man whom Nature, Heaven, and manner of life separate from us.*"¹⁸

Yet the real danger in reading the Ovid story as a parable of miscegenation lies in the way that it ignores the more obvious sexual taboo being broken: that of incest. Strangely, Golding never specifically refers to the "furious lust" that consumes Tereus as incest, though he does call it, among other things, a "lawless love" (6.596). However, an early modern audience well-versed in even the basic affinity prohibitions would have had little problem seeing this as anything but an incestuous affair. In fact, early modern attitudes towards Ovid's tale of Philomel apparently viewed Tereus' defilement of his sister-in-law as an exemplum of incestuous rape. In *The Atheist's Tragedy*, just at the moment D'Amville attempts to rape his daughter-in-law Castabella, he utters the Ovid-inspired rallying cry: "Tereus-like, / Thus I will force my passage to –" (4.3.174-75). He is then interrupted by Charlemont, who frightens him away. As well, *The Metamorphoses* itself strives in other ways to make its concern with the theme of endogamy abundantly clear, particularly in the detailed description of Tereus watching Philomel plead with her father to let her visit Procne:

hanging on her father's neck with flattering arms, requires
Against her life and for her life his licence for to go

¹⁸ Cinthio, "The Third Decade, Story 7," in *Othello*, The Arden Shakespeare 3rd Series, ed. E.A.J. Honigmann (London: Thompson Learning, 2001), 380.

To see her sister. Tereus beholds her wistly tho
And, in beholding, handles her with heart. For when he saw
Her kiss her father and about his neck her arms to draw,
They all were spurs to prick him forth and wood to feed his fire
And food of forcing nourishment to further his desire.
As oft as she her father did between her arms embrace,
So often wished he himself her father in that case.

(6.607-15)

Imagining himself being entreated by Philomel, Tereus raises what was a case of second-degree affinity incest to that of first-degree consanguinity incest: by placing himself in Pandion's shoes, he effectively fantasizes about being the father kissing and holding his daughter – and in the most inappropriate and prurient of ways. The text further underscores this point when Pandion formally places the care of his second daughter into Tereus' hands:

'Dear son-in-law, I give thee here, sith godly cause constrains,
This damsel. By the faith that in thy princely heart remains
And for our late alliance sake and by the gods above,
I humbly thee beseech that as a father thou do love
And maintain her.'

(6.634-8)

If it is with the love of a father that Tereus subsequently treats Philomel, then it is a parental love of monstrously distorted and perverted proportions. Tereus takes Pandion's request to maintain Philomel like a daughter and summarily defies – indeed defiles – it. This makes Tereus' treatment of Philomel all the more horrific, not because his ethnicity differs from hers, but rather because his rape and mutilation of her violates the sacred bonds of kinship, those bonds that he swore to uphold three times (the military alliance, the marriage to Procne, and, finally, the guardianship of Philomel). In this way, the sisters' revenge remains singularly fitting – the tyrant whose unnatural appetites figuratively consume one portion of his family is later forced to literally consume another (and more dear) part. Incest begets “incest” (of a sort), atrocity begets atrocity, and they

both lead to the destruction and self-annihilation of the family. It is this, then, that is (or rather isn't) being transmitted to *Titus*. Although Shakespeare may have been unaware of just how many instances of incest surround Seneca and Ovid,¹⁹ I mention them here to show just how deeply and inextricably incest – and its representation as a violation of sacred kinship bonds – is woven into the very fabric of his two primary classical sources. Thus, I regard the loss of incest in Shakespeare's rendition of the myth as indicative of a radical departure from Ovid rather than something that "meticulously preserves and intensifies the deep structural logic" of Ovid's "ancient narrative of barbaric intrusion."²⁰

Family Bonds and Kinship Ties in *Titus Andronicus*

Interestingly, both *The Metamorphoses* and *Titus Andronicus* construe the threat to the family as primarily sexual in nature, which is then visited upon the virginal daughter, one of the family's most precious and vulnerable members. However, the two texts diverge in depicting the origin of this threat: in Ovid it comes from within the family, and in Shakespeare it comes from without, from Goths and Moors. With Lavinia physically raped and mutilated by Demetrius and Chiron, though ultimately by the devilish genius of Aaron, the two races, threatening enough by themselves, prove all the more lethal, cruel and devastating when joined together to achieve a common goal. Thus what makes Lavinia's rape more horrific than Philomel's is that she is raped by a doubly-threatening, two-headed ethnic monster. This relationship then seemingly establishes the basic

¹⁹ There are, after all, multiple versions of nearly every major classical myth, and many classical sources contain significant narrative gaps. Some variations of the House of Atreus story, for instance, do not have Thyestes seducing Atreus' wife. Details also differ in just how Thyestes impregnates his daughter; while some make it a conscious effort on his part, others claim it an act of chance when he unwittingly rapes his daughter when he happens to see her bathing in a stream.

²⁰ Gillies, 103.

revenge structure of the play, which pits one family against another, insiders versus outsiders, the exemplary civilized Roman family against barbaric and lustful foreign interlopers.

The play, however, does not begin by sharply distinguishing which family stands in the right and which in the wrong, nor does it evince a clear sense of familial unity and cohesiveness, particularly as it pertains to the two Roman families. Notably, since the emperor has recently died and apparently left no clear successor, the play opens with a headless state in disorder, teetering on the brink of civil war.²¹ Both of the emperor's sons claim the crown, and the play's very first scene stages a tense confrontation between the two, each backed by an army of supporters and each prepared to fight for their right to occupy the imperial seat; Saturninus, the more unstable and bloodthirsty of the two, argues for primogeniture, while Bassianus, not wanting "dishonour" to rule, prefers the process of "pure election" (1.1.13, 16). Although both eventually agree to have their armies stand down and to submit their will to that of the people, the process of choosing a ruler (and particularly the ruler's wife) progresses anything but smoothly – and these initial difficulties with the stability of the state act as a prelude to all problems with rule, government, and order that transpire throughout the rest of the play.

The chaos of the state and the royal family is mirrored in the chaos of Titus' family, which is likewise initially portrayed as poised on the verge of civil war. His family may not be headless, but it has recently lost two of its last remaining limbs. Although Titus enters the stage triumphantly leading his prisoners – the Queen of the Goths and her immediate family – he also enters, somewhat less triumphantly, bearing the bodies of his

²¹ Critics often note how this depicts a mishmash of Roman political history, a hybrid combination of republican and imperial sentiments.

latest sons who, honorably slain in their country's wars, paid dearly for that victory. Titus' bold proclamation that he has "buried one-and-twenty valiant sons, / Knighted in field, slain manfully in arms / In right and service of their noble country" (1.1.198-200) certainly attests to his virility, but at the same time speaks loudly of his parental ineptitude. The presence of the imposing Andronici tomb – a monument to Titus' service to the state, reflected in the actions of his ancestors as well as those of his sons – emphasizes this point. The "sweet receptacle of [his] joys" (1.1), the tomb serves as an inescapable reminder of all the sacrifices that his family has endured for their country. Like many such phrases in Shakespeare, Titus' self-chastisement as "unkind and careless of thine own"(1.1.89) reverberates with more than just its surface meaning. While it immediately refers to the delay of interring his sons (thereby causing their restless spirits to "hover on the dreadful shore of Styx" [1.1.90]), it not only comments on his inability to protect his sons on the battlefield, but also hints at the tragedy of a father surviving his children, a notion made all the more poignant and tragically ironic (given the final outcome of the play where he kills his ravished daughter) when he beseeches Lavinia, "live, outlive thy father's days" (1.1.170).

What has hitherto been implicit becomes explicit some few lines later when the underlying tensions of the family erupt into open civil war. The turning point comes when Titus, blindly dutiful to the state and adherent to the altar of tradition, refuses the empery and unwisely recommends that Saturninus – the least desirable candidate, yet the eldest son and rightful heir according to the institution of primogeniture – be crowned ruler of Rome. Saturninus requites the deed by choosing Lavinia as his empress, an offer that Titus readily accepts, since it represents both his duty as Rome's loyal servant and an

acceptable – not to mention appealing – form of advancement for his family. We have here a seemingly classic example of the exchange value of women during the early modern period, where fathers trafficked their daughters for personal and familial gain. As Kahn describes it, “the virgin daughter’s womb is the hidden, prized treasure of her father, given or exchanged as he sees fit.”²² But something goes terribly wrong with handing over Lavinia and her “treasury” (1.1.631): previously betrothed to Bassianus, she is therefore no longer Titus’ lawful possession to dispense with as he pleases.

Bassianus’ claim that “this maid is mine” (1.1.280) completely surprises Titus, who appears blindsided that his daughter would disobey him in such a public and conspicuous forum. Everyone else in his family, though, knows of the betrothal and supports the engagement – Marcus tells Titus that Bassianus “seizeth but his own” (1.1.285) and all of his sons flock to protect the couple as they make their escape from the stage. With his family in full scale rebellion, Titus vows to Saturninus that he will return with the “surprised” Lavinia, even when the attempt brings him into direct confrontation with Mutius, one of his sons. Enraged, shocked, and humiliated at such a treasonous act – doubly treasonous since the violation affects both a head of state and a head of household – Titus kills Mutius for defending his sister’s escape. Thus Titus, surnamed Pius, the proclaimed “terror” of the Goths and “Rome’s best champion” (1.1.68), proves in the short span of half an act much less capable of leading his family at home than at leading Rome’s warriors against their enemies on the battlefield.

In fact, the members of Titus’ family literally become his enemies, a point underscored physically by stabbing his son, and then vocalized by declaring:

Marcus, even thou hast struck upon my crest,

²² Coppelia Kahn, *Roman Shakespeare: Warriors, Wounds, and Women* (London: Routledge, 1997), 50.

And with these boys mine honour thou hast wounded.
My foes I do repute you every one,
So trouble me no more, but get you gone.
(1.1.369-72)

Titus even goes one step further by proclaiming the severance of all kinship ties to his family. Anticipating themes of autonomy and self-engendering addressed more fully in *Coriolanus*,²³ Titus tries to redefine what it means to be an Andronici. Refusing to bury Mutius in the ancestral tomb, Titus discredits the blood that flows through his and his brothers' veins by asserting that righteous deeds are what characterize the members of his family; no son or brother of his would act in such a ignominious way as to mutiny against their patriarch:

No, foolish tribune, no. No son of mine,
Nor thou, nor these, confederates in the deed
That hath dishonoured all out family –
Unworthy brother and unworthy sons.
(1.1.348-51)

While the Shakespeare canon is replete with instances of daughters who resist their fathers' choice of husbands, rarely do such actions result in tragic outcomes. The play's opening, then, shows the Andronici as a family in disorder, disintegration, and indeed self-annihilation.

Tamora's treatment of her sons in the first act serves as an obvious point of contrast to Titus' utter lack of regard for his son's life and the subsequent dismissal of any alliance with his kin. When Lucius demands, "Give us the proudest prisoner of the Goths, / That we may hew his limbs and on a pile / *Ad manes fratrum* sacrifice his flesh" (1.1.99-101), Tamora begs on bended knee that Titus spare her son. She attempts to appeal to his

²³ This is a prevalent theme throughout the play, though it becomes particularly apparent in the last act when Coriolanus' mother, wife, and son come to the Volsces' camp to plead on their knees that he spare Rome from his vengeance. Spurning them, Coriolanus proclaims himself void of all familial bonds, "As if a man were author of himself / And knew no other kin" (5.3.36-7).

emotions as a father – “A mother’s tears in passion for her son! / And if thy sons were ever dear to thee, / O, think my son to be as dear to me.” (1.1.109-11) – and his sense of martial duty and honor, even of respecting one’s enemies:

But must my sons be slaughtered in the streets
For valiant doings in their country’s cause?
O, if to fight for king and commonweal
Were piety in thine, it is in these.
(1.1.115-16)

But Tamora’s pleas to a shared humanity – she even opens her supplication by calling her captors “brethren” – fail to sway Titus, who, concerned only with abiding by the traditional code of Roman conduct, seeks retributive revenge, blood for the blood of his sons: “Religiously they ask a sacrifice. / To this your son is marked, and die he must, / T’appease their groaning shadows that are gone” (1.1.127-9).²⁴ As Ania Loomba points out, Titus cannot identify with his enemy Tamora, “for to acknowledge these similarities would be for him to undermine the reason he has fought the Goths.”²⁵ Instead, he seeks to illustrate Rome’s cultural sophistication through a religious ceremony – human sacrifice – that only manages to show just how barbaric Rome can be. Chiron’s comment, “Was never Sythia half so barbarous!” (1.1.134) carries more than a note of truth to it. Given Titus’ severe treatment of sons – he’s unsuccessfully brought home twenty-one from war, slain another with his own hands, and had Alarbus put to death – Tamora’s pleading for her son’s life stands out as a model of paternal affection and duty. More importantly, it breaks down the distinctions between the perceived binaries Roman

²⁴ Ronald Broude, “Four Forms of Vengeance in *Titus Andronicus*,” *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 78:4 (October, 1979): 494-507, identifies four distinct kinds of vengeance in the play: “the human sacrifice by which the ghosts of the slain are placated with the blood of their slayers; the vendetta, in which families ruthlessly avenge past injuries in order to discourage new ones; the state justice which maintains civil order by punishing those who transgress its laws; and the divine vengeance which upholds cosmic order, and, directed by Providence, turns crime and punishment alike to the uses of an inscrutable Purpose” (495). Alarbus’ killing obviously falls into the first type.

²⁵ Loomba, 83.

and Goth, civilized and barbarian, antagonist and protagonist – a move the play continues to make until the very end. When compared to Tamora, Titus, who indiscriminately sheathes his sword in the bodies of Roman and Goth alike, comes across as the more bloodthirsty, violent, and uncontrollable of the two.

Family matters, even to the “barbarous” nations of the play, and even to the cruel, preposterous Demetrius and Chiron. Although originally inspired to kill Bassianus by their mutual lust for Lavinia and Aaron’s direction, when the murder finally gets played out, they kill Bassianus to protect and avenge their mother for what they were told was a plot to murder her. Significantly, the play frames the slaying in terms that underscore their familial duty and identity:

TAMORA: This vengeance on me had they executed.
Revenge it as you love your mother’s life,
Or be ye not henceforth called my children.
DEMETRIUS: This is a witness that I am thy son. *Stab him.*
CHIRON: And this for me, struck home to shew my strength.
[He also stabs Bassianus, who dies.]
(2.2.113-17)

The brothers again show their respect for family bonds when the nurse presents them and Aaron with the blackamoor child. Viewing the child as a disgrace to the Queen that threatens to undo them, Demetrius and Chiron initially lobby to uphold their mother’s wishes to “christen it with [a] dagger’s point” (4.2.72). Demetrius even eagerly volunteers to perform the job: “I’ll broach the tadpole on my rapier’s point. / Nurse, give it me; my sword shall soon dispatch it” (4.2.87-8). Aaron, however, vigorously defends the child and refuses to let the empress’ sons touch him. But his arguments for letting the child live fail to persuade Demetrius and Chiron – that is, until he plays the kinship card. Aaron tells them that:

He is your brother, lords, sensibly fed
Of that self blood that first gave life to you,
And from that womb where you imprisoned were
He is enfranchised and come to light.
Nay, he is your brother by the surer side,
Although my seal be stamped on his face.
(4.2.124-29)

Aaron's speech, which begins with his proud ownership of the child and a forceful defense of blackness, ends here with the repetition of the word brother, the emphasis on the same blood and womb that fed and housed them all, and the de-emphasis of Aaron's role in the child's production. All of this works to remind Demetrius and Chiron that this is not Aaron's bastard but rather their closest of kin. And the strategy works – the brothers immediately cease all talk of killing the child and instead focus on protecting and preserving his life. In fact, Demetrius even starts referring to the newborn as "child," still a bit generic, but nevertheless a far remove from the "tadpole" and "it" that he uses earlier: "Advise thee, Aaron, what is to be done / And we will all subscribe to thy advice. / Save thou the child, so we may all be safe" (4.2.131-3)

Aaron's love for his "first-born son and heir" (4.2.94) stands as a more prominent example of the importance of kinship to the play's foreign Others. Significantly, Aaron not only proclaims to Demetrius and Chiron his fatherly devotion – "My mistress is my mistress, this myself, / The vigour and the picture of my youth. / This before all the world do I prefer" (4.2.109-11) – but also to Lucius and his army. After being captured by the Goths and threatened with his child's execution, he begs to save his son's life – not his own – by bartering it to Lucius in exchange for information of "wondrous things / That highly may advantage thee to hear" (5.1.55-6). Given that many have regarded Aaron as the devil incarnate and "one of the most diabolical, treacherous, consummate villains in

all of Shakespeare,” his fierce and unforced attachment for his child has often been viewed as surprising, if not incompatible with the rest of his character.²⁶ Other critics, especially those wishing to find redeeming qualities in Aaron, view his love for his infant son as a humanizing force that makes him, in turn, one of the most complex of Shakespeare’s early villains. Whether surprising, incompatible, humanizing or not, at the very least, Aaron’s bond with his child should be seen as singularly fitting given *Titus*’ intense focus on issues concerning the family.²⁷ The case of Aaron and his child is only one of the most conspicuous examples of this concentrated emphasis. Yet this is not to say that the Goths and Moors should be taken as paragons of the virtuous family. A host of issues detract from their exemplary status, particularly in the case of Aaron, whose strong sense of familial ties – not to mention the act of miscegenation that went into his son’s creation – also represents something much more diabolical.

It has long been noted that Aaron’s impressive, wide-ranging catalogue of “murders, rapes and massacres, / Acts of black night, abominable deeds, / Complots of mischief, treasons, [and] villainies” (5.1.63-5) mimics a very similar, at times nearly identical, list told by Barabas and his Turkish slave Ithamore in *The Jew of Malta* (c. 1590, 2.3.179-

²⁶ Philip C. Kolin, “*Titus Andronicus* and the Critical Legacy,” in *Titus Andronicus: Critical Essays*, ed. Philip C. Kolin (New York: Garland Publishing, 1995): 3-55; 30. Kolin goes on to note that Aaron’s seemingly disparate roles include “the Machiavellian plotter, lusty paramour, glib-tongued rhetor, notorious outlaw, morality-play Vice, misleader of youth – yet a loving father” (31). For Aaron as a stereotype of blackness, see Loomba, who argues that Aaron “is a textbook illustration for early modern stereotypes of blackness” (75). Loomba contends that “older stereotypes about barbarism, black sexuality, and evil evoked by Aaron mediate newer anxieties about nation, religion, race, and femininity” (76).

²⁷ Noting this intense focus, C.L. Barber and Richard P. Wheeler, in *The Whole Journey: Shakespeare’s Power of Development* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1986), call *Titus* an “Abortive Domestic Tragedy.” They argue that the play loses depth and meaning since “there is in effect no larger social world within which the outrage takes place, no ongoing business of state and private life within which the isolation and impotence of the injured hero can be presented” (125). Instead, “*Titus* defines its hero (and heroine) almost entirely in domestic terms, and its antiheroes in antidomestic terms; there is no larger society, no larger human and social possibility, showing forth. And in trying to make extraordinary transpositions of usual family and antifamily roles and allegiances, the play tends to fall into sensationalism and sentimentality” (157).

222).²⁸ Indeed there are other moments of intersection between Aaron and Barabas, particularly when Aaron arrives on stage with a bag of gold in his hands, which he promptly buries under an elder tree (2.2). Not only does this act recall Barabas' tendency of burying his wealth to hide it (either under the floorboards of his house or, "as partridges do their eggs, under the earth" [4.4.70-1]), but it also associates Aaron with Judaism more generally, as medieval iconographic tradition had long depicted Jews with money bags, a symbol that not only identifies them with professional money lending but also with avarice, usury, abuse of power, and even the destructive effects of capitalism as a whole.²⁹ These examples – as well as Aaron's conspicuously Jewish name – display the common early modern practice of eliding categories of "Otherness" until they become blurry and indistinct, specifically here the conflation between Moors and Jews.³⁰ But at the same time these instances signal a significant difference. While Aaron may come on stage with a marker of Jewishness in his hands, his first words immediately trouble such an easy association: "He that had wit would think that I had none, / To bury so much gold under a tree / And never after to inherit it" (2.2.1-3). Barabas would likely be one of the most vocal detractors questioning Aaron's sanity, as profiting from such ventures remains his *modus operandi*. The opening stage directions of Marlowe's play – "Barabas discovered in his counting house, with heaps of gold before him" – and the subsequent long, detailed inventory of his vast stores of riches and wealth, none-too-subtly establish

²⁸ Christopher Marlowe, *The Complete Plays*. 1969. Ed. J.B. Steane (London: Penguin Books, 1986).

²⁹ See Sarah Lipton, *Images of Intolerance: The Representation of Jews and Judaism in the Bible moralisée* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999), 30-53. Lipton identifies the money bag as the single most common Jewish icon used in the *Bibles moralisées*; a similar trend occurs in visual depictions of Jews all across continental Europe and the British Isles.

³⁰ More often, Jews get conflated with Islamic Others (Moors, Turks) on the early modern stage. Perhaps the single most common conflation of this type occurs when Jews swear by and worship Mahomet (Islam's Mohammed). By saddling Tamora and Aaron with the same derogatory names – at different points both are called "barbarous" and "ravenous tiger" – *Titus* also essentially equates Goths with Moors.

the basic foundation of his character. Despite his penchant for villainy and intense hatred for all things Christian, the threat posed by Barabas becomes somewhat mitigated by the fact that he is primarily motivated by greed and the accumulation of wealth, rather than by a desire for worldly power. Significantly, when Barabas becomes governor of Malta, he finds the new role an ill and unprofitable fit, and immediately offers the job back to Ferneze for “Great sums of money” (5.2.88). Ultimately money, rather than hate, vengeance, or ambition, matters most; as Barabas explains about his choice to work with both Turks and Christians, he will direct his allegiance to whomever offers the best monetary advantage:

thus far roundly goes the business:
Thus loving neither, will I live with both,
Making a profit of my policy;
And he from whom my most advantage comes
Shall be my friend.

(5.2.110-14)

Aaron, however, is not Barabas, at least not in these regards. Decidedly unconcerned with counting money or acquiring wealth, he instead willingly “wastes” his bag of gold to purchase something he considers more dear: “A very excellent piece of villainy” (2.1.7). The plot that Aaron hatches – a four-part plan of attack against the Andronici fused from the classical stories of Lucrece and Philomel – shows his ability to take advantage of his position as an alien outside the bounds of Roman ethics and morality to manipulate the Roman system to his own advantage. And what Aaron’s after seems to be a dangerous combination of chaos, destruction, and power. Of course Aaron cannot wield power directly – his “Spotted, detested and abominable” (2.2.74) hue forecloses that option – but he can influence events indirectly through the sexual authority he exerts over Tamora, which is even more troubling since it remains all the more difficult to detect. That Aaron

nearly establishes his bastard child as Rome's heir apparent – a plan that would have likely succeeded had his child been able, like his “Muly” countryman's, to pass as Roman – speaks of the anxiety surrounding the idea of the “Turkish threat.” Apparently even the Goths themselves find the notion of a Moor-Goth child reprehensible and disquieting. At least this remains one of the few viable explanations as to why the Goths would suddenly pair up with Lucius and help him defeat their former queen: to punish such an egregious sexual violation and to blot out the existence of this monstrous birth.

As for Tamora, she almost reaches Aaron's fiendish heights. While her first speech may be an emotional and piteous entreaty for her son's life, her next extended speech belies the “ravenous tiger” beneath her tear-stained face. In an aside to Saturninus, who threatens to punish Bassianus and the Andronici clan for their treasonous theft of Lavinia, she counsels that he should “Dissemble all [his] griefs and discontents,” (1.1.448), forgive Titus's family, and allow his new bride to seek revenge, on her own, for the two of them:

I'll find a day to massacre them all,
And raze their faction and their family,
The cruel father and his traitorous sons
To who I sued for my dear son's life,
And make them know what 'tis to let a queen
Kneel in the streets and beg for grace in vain.
(1.1.455-60)

With these last two lines, Tamora reveals that her desire for revenge stems at least as much from selfish pride – the humiliation of a queen, kneeling in vain to a social inferior – as from grief over her lost son. While some recent critics have tried to recuperate Tamora and are sympathetic towards her,³¹ the majority still regard her as one of

³¹ See, for instance, Carolyn Asp, “‘Upon her wit doth earthly honor wait’: Female Agency in *Titus Andronicus*,” in *Titus Andronicus: Critical Essays*, ed. Philip C. Kolin (New York: Garland Publishing,

Shakespeare's most calculating and diabolical villainesses. Certainly the pervasive misogynistic atmosphere of the text vilifies Tamora, portraying her as a "maternal fecundity that, eluding patriarchal control, becomes excessive, destructive, and malignant, breeding further evils."³² The revelations of this first confidential speech start a process of demonizing Tamora that quickly picks up speed, ending with that most unnatural of maternal instincts: to send away in shame and horror her newborn child to be killed.

By the time act two comes around, there is a much stronger sense that something peculiar is going on with Tamora's motivation for revenge. With Aaron already having channeled Demetrius and Chiron's erotic energy into the larger scheme of revenge against Titus and his kin, it would seem logical that Tamora would invoke the image of Alarbus' dismemberment as a call to arms when directing her sons to kill Bassianus and violate Lavinia. After all, Tamora vowed to "massacre them all," which thereby includes the two newlyweds. However, any talk of the cruel "sacrifice" of their brother is absent from Tamora's directive, replaced with, oddly enough, a completely fabricated account of a plot against her own life. Gesturing towards the abhorred pit that will soon contain the body of Bassianus, she claims that "These two have 'ticed me hither to this place: / A barren detested vale you see it is" (2.2.92-3) to "leave me to this miserable death" (2.2.108). Admittedly she does eventually mention the act that first spurred her towards revenge:

Remember, boys, I poured forth tears in vain
To save your brother from the sacrifice,

1995): 333-46. Asp argues that Tamora challenges the Symbolic Male Order by using her maternal powers to pursue her own desires and thus free herself from patriarchal domination. Though it is only a fleeting triumph, as Tamora is soon killed and expelled from the city.

³² Kahn, 54-5.

But fierce Andronicus would not relent.
Therefore away with her and use her as you will:
The worse to her, the better loved of me.

(2.2.163-67)

But by the time she finally gets around to bringing up Alarbus' fate, it seems mostly an afterthought; Bassianus has already been killed, some 70 lines have passed since the induction of the fictitious tale, and Tamora appears to be directly responding to Lavinia's ill-advised plea for a swift death, which only serves to harm her cause by reminding Tamora of the ill that she suffered at Titus' hands: "O, let me teach thee for my father's sake, / That gave thee life when well he might have slain thee" (2.2.158-9).

However, this still doesn't quite provide an adequate explanation for why Tamora feels compelled to invent an offense against her rather than feed off the actual crimes she has endured. What this does do, though, is to undercut the validity of any argument in favor of her revenge against the Andronici; Tamora and her clan are not simply, deliberately revenging a family wrong but delighting in its carnality and licentiousness. The beginning of the second act depicts the Goth family as bent on sex, rape and revenge because they are uncontrollable Goths, not because they are morally, socially, or even religiously obligated to revenge family wrongs. Aaron hints at this earlier in the play when he establishes the details of the ambush that Demetrius and Chiron are to lay, saying that "our empress, with her sacred wit / To villainy and vengeance consecrate" (1.1.620-21). The order of words seems telling, as it indicates that although vengeance might be a part of this ploy against Bassianus and Lavinia, it remains secondary to the prime importance: villainy. By the time that Tamora dresses up as Revenge at the end of the play, she has become a parody, rather than an embodiment, of the concept; she may

think she fools Titus by dressing up in the trappings of vengeance, but even he, distracted as he is, sees through her disguise. And he then turns the tables on her.

In the complicated sexual world of *Titus*, any remnant of incest leftover from the play's classical sources is displaced onto Tamora, queen of the Goths. Notably, in referring to the rape of Lavinia, she uses the first person plural when reminding her sons to kill her only after "ye have the honey *we* desire" (2.2.131, emphasis mine), almost as if she will likewise, through them, take part in Lavinia's sexual sweets.³³ Of course she doesn't, technically, enjoy the act her sons perform, though she does the next best thing by satiating her lust at the same time as they do. When Demetrius and Chiron exit with the helpless Lavinia, Tamora, apparently aroused by the scene, bids them farewell, saying, "Now will I hence to *seek* my *lovely Moor*, / And let my spleenful sons this trull deflower" (2.2.190-1, emphasis mine). Significantly, most of the slander directed towards Tamora is sexual in nature and refers to her miscegenistic affair with her "lovely Moor." Various called "abominable" and "raven-coloured," her "love" is most often referred to as "foul": "foul desire," "foul proceedings," "foul adulteress." Yet Tamora's sexual nature is a two way street. A widow when she first enters the stage, she does not stay unmarried for long. In a cynical and perverted take on cross-national royal weddings, Shakespeare does not have Saturninus marry Tamora in the hopes of brokering a lasting peace between the Goths and the Romans; rather, he pursues her out of an uncontrollable lust for the exotic Other. Saturninus' promise to wed Lavinia, the "lily" white "royal mistress" of Rome, lasts only as long as it takes for him to lay eyes on the

³³ Julie Taymor's film version, *Titus* (1999), retains this sense of incest. In the scene where Titus and his clan shoot arrows into the courtyard, Taymor has Tamora, Saturninus, Demetrius, and Chiron reading the petitions on the royal bed; all are naked, and Chiron even has his arms wrapped around his mother as she reclines on his chest.

darker-skinned Tamora, “of the hue / That I would choose were I to choose anew” (1.1.265-6).³⁴ His rejection of Lavinia – itself a match meant to heal the divisions between the various Roman factions vying for the empery – eventually leads Rome to civil war. Thus Tamora’s character in *Titus* becomes something of an amalgamation of monstrous female hyper-sexuality: part (incestuous) lusty widow, part desiring exotic Other, and part desirable exotic Other, she is, in short, a “most insatiate and luxurious woman!” (5.1.88). If there is some leniency for someone like Titus to seek revenge above and beyond the state’s laws, such tolerance is denied to Tamora. By lying about the murder plot against her and conveniently masking rape as vengeance, Tamora and her family pervert any “just” motivations for revenge; their need for blood stems almost completely from their uncontrollable, lustful, and emotional natures. While first blood was drawn from Tamora, the text makes it abundantly clear that she and her kin are perpetrators, not victims, of violence.

Of course, family matters to Titus and the Romans as well, even if the play’s early events seem to indicate otherwise. So what causes this change of heart? What brings Titus back into the family fold? What transforms Titus from the hapless and heartless destroyer of his family to its champion revenger? Most readily, Titus rallies around his kin when they are attacked from the outside, when Tamora and Aaron unleash their own vengeance on Titus’ clan for the killing of Alarbus: the imprisonment and deaths of Titus’ sons, Lucius’ banishment, the fruitless loss of Titus’ limb, the discovery of Lavinia. As soon as these events begin to unfold, all talk of family discord and squabbling stops, replaced with the desire for justice. Apparently, acts of violence

³⁴ It is unclear exactly what skin color Tamora is meant to have. Most critics, such as Loomba, regard her as essentially fair skinned. But it seems clear from this comment that Tamora’s “hue” is supposed to differ from that of Lavinia. Most likely she is inbetween: not-quite lily-white, though certainly not “coal-black.”

committed on the family from within pale in comparison to acts of violence committed on the family from without.³⁵

Additionally, Titus' reunification with his family happens at the same time that his relationship to the state unravels. At the play's opening, Titus embodies Rome's most loyal and dedicated servant. All his actions are done in the service of the state, including such questionable ones as sacrificing Alarbus, backing Saturninus' claim to the throne, and killing his "traitorous" son Mutius. Saturninus, the emperor of Rome and the embodiment of the state, calls Titus "father of my life" (1.1.258), a title that Bassianus later repeats. For Titus, his allegiance to the state means much more than his allegiance to his kin, and indeed, Rome serves as his surrogate family. Quickly, though, this relationship proves an ill investment. This is first visually represented when Titus rushes off in the attempt to bring Lavinia back. As he dashes across the stage, he calls back to Saturninus, "Follow, my lord, and I'll soon bring her back" (1.1.293); but Saturninus does not follow Titus, and the distance between the two grows more vast when Saturninus exits with Tamora during Titus' fight with his son, reentering above with his new queen. By the time that it is Titus' turn to beg in vain on his knees for his sons' lives, he realizes that the payment for his service is only pain, suffering, and humiliation, a point symbolically represented by the useless sacrifice of his own hand, the hand that had served Rome so well by defending and expanding her borders.

³⁵ An analogous situation occurs with Saturninus and Bassianus. In the first act, Saturninus threatens his brother with violence twice – once in order to secure the crown, and again later in retribution for stealing Lavinia away from him: "Traitor, if Rome have law or we have power, / Thou and thy faction shall repent this rape" (1.1.408-09). He apparently forgives (or forgets) all of these faults when he finds his brother slain two acts later; he then only cares about punishing those who committed such a treasonous deed. In fact, conflict (and then resolution) between brothers is a recurring theme of the play; besides the two royal brethren, Marcus and Titus, and Demetrius and Chiron all spar with one another during the play. The only brothers who do not experience discord are Titus' sons, though, as I mention above, this becomes displaced onto the relationship between the father and his children.

Unlike *Hamlet*, where the revenger constantly plots, plans and deliberates on his own, divorced from the rest of his kin (indeed, the object of his revenge is a family member), Titus is decidedly not alone. In fact, family constantly surrounds him, both immediate (sons, grandson, daughter) and extended (brother, nephew, cousins) members, and the family, as a group, plans and carries out the revenge against Tamora. During the blood oath scene, for instance, Marcus, the uncle, first proposes that the Andronici swear to seek vengeance (4.1.83-94). And as the plan begins to pick up speed as it moves towards its conclusion, Titus enlists more and more Andronici to fulfill their familial duty to protect and revenge their kinsmen: the arrow-shooting scene (4.3) introduces three new Andronici (Publius, Caius and Sempronius), and the final banquet-preparation scene introduces yet another (Valentine). Significantly, all the Andronici actively participate in killing and cooking Demetrius and Chiron; even though Titus wears the chef's hat and came up with the recipe, aprons are worn by all. In short, revenge is family business, and it is only due to the help and support of his full family that Titus is able to regain his sanity and exact his (actually, their) revenge.

Family, State, and the Consequences of Revenge

In leaving out incest from *Titus Andronicus*, Shakespeare radically alters the structure and meaning of Ovid's tale of violation and revenge, turning a story depicting the abuse of kinship ties into one that, at least partially, celebrates such bonds. Shakespeare principally accomplishes this move through replacing incest with radical exogamy – Lavinia (and by extension Titus and his family) is raped and mutilated by the cultural and racial Other, an act that demands retribution and essentially pits the Andronici against the

Tamora/Aaron clan. *Titus* does retain some of the inter-family chaos and self-destruction that dominates the story of Philomel and Procne, but such discord lasts no longer than the first act. In Ovid, incest confuses family bonds: Tereus imagines himself as Philomel's father, not her brother-in-law; Philomel shies away from her sister out of shame and guilt – "But she, considering that / Queen Procne was a cuckquean made by means of her, durst nat / Once raise her eyes, but on the ground fast fixed held the same" (6.668-70); Procne abandons her maternal instincts in favor of revenging her sister and herself by slaying her own son. But in *Titus*, the violence against Titus' family – Lavinia's rape and mutilation, Martius and Quintus' executions, Titus' dismemberment – all act as catalysts for clarifying and cementing kinship relations, for dictating family duties and obligations.

Yet if *Titus* celebrates such bonds of family, it does so at the expense of the affiliation between the family and the state. From the beginning, where unwise reliance on the tradition of primogeniture and the harsh, unrelenting need for sacrificing Tamora's son effectively set in motion the tragedy that follows, something seems to be amiss with the relationship between the family and the state. The case of Titus, the dutiful servant who loses twenty-two of his twenty-five sons by the end of the first act, represents an exceptional example of this misalignment between what the family wants and needs and what the state wants and needs. At the play's beginning, Titus's prodigious fecundity seems to signal not a desire for a family, but rather for a large pool of potential soldiers to deploy in Rome's wars; or rather, it demonstrates Titus' complete faith that a family's proper function is to unquestioningly serve the state, even at its own expense. But Titus' payment for his service – the severed heads of two more of his sons and the flippant

return of his sacrificed hand – show just how much the state has spurned and neglected him. The Andronici's subsequent appeals to the court for justice also go unheeded. It is only by banding together and relying on one another that Titus and his family are able to survive, let alone exact revenge. Thus the state, permeable and prone to the corrupting influence of the outside Other, utterly fails the Roman exemplars of Titus and his kin. Indeed, highlighting the importance of familial loyalty, in turn, ultimately serves as a critique of the nation's fractured relationship to the family.

However, *Titus* is by no means a tale with a simple Us (Romans) versus Them (Goths/Moors) structure. Family matters to both the Romans and the barbarians, as evidenced by the importance and strength of familial connections that exist between the members of all four families. Extending across cultural, geographic, and religious boundaries, these ties serve as the underlying foundation that guides all the principal actors – “civilized” and “barbaric” alike – into performing acts of familial loyalty that are, at the same time, deeds of extraordinary violence and brutality. In the end, *Titus* suggests that there is something powerful about family bonds, yet at the same time something violent, wild, and indeed uncontrollable. The military and the state try to control and even capitalize on this potency by adopting false kinship metaphors that are meant to reinforce and strengthen bonds of loyalty and duty to the state. Additionally, the state attempts to redirect the family's sense of self-protection, so that families like the Andronici fight to preserve, not themselves, but the institution of Rome itself (which, in turn, is supposed to protect them). As is evidenced by Titus' actions in the first act, the family defines its sense of self, worth, and honor achieved in the bloodshed on the battlefield, primarily through its service to the state. Yet the state fails to protect the

Andronici from harm or, once they are injured, provide them with justice, and since Titus and his kin cannot ignore the heinous crimes committed against their family, they resort to extra-judicial means to carry out their vengeance. While the play begins with the notion that loyalty to the state trumps that of the family (Titus, after all, kills his son for the treasonous act of helping the emperor's promised bride escape), what follows soon shows that one can only rely on family loyalty. Binding together and swearing a blood oath, the Andronici, to a certain extent, exist as a separate unit outside the purview of the state, which is powerless to stop the ensuing bloodshed and destruction.

The play's ending likewise hints at the dangers and threats that family bonds pose to the state. At first glance, the conclusion seems to offer a sense of reconciliation and closure, where the threats to and of the family have been exterminated and safely contained by the newly established empery: Titus has achieved his revenge, most of the principal players are dead (or, in the case of Aaron, soon to be so), the barbarous Tamora/Aaron alliance has been severed and punished, former enemies (Goths and Romans) are united as allies, and, most significantly, Aaron's son is allowed to live. Many critics tend to regard this ending, particularly the Goth-Roman alliance (Kolin calls it a "Rainbow Coalition"³⁶) and the merciful sparing of the child, as signs of hope and peace. Ania Loomba, for instance, contends that "by the end, [Lucius'] alliance with the Goths signals an end to the continuous cycle of violence. He may not be flawless but the play does suggest that the will 'heal Rome's harms and wipe away her woe' (5.3.147)... Lucius' decision to let the issue of their miscegenation, the back baby, live signals an end

³⁶ Philip C. Kolin, "'Lucius, the Severely Flawed Redeemer of *Titus Andronicus*': A Reply," *Connotations* 7:1 (1997-98): 94-6; 95.

to the violence.”³⁷ But if the tradition of revenge stories – especially the protracted, multi-generational epic tale of the House of Atreus – teaches us anything, it is that such a peace is tenuous at best, and most likely impossible. Unless all the members of a family are dead (as in *The Spanish Tragedy* or *Hamlet*), the mantle of revenge can be taken up by the next generation’s avenger, particularly if given reason and opportunity. And Lucius – with his harsh and cruel execution of Aaron (buried up to his neck in the sand and left to starve – a play off of the torture of Tantalus) and the desecration of Tamora’s body (thrown to “beasts and birds of prey”) – potentially provides the child that he will raise with plenty of reasons for avenging his parents’ death and defilement. Even though he is doubly barbaric, a Goth-Moor, we know that family and blood relations matter to him; being Aaron’s “heir,” we also have a sense of exactly what character traits he will inherit from his father.

Thus, Lucius’ first acts as emperor seem to spell the doom for Rome (and, by extension, all of civilization): they are both too much and not enough, too much in that he violates Roman burial customs (which he actually argued for at the play’s beginning) and not enough in that he allows Aaron’s child, a revenger-in-waiting, to live. In fact, despite all of the play’s bloodshed, a surprisingly large number of principal players survive at the end of *Titus*. Besides Lucius and the child, there is also Marcus and, most importantly, young Lucius. Already schooled in the ways of Ovid, this youngest member of the Andronici proves himself an adept pupil in the ways of revenge by suggesting that if it were up to him, he would repay his aunt’s rape in kind by raping the mother of Lavinia’s attackers (4.1.107-9). Unlike *Hamlet*, where all of the principal players are killed, Shakespeare almost seems careful to have left enough remaining players alive to populate

³⁷ Loomba, 85.

the stage for a sequel – a plot against the Andronici some 20 years in the future when Young Aaron has achieved adulthood and readies himself to carry on his father's legacy. At the very least, any sense of the safe containment of the extra-judicial potentialities of the family seems to be denied to *Titus Andronicus*.

EPILOGUE

Looking Forward: A Pattern for Reading

Shakespeare never did write a sequel to *Titus Andronicus*, though he continued to revisit the issues of incest, miscegenation, and the family throughout his career, perhaps nowhere in more varied and intriguing ways than in his late romances. In *The Winter's Tale* (1609), Shakespeare flirts with incest during the reunion scene between Leontes and Perdita, where Leontes momentarily confuses paternal and romantic love (5.1.207-32).¹ And in *Cymbeline* (1609), the confusion is between romantic and fraternal love as well as between gender roles. When Imogen (disguised as a boy) unknowingly finds herself living with her long-lost brothers in the Welsh mountains, they all immediately sense a strong attachment to each other, even as they remain uncertain as how to define it. Guiderius opts for romantic love, telling Imogen, "Were you a woman, youth, / I should woo hard, but be your groom in honesty: / I bid for you as I do buy" (3.7.41-3). Arviragus, however, chooses to "love him as my brother" (3.7.44) since he believes that Imogen is, as he claims, a man. *Cymbeline* also contains more than a strand of miscegenation. As Mary Floyd-Wilson argues, the play stages a modified version of the *Othello* plot that reveals its deep investment in Anglo-Scottish relations.²

¹ For a more extended discussion of incestuous overtones in the play, see Carol Thomas Neely's "Incest and Issue in the Romances: *The Winter's Tale*," the fifth chapter of *Broken Nuptials in Shakespeare's Plays* (166-209).

² See her "Cymbeline's Angels," the seventh chapter of *English Ethnicity and Race in Early Modern Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003): 161-83.

The tropes of incest and miscegenation, however, resonate most strongly in Shakespeare's two "travel" plays: *Pericles* (c. 1606-07) and *The Tempest* (1610).³ In the first of these, Pericles travels to the Turkish city of Antioch in the attempt to solve Antiochus' riddle and thereby win his daughter's hand in marriage. When Pericles discovers the terrible secret of the answer, this horrific revelation instigates a flight from incest that seemingly gets replayed with Pericles and his daughter. After the "death" of Thaisa, Pericles, perhaps fearing the temptation that he will, like Antiochus, turn to his daughter as a replacement for his wife, abandons Marina with Cleon and Dionyza. And the specter of incest continues to haunt the play, in particular creeping into Pericles' reunion scenes with his daughter (5.1, especially 5.1.110-19) and wife (5.3). In *The Tempest*, Shakespeare presents something of an opposite scenario. Set on a small, remote island with no ready means of escape, the play consciously forecloses a flight from incest as a viable option. The geographical limits in turn greatly reduce the pool of potential marriage partners. For Prospero – playing the role of the patriarchal father whose duty it is to pass his daughter off to a "suitable" husband – there are only two possibilities open for Miranda on the island: incest (Prospero himself) or miscegenation (Caliban). The play's mother-son pairing – Sycorax and Caliban – offers a perverted, inverted reflection of the Prospero-Miranda relationship. A most "foul" and "damned" witch from Algiers, Sycorax's description hints at the widow-witch-incest-bestial association. Of course Prospero, parallel to his rejection of revenge, ultimately eschews incest (Caliban was

³ William Sherman, in "Travel and Trade," calls *The Tempest* the "period's definitive travel play" (109).

never really an option, but rather a threat that needed neutralizing) and uses his magic to bring in Ferdinand, the perfect third party.⁴

Shakespeare was not alone in creating a body of work that trafficks in these issues. Most noticeably, Middleton also addresses these sexual extremes, particularly with his trilogy of incestuous widows: Gratiana in *The Revenger's Tragedy* (1606), Hecate in *The Witch* (1616), and Livia in *Women, Beware Women* (1621). Whereas Kyd and Webster provide mostly sympathetic portrayals of social ambition, Middleton offers a much more dark, ironic, and cynical view of social and sexual mobility. Rather than having his widows be the victims of unwanted incestuous advances, he configures them as instigating – or at least reciprocating – these illicit sexual encounters. Tending to gender social ambition as feminine since it is primarily accomplished through a powerful female figure, Middleton provides a starkly different view of social miscegenation than his contemporaries, one that becomes equated with lustfulness, violence, and hollow materialism.

I mention these dramas by Shakespeare and Middleton to provide an additional sampling, however brief, of other ways that dramatists used incest and miscegenation in their plays – a means, so to say, of showing the flexibility of these tropes. In fact, the major benefit of a study of this nature resides less in its readings of individual plays and more in the patterns of analysis it helps to establish. It is my hope that the investigative framework that I have provided – the deep history of incest and miscegenation, coupled

⁴ For a discussion of *The Tempest* and incest, see Mark Taylor, *Shakespeare's Darker Purpose: A Question of Incest* (New York: AMS Press, 1982). For an analysis of miscegenation in the play, see Jyotsna Singh, "Caliban versus Miranda: Race and Gender Conflicts in Postcolonial Rewritings of *The Tempest*," in *Feminist Readings of Early Modern Culture: Emerging Subjects*, ed. Valerie Traub, M. Lindsay Kaplan, and Dymphna Callaghan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996): 191-209; Marjorie Raley, "Claribel's Husband," in *Race, Ethnicity, and Power in the Renaissance*, ed. Joyce Green MacDonald (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1997): 95-119; and Kim Hall's "Commerce and Intercourse: Dramas of Alliance and Trade," chapter three of *Things of Darkness* (141-59).

with the broad socio-political context of the family, social mobility, and trade – will prove a useful and productive means of reading a wide variety of early modern plays.

To me, one of the most surprising findings to come out of this study is how early modern dramatists viewed incest and miscegenation not as opposing or separate entities, but rather as strongly connected. When one is explicitly raised in a text, it is likely that resonances of the other can also be found. Although I began this project by describing incest and miscegenation as occupying opposite ends of the sexual spectrum, this configuration of sexual alliance as a long, straight line no longer seems like an adequate representation of how things really functioned during the period. Less binary opposites than cousins who share a number of points of interconnection, perhaps a more fitting depiction of the early modern sexual spectrum is the *ouroboros* – an image evoked in the riddle that opens *Pericles*: “*I am no viper, yet I feed / On mother’s flesh which did me breed*” (1.1.65-6). Indeed, the circular image of a snake consuming its own tail seems a remarkably appropriate means of describing the nexus of sexual extremes, as well as the affiliation between incest, cannibalism, bestiality, and miscegenation, that weave through early modern drama.

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