

The Duchess' Privy Chamber: Early Modern Marriage and the Eviction of Women from the Public Sphere in The Duchess of Malfi¹

Carla Spivack

In December of 1603, several months after the coronation of James the Sixth of Scotland as James the First of England, John Harington, a failed courtier from Elizabeth's reign - her godson, in fact - was summoned, as others, to the new monarch's "closet" - the innermost and most private of the many royal chambers - for an introduction. For Harington, it was an opportunity to greet the new king and set the stage for improving his fortunes under the new regime. After waiting an hour, he was led to a small chamber where pens and paper were laid out, and the King quickly appeared. James asked whether Harington were related to a courtier of the same name whom James had recently made a baron, and inquired about Harington's education, bringing to Harington's mind his "examiner at Cambridge aforetyme." The king posed the philosophical question of "what pure witte [white] was made of" and "whom it best became." Finally, James turned to one of his favorite subjects at the time, witchcraft, and asked Harington why "the devil did worke more with anciente women than with others." In response, Harington risked a "scurvey jeste," and suggested that it was because, as scripture tells us, "the devil walketh in dry places." Presumably after a chuckle, the King went on to other matters and concluded by promising to further aid the "understanding" of his courtier if he could.²

This vignette, I believe, reveals that a profound shift in gender relations and the role of women in public life took place at the time of the Jacobean succession. I suggest that it partakes of a process at work at many levels in Jacobean culture which dismembered Elizabethan

¹ I would like to thank the following people for their invaluable insights, comments and suggestions during the long evolution of this article: Professors William E. Nelson, Mary Thomas Crane, Amy Boesky, and Erica L. Harth; I would also like to thank Liz Butler, Joshua Kirsch, Meredith McGowan, Yair Sagy and Jeff Westover for their thoughtful criticism.

² This incident is recorded in JOHN HARRINGTON, *LETTERS OF JOHN HARRINGTON* 33 (Ruth Willard Hughey ed., 1971).

iconography - i.e., the symbolic system which legitimated Elizabeth as a female ruler - and displaced women from a central to a marginal position in the court and in public life. Elizabeth had constructed a complex practice of self representation to establish and elaborate upon her right, as a female, to rule. I will discuss this self representation later; my introductory point here is that Jacobean culture saw a dismantling of this symbolic system which undid the legitimacy of female political power. This process involved the replacement of the imagery of female political power with the imagery, provided by legal and other texts,³ of female subjection in marriage. This process both influenced and was influenced by the increasing shrinkage of women's public roles in the early modern period.

Since Joan Kelly Gadol first revolutionized women's history by arguing that women actually lost, rather than gained, status in the Renaissance,⁴ other feminist scholars have substantiated and elaborated upon her claim. Lisa Jardine, for example, argues that the newly romanticized Protestant ideal of the family actually circumscribed women's roles, that the Reformation eliminated traditional outlets for female independence such as convents and the worship of female saints, and that Protestant advocacy of education for women actually served to cut women off from access to the public sphere.⁵ I will suggest that this process, and the dismantling of Elizabeth's self-presentation, were intertwined and mutually enabling. Specifically, I will argue that the cultural recuperation from female rule contributed to the displacement of women from the public sphere in the early Jacobean years. In this, I am agreeing with Lisa Jardine that the representation of a woman sovereign, "far from leading the

³ For a discussion of the legal history of marriage in this period, *see generally* B. J. SOKOL & MARY SOKOL, *SHAKESPEARE, LAW AND MARRIAGE* (2003); R.B. OUTHWAITE, *CLANDESTINE MARRIAGE IN ENGLAND 1500-1850* (1995).

⁴ Joan Kelly Gadol, *Did Women Have a Renaissance?* in *BECOMING VISIBLE: WOMEN IN EUROPEAN HISTORY* 176 (Renate Bridenthal et al. eds. 1987).

⁵ LISA JARDINE, *STILL HARPING ON DAUGHTERS: WOMEN AND DRAMA IN THE AGE OF SHAKESPEARE* 51-53 (1983).

Elizabethans to a forward looking tolerance of active womanhood . . . betrayed all their uneasiness” about female power.⁶

I am not arguing, of course, for a causal relationship between the post-Elizabethan backlash against female rule and the shrinkage of women’s public roles - or vice versa. The change in women’s status in this period was the overdetermined result of emergent historical forces such as capitalism, changing modes of production, and Protestantism. Rather, I am saying that the dismantling of Elizabethan iconography provided a set of images ready-to-hand, so to speak, whose reworking both reflected and contributed to this change by expressing it symbolically. Other discourses were at hand to provide alternative symbolic systems to that of female power, particularly that of marriage law, and I will show how the plays I examine used these alternate systems to undermine Elizabethan iconography. I believe this reworking and its effects can be seen in several plays of the period; here I focus on two, and mainly on one, Webster’s *Duchess of Malfi*,⁷ in which I think it is most apparent.

I will analyze the displacement of female power in *The Duchess of Malfi* and *The White Devil* by showing how the plays undermine the symbolic underpinnings of female rule. I will argue that these plays reveal the collision of the displacement process I have mentioned with the opposing pull exerted by images of women who positioned themselves at the center of their own courtly worlds: Queen Anne, Arbella Stuart, and, most important, the specter of Queen Elizabeth. I will show how overdetermination operates at a cultural level to collect and compress the imagery of all these three figures in the play, and how the play then dismembers this imagery. In

⁶ *Id.* at 169.

⁷ I refer throughout to *The Duchess of Malfi*, in JOHN WEBSTER, *THREE PLAYS* 167-292 (D. C. Gunby ed., 1972) (1623).

The Duchess of Malfi, I will show how it is replaced with the imagery of the female sequestered in marriage.

My methodology is indebted to the many critics who have developed a process of “local reading.” This practice combines the methods of anthropology and history by identifying contemporary topical references recurring across the whole discursive span of a culture and then analyzing ways in which a particular text uses them to generate or disperse meaning.⁸ This form of reading is what Clifford Geertz refers to as “thick description:” it seeks important recurring patterns by assembling detailed observations from diverse elements of a culture.⁹ While such a project may not render holistic interpretations of individual texts, it does try to identify significant structural elements in a culture. My method here is also indebted to Arthur Kinney’s excavation of what he calls a text’s “lexia:” the accumulation of associations – political, social, legal, historical, etc. – potentially called up in the mind of a contemporary playgoer by a given word, image, or plot device.¹⁰ Understanding how this “master code” or “matrix” is both used and modified by a particular text opens up new ways of understanding the text and the cultural work it is doing.¹¹ Put another way, “[i]n the Elizabethan-Jacobean theater . . . plays participate ceaselessly in the making as well as the unmasking and readjustment of cultural power.”¹² Webster’s plays, I will show, help undermine the symbolic underpinnings of female rule and thus help create its cultural impossibility.

Other critics have noted ways in which James’ succession was marked by the refiguring of the Queen’s iconography of female royal power. For example, Susan Frye shows that James’

⁸ For the definition of “local reading” as she practices it, and as I seek to emulate, see LEAH S. MARCUS, PUZZLING SHAKESPEARE: LOCAL READING AND ITS DISCONTENTS 1-50, 37-38 (1989).

⁹ See, e.g., CLIFFORD GEERTZ, NEGARA: THE THEATRE STATE IN NINETEENTH CENTURY BALI 98-129 (1980); THE INTERPRETATION OF CULTURES (1973); *Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight*, DAEDALUS 101 1-37 (1972).

¹⁰ See ARTHUR F. KINNEY, LIES LIKE TRUTH: SHAKESPEARE, MACBETH, AND THE CULTURAL MOMENT 1-23 (2001).

¹¹ *Id.* at 274-75.

¹² ALBERT H. TRICOMI, READING TUDOR-STUART TEXTS THROUGH CULTURAL HISTORICISM 1 (1996).

coronation procession into London, which depicted the city as a bride awaiting her groom, “acquired a specifically gendered set of meanings that reverse those of Elizabeth’s entry,” which had presented the city as the Queen’s “teacher, father, and husband.”¹³ Julia Walker has shown how James’ replacement of Elizabeth’s tomb with his mother’s symbolically displaced his relationship with Elizabeth and emphasized his descent from Henry VII.¹⁴ While I agree that James himself specifically reconfigured Elizabeth’s gendered symbolism, I wish to go further and show ways in which this reconfiguration took place at a cultural level broader and deeper than that controlled by the king. Critics have also documented ways in which Elizabeth’s image became a lightning rod for nostalgia and discontent with the Stuart regime in the years after her death.¹⁵ Again, I suggest that this scholarship, while significant, overlooks the ways in which the early years of Jacobean rule saw the dismantling of female power.

In the plays at issue, the heroines, Vittoria Corombola and the Duchess, as sexually desiring subjects, exert a decentering pull on the courts around them. This is threatening to male courtiers, and it ultimately mandates the destruction of the women at its source. This decentering, I argue, reflects the real life effect on the court of Queen Anne and of Arbella Stuart, female figures who stood in the way of the effort of the Jacobean court to reconstitute itself as a strictly masculine domain organized around the patriarchal rule of King James. Ultimately, I will show, Queen Elizabeth, as a female sovereign who required her male courtiers to constitute themselves as the objects of her gaze, is the specter hovering behind the plays. I begin with the exchange between Harington and the King because I believe and hope to show that it exhibits signs of the

¹³ SUSAN FRYE, *ELIZABETH I: THE COMPETITION FOR REPRESENTATION* 32 (1993).

¹⁴ JULIA M. WALKER, *MEDUSA’S MIRRORS: SHAKESPEARE, SPENSER, MILTON AND THE METAMORPHOSIS OF THE FEMALE SELF* 142-155 (1998).

¹⁵ *See, e.g.*, DAVID CRESSY, *BONFIRES AND BELLS: NATIONAL MEMORY AND THE PROTESTANT CALENDAR IN ELIZABETHAN AND STUART ENGLAND* 130-140 (1989); *see generally* JULIA M. WALKER, *THE ELIZABETH ICON: 1603-2003* (2004); JOHN WATKINS, *REPRESENTING ELIZABETH IN STUART ENGLAND: LITERATURE, HISTORY, SOVEREIGNTY* (2002).

symbolic dismantling of Elizabethan power, and I will end with a vignette from the last days of Elizabeth's reign which I think foreshadows this process.

In Part One, I will summarize the changing nature of the court in the early modern period, show how women were affected by those changes, and suggest how a female ruler would have affected this process. In Part Two, I will return to the Harington episode and analyze in detail how it contains elements which begin to unravel Elizabeth's iconography in favor the depiction of an all-male court. In Part Three, I will show how Queen Anne, as center of a "court within the court," Arbella Stuart, as rival claimant to the throne, and the memory of Elizabeth, threatened the recuperation of the male-centered court under James. Part Four will analyze how *The White Devil* and *The Duchess of Malfi* work to undo the symbolism associated with female rule in order to symbolically drive women out of the public sphere and into the private, sequestered sphere of marriage. I will discuss how the imagery provided by legal and conduct manuals of the period – imagery of the silent, figuratively veiled wife - takes the place of the imagery of the female ruler, a process which culminates in Ferdinand's order as he stands over the dead Duchess to "cover her face."

Part I: The Structure of the Early Modern Court

As Joan Kelly Gadol famously showed, the Renaissance brought a "contraction of social and personal options" for women, measured in terms of the regulation of female sexuality, women's economic, political and cultural roles, and ideology about women.¹⁶ She traces this trend to changes in the courtly love tradition, whose Renaissance version, unlike its medieval precursor, attributed courtly love to male princes and courtiers and created dependence in

¹⁶ GADOL, *supra* note 3 at 176.

women.¹⁷ Between the medieval period and the early modern period, royal courts evolved from a coalition of independent vassals who swore allegiance to a king, to a community of professional courtiers, dependant for their livelihoods on the sovereign's largesse.¹⁸ In the feudal state, vassal knights had a significant degree of independence. While they had to pledge allegiance to the king and muster their troops at his command, they had their own base of support, their own lands, castles, and followers, and were capable of posing a military threat to the ruler if not held in check. As feudalism gave way, however, the status of these knights changed. They lost their lands and were reduced to the position of courtly retainers who were dependent on the favor of the king for advancement and even survival. Thus, whereas in the medieval feudal estate, the knight entered freely into a state of vassalage with the king, retaining his sense of autonomy, the courtier of the newly consolidated principality, stripped of his holdings, found himself dependent for survival on the Prince's favor and good will. To win the prince's affection, the courtier now had to groom his appearance and behavior with the sole object of pleasing his master. Balthazar Castiglione's *The Courtier*, an Italian manual for success at court, translated into English in 1561, advises the aspirant to be "pliable:" let his conversation be "pliable . . . with all diligence to get him favor;" he should be "altogether pliable to please [the prince]"¹⁹

Not surprisingly, this repositioning of the male at court had implications for the role of women. The new arrangements made courtiers into objects of the prince's gaze; Castiglione goes so far as to say explicitly that the courtier becomes like a woman in relation to the prince.²⁰

¹⁷ See GADOL, *supra* note 3 at 178-189.

¹⁸ *Id.*

¹⁹ BALDASSARE CASTIGLIONE, *THE BOOK OF THE COURTIER* 123 (Friench Simpson trans., F. Ungar Pub. Co. 1959) (1528).

²⁰ CASTIGLIONE, *supra* note 18 at 125.

For the courtier to retain his illusion of self-determination, he required the woman to be the object of his gaze as he is an object of the Prince's gaze. In a logical extension of this discussion, Castiglione determines that women cannot love as well as men: a woman who experiences sexual love as a subject, rather than an object, of desire, jeopardizes the precarious sexual economy necessary to uphold court structure. She positions herself as the subject of the gaze and men as its objects.

Even in the best of times, being a courtier was nerve-wracking, as is clear in this poem about the ups and downs of competing for favor at court:

Full little knowest thou that hast not tried
What Hell it is in suing long to bide;
To lose good days that might be better spent;
To waste long nights in pensive discontent;
To speed today, to be put back tomorrow;
To feed on hope, to pine with fear and sorrow;
To have thy Prince's grace yet want her Peer's;
To have thy asking, yet wait many years;
To fret thy soul with crosses and with cares;
To eat thy heart through comfortless despairs;
To fawn, to crouch, to wait, to ride, to run,
To spend, to give, to want, to be undone.²¹

As this poem makes clear, the courtier was wholly dependent on the ruler for survival, and so his future was contingent upon his ability to flatter and please. Castiglione advised courtiers to act like reflections of their prince - like what he likes, praise what he praises, scorn what he scorns.²²

Not surprisingly, just as this shift changed the position of men at court, it also had implications for the role of women. In courtly love, women's voices were equal in the love relationship and they were represented as giving love freely.²³ But, as Gadol has shown, if

²¹ EDMUND SPENSER, *Mother Hubbard's Tale*, in EDMUND SPENSER, EDMUND SPENSER'S POETRY: AUTHORITATIVE TEXTS, CRITICISM 255 (Hugh MacLean et al. eds., 1993).

²² CASTIGLIONE, *supra* note 18 at 120.

²³ GADOL, *supra* note 3 at 179-184.

courtiers were the feminized reflections of the prince's moods, then to retain a sense of power and independence, men had to figure women as reflections of themselves.²⁴ Thus, the shift in the conventions of courtly love brought about by the collapse of feudalism revealed a loss of subjectivity on the part of the women. Women were no longer portrayed as desiring subjects who gave love based on their likes and dislikes, but were instead represented as projections and reflections of male desire, reassuringly passive in relation to a fantasy of male power. Such a formulation is what compelled Castiglione to raise the question of whether women could love as well as men. The answer was already inscribed in the new court's social relations: without subjectivity, women were incapable of constancy, instead simply mirroring the desires of one suitor after another.

Into the center of this courtly economy of desire stepped Elizabeth, whose motto was "semper eadem," always the same. She occupied her place at the center as dramatically as possible, as her iconography shows. Elizabeth was the sun, source of light, as in the Ditchley Portrait where a verse behind her states in part: "The Prince of Light. The Sonne." In the Rainbow Portrait this identification of Elizabeth with the source of light is even more explicit, with the Queen causing a rainbow to break out in the heavens. Not only was Elizabeth the center of the court, she occupied an even more exalted place in relation to the cosmos. In the plate in John Case's *Sphaera Civitatis* she holds the position of God in the Ptolemaic universe, above and encompassing the spheres. In an economy where male courtiers figured women as reflections of themselves, occupying positions on the periphery of the cosmos, for a woman ruler to insist that she was not only the center of the court but of the universe as well destabilized the post-feudal courtly economy. Now a woman was at the center of the court demanding to be flattered and

²⁴ See GADOL, *supra*, note 3 at 188-189.

admired by male courtiers. In short, Elizabeth disrupted the sexual economy of the early modern court. Castiglione's prince was now a woman, focus of all gazes, source of all imitation, and origin of all light.

The role of the gaze can be seen in the Petrarchan love tradition. Susan Frye has pointed out how Elizabeth used both the male and female positions in the Petrarchan tradition to assert her power.²⁵ When the longing speaker of the poem is a man, the Queen, as object of desire, is distant and unreachable. When the speaker is a woman, it enables her to emphasize her use of the gaze and with it her power over male subjects. As source of the gaze - admiring or critical but always decisive of a courtier's fate - the Queen re-positioned herself in a place traditionally occupied by men in the courtly world of Petrarchan longing.

Part II: Back to the Closet

To return to Harrington's exchange with the king: this episode exhibits several expressions of male bonding and its concomitant dismemberment of Elizabeth's image. First, the context for the meeting is that of a male courtier who had failed at winning preferment under the female ruler now seeking the favor of the new, male, king in his male centered court. Harrington had pretty much botched the job of getting preferment from Elizabeth.²⁶ Born in 1561, he was godson to the Queen and educated at Cambridge in preparation for a legal career - both attributes which should have served him well at court. But Harrington was not the ideal courtier. He lacked the finesse and ability to

²⁵ See FRYE, *supra* note 12 at 109.

²⁶ For an account of Harrington's life, *see generally* RUTH HUGHEY, JOHN HARRINGTON OF STEPNEY, TUDOR GENTLEMAN: HIS LIFE AND WORKS (1971).

dissimulate in order to please, and had too much of the “incorrigible and losing honesty” which Sir Thomas Hoby mentions in his 1561 translation of Castiglione’s *The Courtier*.²⁷

In 1596, Harington published a pamphlet called *The Metamorphosis of Ajax*, a satire aimed at people and events of the court. Though Elizabeth was initially amused, she became angry when she learned that the work included an attack on her favorite, Leiceister. Harington was banished from court to his country seat at Kelston, where a cousin wrote him a year later that the Queen had a mind to take him back but hesitated for fear it would only inspire him to produce another satire. In 1599, however, he was summoned to accompany Essex on a mission to subdue the Irish rebel Tyrone. The expedition resulted in the disgrace of Essex, but Harington was able to get back into the Queen’s good graces and keep the knighthood Essex had granted him to boot. However, he never prospered through success at court, had financial difficulty, and had to sell some of his inherited land. In short, Harington, like Essex in some ways, had trouble playing the courtier’s game with Elizabeth and suffered as a result. Harington’s feelings toward Elizabeth were mixed; we can only guess at how his resentment at currying favor with a female sovereign compared with the rage and frustration of the rebellious Essex. But Harington admits that he feels fear as well as affection. When the Queen chastised him after the Irish campaign, and ordered him to leave her, he “did not stay to be bidden twice; if all the iryshe rebels had been at my heels, I shoulde not have had better speed for I did

²⁷ BALDASSARE CASTIGLIONE, *THE BOOK OF THE COURTIER* (Thomas Hoby trans., 1561) (Virginia Cox ed., 1994).

now flee from one whom I both loved and feared too.”²⁸ At another point he swears he fears the queen more than he fears Tyrone.²⁹

A hint of Harington’s ambivalence appears in a curious reference in a letter to his wife shortly before the Queen’s death. On December 27, 1602, he wrote to his wife, Lady Mary Harington, about the pitiable physical state of the Queen and her impending death:

I herewith send thee, what I woud god none did know, some ill bodings of the realme and its welfare. Oure deare Queen, my royale godmother, and this state’s natural mother, dothe now beare shew of human informitie, too faste by the evil we shall get by her dethe, and too slowe for that good which shee shall get by her releasement from pains and miserye.³⁰

Immediately after this, he turns to a panegyric in praise of female silence:

Dear Mall, how shall I speake what I have seene, or what I have felt? - thy good silence in these matters emboldens my pen. For, thanks to the swere god of silence they lips do not wanton out of discretion’s path, like the many gossiping dames we coud name who lose their husband’s fast hold in good friends, rather than hold fast their own tongues.³¹

It is interesting that Harington’s distress on the Queen’s death should trigger thoughts about the virtue of female silence. This is not a common theme with him, though it certainly was a truism of the period. Harington himself does not discuss it at any other point; female silence or loquacity does not seem to have been a topic that especially exercised him. But the dying Queen suddenly brings it to the fore.

²⁸ JOHN HARRINGTON, SIR, THE LETTERS AND EPIGRAMS OF SIR JOHN HARRINGTON, TOGETHER WITH THE PRAYSE OF PRIVATE LIFE 45 (Norman McLure ed., 1930).

²⁹ *Id.*

³⁰ *Id.* at 67.

³¹ *Id.* at 68.

In light of Harington's background, it is not surprising that his meeting with James bears the marks of a recuperative assembly of a male society. When the King questions Harington as to his relationship with the Baron, Harington responds that he is related and that "we are branches of the same tree," an assertion which places him in the geneological network of the male aristocracy. Then the king questions him as to his learning in a way which reminds him of his Cambridge tutor – a reference to the all-male community of the university from which women were excluded and in which older students mentored younger males. In offering to "aid his understanding," James further calls upon the image of an all-male community of scholars; indeed one of the ways James cultivated his young male favorites was by tutoring them in Latin. So far, the exchange between king and courtier hints at the re-assembly of the court as an exclusively male enclave. Further remarks, moreover, go further, and begin to unravel the fabric of Elizabeth's image.

James' query as to what "pure white is made of" pulls at the first thread of this fabric. "Pure white" was a symbol in which many of aspects of Elizabeth's self representation converged. Obviously, white is the color of virginity, and Elizabeth's chastity was central to her iconography: it empowered her, as the virgin Queen, to rule. In the speech concluding the 1601 Parliament, she told her listeners that she had "bene content to be a tapere of trewe virgin waxe to wast myself and spend my life that I might giue light and comfort to those that liue under me."³² Susan Frye explains that this image of the Queen as "virgin wax" – i.e., pure white - "manages simultaneously to suggest the power of her chastity, which enables her to shed light; her height above

³².ELIZABETH I: COLLECTED WORKS 347 (Leah Marcus et al. eds., 2000).

“those that liue under me,” which her chastity helps create; and the relation between the chaste queen and her subjects which was necessary for their continued light and warmth.”³³ Elizabeth’s use of virginity in her self-presentation warrants further scrutiny here, because James’ inquiry – “what pure white is made of” – rhetorically heralds a process of “unpacking” the Queen’s iconography, subjecting her symbols’ mystification to scientific inquiry and the demystifying gaze.

Elizabeth depicted her virginity as the source of her autonomy and royal power. As a virgin, she was not defined by her relationship with a man, and therefore could present herself as self-sufficient, having chosen to define herself and to liberate herself from the definitions of, as Susan Frye puts it, “the past, of Parliament, her courtiers and advisors.”³⁴ Her motto, *semper eadem* - “always the same” expressed the idea of her self-definition. Louis Montrose notes how the Queen used her virginity to transform the problem of her gender into a source of power by identifying her body with the realm and imputing inviolability to both.³⁵ Carole Levin has shown how Elizabeth’s virgin image freed her from the possibility of being second in power to a male king, and also from the anxieties and dangers of childbearing and fertility issues so tragically lived out by her sister Mary.³⁶ Leah Marcus has noted how Elizabeth’s unmarried state allowed her to preserve her independence while simultaneously figuring herself as wife to her realm and mother to her subjects.³⁷ James’ inquiry as to the constituents of “pure white” signals the

³³ FRYE, *supra* note 12 at 114.

³⁴ FRYE, *supra* note 12 at 39.

³⁵ Louis Adrian Montrose, *The Elizabethan Subject and the Spenserian Text*, in *LITERARY THEORY/RENAISSANCE TEXTS* 303-340 (Patricia Parker et al. eds., 1990).

³⁶ CAROLE LEVIN, *HEART AND STOMACH OF A KING: ELIZABETH I AND THE POLITICS OF SEX AND POWER* 65 (1994).

³⁷ LEAH S. MARCUS, *PUZZLING SHAKESPEARE: LOCAL READING AND ITS DISCONTENTS* 53 (1988).

disruption of this symbolic convergence. Moreover, it hints that the Queen's nature will now become the object of male scrutiny rather than a source of royal power.

The importance of this last observation becomes apparent in light of the fact that Elizabeth's self presentation simultaneously compelled and deflected the gaze of her subjects.³⁸ Drawn to gaze at her with longing, awe and respect, they were also turned away at a certain point from scrutinizing the ruler's "secret places," places associated with the mystical "arcana imperii." or mysteries of rule which were forbidden to ordinary eyes.³⁹ The gesture James makes here, if implicitly – subjecting these places to scrutiny – begins to undo these "mysteries" of female rule. This process continues in the Duchess of Malfi as the Duchess "secret place" – her sexuality - becomes the object of her brothers' obsessive probing.

It is worth noting another aspect of the symbolism of "pure white:" that of youth. Toward the end of her reign, Elizabeth habitually wore white, a color associated with the younger members of the court, whereas the color usually associated with age – and hence arguably more appropriate for the Queen in her later years - was black.⁴⁰ Thus, white as Elizabeth used it represented the myth of her eternal youth, and the eternal youth of her body politic, as her mortal body aged. In this context, James' inquiry about white, followed by the joke about witches and aging female bodies, converge to suggest that Queen's gender-based mortality and female decrepitude in general. It also implies that the falsely youthful depictions of Elizabeth in her later years had "fooled no one," and asserts the truth about the aging female body. Such a sentiment seems to have been

³⁸ Louis Adrian Montrose, *Spenser and the Elizabethan Political Imaginary*, 69:4 ENG. LIT. HIST. 907, 921 (2002).

³⁹ *Id.*

⁴⁰ ELIZABETH W. POMEROY, *READING THE PORTRAITS OF QUEEN ELIZABETH* 59-60 (1989).

prevalent among young male courtiers in her later years: at once point Essex, angry at being denied some suit, remarked that the Queen's "mind was a crooked as her carcasse."

The King's next query to Harington, about witchcraft, must be seen in this context. His suggestion that Satan turns to older women for his evil purposes can be seen as referring to the aged and "unfeminine" body of the Queen - unfeminine both in having passed time for marriage and childbearing and unnatural in the sense of holding royal power normally reserved for men. Harington's snarky answer reinforces this sense of the unfeminine female body, while also affirming the sense of a male society which treats women as outsiders - existing only for their sexual functions - or in this case only humor - when these functions no longer exist.

This episode's implications can be further illuminated by comparison with a parallel incident involving Queen Elizabeth, a meeting between the Queen and Sir James Melville, ambassador for Mary, Queen of Scots. Resolving to "open a good part of her inward mind" to him, Elizabeth led him into the innermost compartment of her state apartments at Whitehall and showed him her collection of miniature portraits:

She took me to her bedchamber and opened a little cabinet, wherein were diverse little pictures wrapt within paper, and their names written with her own hand upon the papers. Upon the first that she took up was written, "My lord's picture."

I held the candle, and pressed to see that picture so named. She appeared lowth to let me see it; yet my importunity prevailed for a sight thereof, and found it to be the Earl of Leceister's picture.⁴¹

⁴¹ PATRICIA FUMERTON, *CULTURAL AESTHETICS: RENAISSANCE LITERATURE AND THE PRACTICE OF SOCIAL ORNAMENT* 67-68 (1991).

Here, it is striking that Elizabeth interjects the portrait of a man between herself and her interviewer: not only are men welcome in the privy chamber, but, when revealing her “inward mind” to him, she chooses to do so by means of the portrait of her male favorite. This suggests not just the obvious - that Elizabeth was of course not in a position to exclude men from her court - but that there was a male presence even in her innermost space, and that revealing her innermost thoughts involved revealing that male presence. This episode is most useful in comparison to Harington’s interview with James, foregrounding how their shared joke about old women forges an intimate moment (the joke mutually enjoyed by master and subordinate, a risky venture on the part of the servant condescendingly rewarded by the superior’s appreciation). What this incident expresses is that the distinctions between men and women are at least for a moment more important than distinctions among men as to power, rank, wealth, etc. James, the new ruler of a powerful England, shares the intimacy of a “dirty joke” with Harington, a failed and financially insecure courtier anxious about his fate under the new regime. Whereas the moment in Elizabeth’s chamber underlines the presence of men at court, the interview with Harington rhetorically threatens to drive women out of the court.

Part III: Constellations of Women

A long series of biographers has dismissed Anne as frivolous and inconsequential. More recently, however, scholars like Barbara Lewalski and Leeds Barroll have begun to recuperate Anne’s role from a critical history too often willing to

dismiss females as excluded from power and influence.⁴² In *Anna of Denmark, Queen of England*, Barroll credits Anne as masterminding the important cultural innovations long ascribed to the Stuart court.⁴³ I wish to carry this insight further, and suggest that Anne exerted not only aesthetic influences, but also anxiety causing political ones, which harked back to the power of Elizabeth. I will suggest that her pull was strong enough to exert a decentering effect on James' male centered court, and that this, combined with other female-based threats like that of Arbella Stuart and the memory of Elizabeth, caused the anxiety felt in Webster's play.

This decentering effect Anne exerted became manifest before the establishment of the Stuart court in England. So strenuously, for example, did she resist the King's wish to take the newborn Henry away from her and place him with the Earl of Mar for safekeeping that a report sent to Cecil from the Scottish court warned that Scotland was "now constantly divided into two factions, one for the King and another for the Queen."⁴⁴ So threatening was this division, and so equally matched were the factions involved, that another letter from the Scottish court reports at the same time that all the parishes of Scotland were observing a fast "for the amendment of the present danger."⁴⁵ Moreover, of course, Anne's conversion to Catholicism, which was considered serious enough to pose a threat to James' claim to the English throne, created another opposition between the courts of the two rulers.

⁴² See LEEDS J. BARROLL, *ANNA OF DENMARK, QUEEN OF ENGLAND: A CULTURAL HISTORY* (2001); BARBARA KIEFER LEWALSKI, *WRITING WOMEN IN JACOBEAN ENGLAND* (1993).

⁴³ See BARROLL, *supra*, at 2.

⁴⁴ *Id.* at 24.

⁴⁵ *Id.*

In describing Queen Anne's "court," Barroll makes the important point that the term does not designate a physical location, but rather the presence of the royal person at its center.⁴⁶ In other words, the "court" was a metaphysical space, shaped and located by the centripetal force of the ruler around whom it coalesced. When I refer to the decentering force of Anne's court, therefore, I am describing the effect of her presence and its ability to form an alternative center of power which countered that of the King. This counterforce, in turn, had a destabilizing effect on the "official" Jacobean court.

Anne's court created a specifically female arena for power, as opposed to James' assertively male one.⁴⁷ Barroll points out that Elizabeth's rule never created such an arena, since all her councilors and advisors were men. The arrival of Anne, however, opened up a female sphere, as the new Queen gathered ladies around her and as the English noblewomen strove for access and position around the new Consort.⁴⁸ Indeed, Barroll also points out that Anne's court ultimately represented a broader and more diverse segment of the English nobility than did James': while James surrounded himself with Scots, Anne's sphere included relatives of Cecil, the Howards, the wife of the Earl of Suffolk, and the wife of the Earl of Arundel.⁴⁹

In the masques she put on, Anne was most able to present herself and her coterie to the world. In an image that will be significant in discussion of *The White Devil*, these performances were renowned for their display of the court ladies decked out in sumptuous gowns and jewels. The Venetian Ambassador said of the performance of *The Masque of Beauty*: "I must touch upon the splendour of the spectacle which was worthy

⁴⁶ *Id.* at 38.

⁴⁷ *Id.* at 40.

⁴⁸ *Id.* at 36-73.

⁴⁹ *Id.*

of her Majesty's greatness. . . . [W]hat beggared all else and possibly exceeded the public expectation was the wealth of pearls and jewels that adorned the queen and her ladies, so abundant and splendid that in everyone's opinion no other court could have displayed such pomp and riches."⁵⁰ Indeed, the French Ambassador was so offended at not having been invited, that, as recompense, James invited him to a private dinner with him alone.⁵¹ This gesture made things worse, however: the Ambassador angrily refused, expressing offense that a merely private event should be thought to make up for the lost opportunity to participate in "un spectacle et une solemnite publique."⁵²

As the above example suggests, in the performance of her masques, Anne had an effect on foreign relations as well.⁵³ For example, the 1603 New Year's celebrations were to include a King's masque, *The Orient Knights*, and a Queen's masque, *The Vision of the Twelve Goddesses*.⁵⁴ Because of the importance of treating the French and Spanish envoys with careful evenhandedness, the French Ambassador was invited to the King's masque and the Spanish to the Queen's.⁵⁵ Such a distribution of honors did not appear to the recipients as equal treatment, however: the Spaniard "thinks he hath carried it away by being first feasted . . . and invited to the greatest masque."⁵⁶ The French envoy made "unmannerly expostulations with the king and for a few days troubled all the court;" but Queen Anne made the final decision. She flatly refused to change the invitations, and the Spanish Ambassador attended her masque with the Polish Ambassador and "their whole

⁵⁰ *Id.* at 109.

⁵¹ *See id.* at 111.

⁵² *See id.*

⁵³ *See id.* at 88.

⁵⁴ *See id.*

⁵⁵ *Id.* at 88.

⁵⁶ *Id.* .

trains.”⁵⁷ In the 1607 incident with the French Ambassador, when James’ remonstrations to Anne failed to change her guest list, the envoy complained to the Duke of Lennox that the King seemed not to be master in his own house.⁵⁸

The masques also exerted political influence through the dancing which took place after the performance. In the third part of the masque, the female performers stepped into the audience to take partners - not their husbands - whose selection was politically motivated. Those invited seem to have been people the Queen had decided to promote. In the first masque, in 1603-04, the Queen’s dancers chose as partners, in addition to some already close to James, half a dozen others. By doing so, as Barroll points out, “the queen had also appropriated the power to add - at least in these circumstances - half a dozen other nobles to those favored by James.”⁵⁹

One of the ways Anne “centered” herself in herself rather than as a reflection of James was in asserting her royal lineage and the status it gave her. At the time of her fight with James over the custody of her son Henry, given into the care of the hated Earl of Mar, she invoked her blood as the basis for her rights. James was predictably infuriated, and thundered back that

I thank God I carrie that love and respecte unto you quich by the law of God and nature I ought to do to my wyfe and mother of my children, but not for that ye are a king’s daughter, for quhither ye waire a King’s or a cook’s daughter ye must be all alike to me, being once my wyfe . . . I beseache you excuse my rude plainness in this; for casting up of your birthe is a needless impertinent argument to me.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ *Id.*

⁵⁸ *Id.*

⁵⁹ *Id.* at 95.

⁶⁰ LEWALSKI, *supra* note 40 at 22.

Anne set up her own court which, after 1605 when her sixth child, Mary, died of a fever, resided in her many residences away from court: Somerset House, Hampton Court, Oatlands, and Greenwich. Lewalski notes that as early as 1605, Dudley Carleton described the Queen's court as a competing locus of power and influence, mentioning in a letter that "the Lords of the Council are tyed to attendance at the Queen's Court, and they have a letter from the King to be more diligent in his affairs."⁶¹ In 1614, John Chamberlain wrote to Carleton in a similar vein, that "This day sevenight the Lord Roxborough married Mistris Jane Drommond at Somersethouse or Quenes court (as yt must now be called). The King tarried there til Saterdag after dinner; the entertainment was great and cost the Quene as she sayes above 3000."⁶² James himself jokingly refers to Anne's circle as a "Feminine Court."⁶³

Other developments bolster the idea that that the Queen's court represented an alternate center of power. For example, the early years of the seventeenth century saw the creation of the Queen's Court of Chancery, which had jurisdiction over issues concerning the Queen's estates.⁶⁴ Moreover, Anne insisted, at the very beginning of the reign, on choosing her own court officers, and refused to install Sir George Carew – James' choice - as her Lord Chamberlain, and rejected for her inner circle most of the women who had served Elizabeth, replacing them with younger women she had taken a

⁶¹ *Id.* at 26.

⁶² THE LETTERS OF JOHN CHAMBERLAIN I:507 (Norman Egbert McLure, ed., 1939).

⁶³ LEWALSKI, *supra* note 40 at 28.

⁶⁴ See Clare McManus, *Introduction: The Queen's Court*, in *WOMEN AND CULTURE AT THE COURT OF THE STUART QUEENS 4* (Clare McManus, ed., 2003). Interestingly, there was no "Queen's Bench" under Elizabeth; the courts retained their traditional designation, the King's Bench.

liking to.⁶⁵ Her motto, “My power is from the most high,” suggested that she had her own direct connection to authority not linked to her husband.⁶⁶

Queen Anne’s masques were also a site where females were placed at the center of the action. For one thing, the actors were women - dressed up on Elizabeth’s old gowns, even - in contrast to the public theaters, where boys played all the female roles.⁶⁷ Moreover, it is significant that Anne chose as her persona Pallas Athena. As Lewalski notes, the figure of the virgin goddess of wisdom, rather than the more obvious choices of Juno or Venus, would have brought Queen Elizabeth, an image of female power, to the minds of the contemporary audience.⁶⁸ Moreover, Pallas wore the head of Medusa on her breastplate. Medusa, the Gorgon, in Greek mythology, punished the male gaze by turning men she looked at into stone. This symbolism strongly indicates that, rather than making women the focus of the gaze, the masques place women at the center as gazing subjects who turn the men in the audience into objects.

In light of these symbols, it is not surprising that this masque aroused unease and what Daniel called “sinister interpretation.”⁶⁹ As Stephen Orgel has demonstrated, the court masque was more than entertainment: it was enacted the way the court saw itself.⁷⁰ The masque was as much a performance of the aristocratic society at court as it was of the themes of the masque – and those as well expressed the court’s self image. Because of the nature of the masque at court, it seems reasonable that, as Lewalski speculates, that this may have been because “the spectators had some ill-defined but uneasy sense of

⁶⁵ *See id.*

⁶⁶ *See id.* at 21.

⁶⁷ LEWALSKI, *supra* note 40 at 33.

⁶⁸ *Id.*

⁶⁹ *Id.*

⁷⁰ STEPHEN ORGEL, *THE ILLUSION OF POWER: POLITICAL THEATER IN THE ENGLISH RENAISSANCE 10-11* (1975).

currents of power radiating from the Queen rather than the King.”⁷¹ I want to add that the symbols - Elizabeth’s clothing, the figure of Pallas - conveyed very specifically the most threatening elements of a female-centered court, and the Elizabethan one at that - the idea that men were objects of the female gaze, and thus dependant on pleasing that gaze. Also, the head of Medusa implied that women wield a potent gaze.

Anne’s dress and portraiture reveal other ways in which she asserted her independence along gendered lines. A 1617 portrait of the Queen in by Paul van Somer shows her standing in front of her own palace of Oatlands dressed in a hunting outfit with short hair, and broad brimmed hat, an outfit which Stephen Orgel describes as potentially “man-like and unseemly.”⁷² Orgel goes on to note that the portrait coincided with James’ fulminations against cross dressing, and speculates that the Queen’s masculine attire “would be an index to a much more dangerous kind of independence.”⁷³

Another powerful female figure who could have caused anxiety was Princess Elizabeth, who, after her marriage, took on the role of warrior queen in her defense of international Protestantism.⁷⁴ In this context, many tracts and tributes at her wedding to the Elector of Palatine portrayed her as “Elizabeth Rediviva,” Elizabeth brought back to life.⁷⁵ Thomas Heywood’s *Marriage Triumph* compares the Princess with Elizabeth, saying “you equall her in vertues fame/From whom you received your name.”⁷⁶ When she joined her husband in Prague, John Harrison wrote that she was

Lyke an other *Queene Elizabeth* revived also agayne in her,
the only *Phoenix* of the world . . . shewing herself like that *virago at*

⁷¹ *Id.* at 30.

⁷² STEPHEN ORGEL, IMPERSONATIONS: THE PERFORMANCE OF GENDER IN SHAKESPEARE’S ENGLAND 84 (1996).

⁷³ *Id.*

⁷⁴ *See id.* at 37.

⁷⁵ LEWALSKI, *supra* note 40 at 54.

⁷⁶ *Id.*

*Tilburie in eightie eight: an other Queene Elizabeth, for so now she is: and what more she may be in time, or her royall yssue, is in gods hands to dispose to his glorie, and the good of his church . . .*⁷⁷

In her role as defender of the international Protestant cause, Elizabeth inspired gestures of loyalty and allegiance which resembled those made to a king. In 1621, at Christmas, the gallants of the Inns of Court enacted such a ritual, “whereat his Majestie was highly displeased.”⁷⁸ The Lieutenant of the Middle Temple, at supper with thirty other members,

took a cup of wine in one hand and held his sword drawn in the other, and so began a health to ‘the distressed Lady Elizabeth,’ and having drunk, kissed his sword and laying his hand upon it, took an oath to live and die in her service; then delivered the cup and sword to the next, and so the health and ceremony went around.⁷⁹

Conversely, in a move which must have pleased James even less than the fealty ceremony, contemporary cartoonists expressed popular anger over his failure to back the Protestant cause by showing him with empty pockets and an empty scabbard.⁸⁰ In contrast to the loyalty inspired by the martial “virago” Elizabeth, which endows men with the courage and passion to draw their swords, James’ pacifism and desertion of the Protestant cause deprives him of his.

Another threatening female figure whose specter I locate behind Webster’s plays was Arbella Stuart. I am not the first to detect her presence: Sara Jayne Steen argues the contemporary audiences would have perceived in the Duchess’ plight a reference to

⁷⁷ *Id.*

⁷⁸ *Id.*

⁷⁹ *Id.* at 65.

⁸⁰ *Id.* at 63.

Arbella, and that some would have been sympathetic to both.⁸¹ Charles Forker also notes similarities in the play's plot to Arbella's secret marriage and elopement.⁸² Neither, however, goes farther than to point out resemblances between the play's plot and Arbella's real-life and doomed romance with Edward Seymour.

Arbella's quite colorable claim to the throne stemmed from her descent from Henry VII's daughter Margaret's second marriage with the Earl of Angus, while James' claim arose from Margaret's first marriage to James IV of Scotland.⁸³ Moreover, Arbella had been born in England, while James' alien birth in Scotland formed, under the Alien Act, a potential bar to his succession.⁸⁴ Her Aunt, Bess of Harwick, had her educated as a potential successor to the throne,⁸⁵ and the first time Elizabeth met her, she admonished those present "Look well at her, for she is not so unimportant as you may think. One day she will be even as I am, and will be Lady Mistress, but I shall have been before her."⁸⁶ In 1594, a Jesuit missionary wrote a pamphlet setting out the various claimants to the throne including Arbella and the strength of their respective claims, enraging Elizabeth. Both Elizabeth and James recognized the threat Arbella posed: Elizabeth banished her from court and played politics with her marriage prospects; James brought his cousin back to court, but, wary of her claim to the throne, denied her any independence, refusing to return her estates or allow her to marry.⁸⁷ Ultimately, her relationship with the King was severely damaged by the Bye Plot and the Main Plot, two conspiracies to marry

⁸¹ See Sara Jayne Steen, *The Crime of Marriage: Arbella Stuart and the Duchess of Malf*, 22:1 SIXTEENTH CENTURY JOURNAL 61 (1991).

⁸² See CHARLES R. FORKER, *SKULL BENEATH THE SKIN: THE ACHIEVEMENT OF JOHN WEBSTER* 299-300 (1986).

⁸³ RUTH NORRINGTON, *IN THE SHADOW OF THE THRONE: THE LADY ARBELLA STUART* 15-16 (2002).

⁸⁴ *Id.* at 16.

⁸⁵ *Id.* at 32

⁸⁶ *Id.* at 41.

⁸⁷ See generally *id.* at 43-59, 73-96.

Arbella to a Catholic prince and put the two on the English throne through foreign intervention.⁸⁸

In 1602, Arbella, having been kept in virtual isolation for years by her Aunt, the formidable Bess of Hardwick, gave those anxious about her claim to the throne further cause to think that their fears were well-founded. She sent one of her servants to the Earl of Hertford to propose marriage between herself and his sixteen-year old grandson, Edward Seymour, the only other serious contender for the throne besides James.⁸⁹ Unfortunately for her, the Earl, having learned his lesson during eight years in the Tower for his own clandestine marriage, promptly told Cecil what Arbella proposed.⁹⁰

Barely escaping the Tower through either a genuine or feigned mental breakdown failed to deter her, however, from plotting, eight years later, to marry William Seymour, Edward's younger brother, again in an apparent attempt for some chance at the throne. Again, the plot was uncovered, and Arbella confessed and begged the King's pardon.⁹¹ After this, she was allowed to return to court, but on June 22 secretly married Seymour. The marriage was discovered after seventeen days: William was thrown into the Tower and Arbella was put into the custody of William Perry at Lambeth. This time James was adamant, dismissing Anne's intervention on Arbella's behalf by saying that Arbella "had eaten of the forbidden fruit."⁹² Arbella eventually managed to arrange conjugal visits with William in the Tower, and in September claimed to have become pregnant. When a doctor reported that it was a false pregnancy, James decided once and for all to separate

⁸⁸ *See id.* at 79.

⁸⁹ *See id.* at 71.

⁹⁰ *See id.*

⁹¹ *See id.* at 84.

⁹² *See id.* at 111.

the couple. The Venetian ambassador reported that James decided to exile her to Durham “to secure himself against dissatisfaction settling around her.”⁹³ Arbella managed to delay the trip long enough to plan an escape with William to the continent, disguising herself as a man and making it as far as the Channel, but was captured before she landed, and sent to the Tower. She lived there until her death, four years later. William, no longer considered a threat with Arbella out of the way, lived in peace on the continent for several years.

Though Arbella was never brought to trial - as she begged to be - Francis Bacon summarized the charges against her at the Countess of Shrewsbury’s trial on June 30, 1612:

She married without the King’s consent, which had been a neglect even to a mean parent. But being to our Sovereign, and she standing so near to his majesty as she doth, and then choosing such a condition as it pleased her to choose . . . it was not unlike the case of Mr. Seymour’s grandmother [Catherine Grey] . . . That this flight or escape into foreign parts might have been seed of trouble to this state, is the matter whereof the conceit of a vulgar person is not incapable.

For although my lady should have put on a mind to continue her loyalty, as nature and duty did bind her; yet when she was in another sphere, she must have moved in the motion of that orb, and not of the planet itself. And God forbid that the King’s felicity should be so little, as he should not have envy and enviers enough in foreign parts.⁹⁴

Finally, the specter of Elizabeth, archetype of the female rule, hovers behind these plays. The aspects of Elizabeth’s iconography which are important to understanding the

⁹³ *See id.* at 88.

⁹⁴ LEWALSKI, *supra* note 40 at 63.

plays are her self presentation as a source of light, and her simultaneous attraction of the gaze to her person simultaneous deflection of the gaze from her “secret places.”

Part IV: The Plays

The heroines of *The White Devil* and *The Duchess of Malfi* are among the most problematic on the Jacobean stage. Each of these women performs actions which set off a string of repercussions finally leading to their deaths. Vittoria, in *The White Devil*, takes a lover and is implicated in the murder of her husband; the widowed Duchess in *The Duchess of Malfi* takes a second husband from a lower social class against her brothers' wishes. What is problematic about these two protagonists is that the magnitude and devastation of their actions set in motion do not seem proportionate to what the women actually do. Vittoria, accused of murder, seems guilty only of having had a dream which could have been read by her lover as incentive for the crime; the Duchess' remarriage, though not clearly sanctioned by Webster, is certainly not clearly condemned.

Several important readings of the Duchess of Malfi have addressed the nature of the Duchess' transgression.⁹⁵ Theodora Jankowski sees it as a fatal conflict between the Duchess' body natural and her body politic.⁹⁶ She argues- correctly, I believe - that Webster initially presents the Duchess as a political figure and sovereign, and that, through her marriage to Antonio, he shows this public, political figure in conflict with the “private” self who chooses Antonio, her social inferior, as a mate.⁹⁷ Jankowski also reveals in the play the results of the conflict between a discourse of the woman's body as

⁹⁵ For recent criticism of the play, *see generally* NEW CASEBOOKS: THE DUCHESS OF MALFI (Dympna Callaghan ed., 2000).

⁹⁶ *See* THEODORA JANKOWSKI, WOMEN IN POWER IN THE EARLY MODERN DRAMA 147 (1992).

⁹⁷ *Id.* at 168-69.

the property of her male relatives to dispose of as they see fit, and one which “mandates a woman’s free choice as a matter of moral necessity.”⁹⁸ In the Duchess’ pregnancy, Jankowski sees her “failure to consider the implications her changing shape will have upon her subjects” by diverging from the acceptable confines of the immutable male body.⁹⁹

Though Jankowski contrasts the Duchess “changing shape” with Elizabeth’s self presentation as virginal and thus immutable, she stops before discussing ways this image of the pregnant “body politic” undoes the figure of the female ruler. I will argue that this is exactly the social “work” of this play, and that in doing so, it pursues the logic of the symbolic equation of the ruler’s body with the realm to its disastrous conclusion. I also agree that “the curious act V . . . attempts to contain all the subversive aspects of the Duchess’ rule and restore patriarchal order,” and that its success is dubious at best.¹⁰⁰ Indeed, I argue that the echo from the Duchess’ grave in the last scene represents a failure to entirely dismantle the image of the female ruler - specifically, the image of Elizabeth. I argue that the play must be more closely tied to specific Elizabethan iconography, and that such an analysis will reveal how not only the dead Queen Elizabeth, but also the living Queen Anne and Arbella Stuart, with their decentering effect, hover behind the play.

I also agree with Mary Beth Rose’s interpretation that the play enacts an attempt to “draw the two domains [public and private] together and to confer upon them equal

⁹⁸ *Id.* at 171.

⁹⁹ *Id.* at 176.

¹⁰⁰ *Id.* at 181.

distinction,” and that “its failure provides the primary tragic material for the play.”¹⁰¹ However, I believe there is more at stake here than the relative status of public and private: the play uses the dismantling of Elizabethan iconography to *remove* women from the public sphere. This is why I reject readings which focus on the Duchess’ maternal body as the center of the tragedy, and see the play as excoriating the “paternal authority” which represses it.¹⁰² My point is that both the maternal and the political reside in the Duchess and cannot be reconciled – not because of the machinations of patriarchal power, but as the result of a historically specific cultural shift.

Another important reading of gender in the play is Leonard Tennenhouse’s. In *Power on Display*, he connects the Duchess’ sexual transgression and punishment to the Jacobean court’s constitution of itself as a pure, aristocratic community.¹⁰³ He argues that Elizabethan comedy allowed for the aristocratic community to appear open and inclusive, while remaining, in fact, pure, while the Jacobean stage allows the closing of the gap “between the aristocratic body and that of the people” in order to show that “such a transgression produces disease and obscenity.”¹⁰⁴ For Tennenhouse, the Duchess’ subversive desire for Antonio is monstrous because in expressing it she “embodies male desire.”¹⁰⁵ In acting as a desiring subject, female figures like the Duchess “obscure within themselves the boundary differentiating what belongs to the body politic and what must be kept outside.”¹⁰⁶ In a similar vein, Allison Findlay finds the play’s tragic course

¹⁰¹ MARY BETH ROSE, *THE EXPENSE OF SPIRIT: LOVE AND SEXUALITY IN ENGLISH RENAISSANCE DRAMA* 162 (1988).

¹⁰² See e.g., TRICOMI *supra* note 11 at 142, 150.

¹⁰³ LEONARD TENNENHOUSE, *POWER ON DISPLAY* 116-17 (1986)

¹⁰⁴ *Id.* at 117.

¹⁰⁵ *Id.* at 119.

¹⁰⁶ *Id.* at 120.

in the fact that “for the noble elite, female sexuality determined ownership of property and blood” resulting in “rigorous enclosure of the female body[.]”¹⁰⁷ Again, I wish to connect this insight about the play more closely with the figures of Elizabeth, Anne and Arbella Stuart, and to show how this “desiring subject” decenters the recuperative male society of the Jacobean court.

A significant number of feminist critics see the Duchess as an at least partially triumphant heroine who manages to assert her independence and desire. Emily C. Bartels, for example, describes the Duchess as exemplifying, in her defiance of her brothers, the possibilities of self assertion available to her within existing circumscription.¹⁰⁸ Others see Webster as using contemporary discourse about women against itself in order to suggest the possibility of an alternate view. In this vein, Lori Schroeder Haslem argues that Webster introduces cultural stereotypes about the female body and pregnancy early in the play only to undermine them by cultivating sympathy for the Duchess and her condition.¹⁰⁹ And Judith Haber sees the play as Webster’s attempt to re-imagine “speech sexuality and space . . . in feminine terms” by foregrounding the illusory nature of male purity and presenting a benevolent new possibility in the Duchess’ mode of behavior.¹¹⁰ I think there is something to all of these approaches. I believe, however, that without historicizing this play in the post-Elizabethan context which I have been describing, it is impossible to see the historical process at work in it and to understand the cultural work it is doing.

¹⁰⁷ ALLISON FINDLAY, A FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE ON RENAISSANCE DRAMA 100 (1999).

¹⁰⁸ See Emily C. Bartels, *Strategies of Submission: Desdemona, the Duchess, and the Assertion of Desire*, 36 STUDIES IN ENGLISH LITERATURE 417, 422-23 (1996).

¹⁰⁹ See Lori Schroeder Haslem, *Troubled with the Mother: Longings, Purgings and the Maternal Body in Bartholomew Fair and the Duchess of Malfi*, 92:4 MODERN PHILOLOGY 438, 457 (1995).

¹¹⁰ Judith Haber, *My Body Bestow Upon My Women: The Space of the Feminine in the Duchess of Malfi*, 18 RENAISSANCE STUDIES 220 (1987).

I argue that the characters' crimes consist of disrupting the economy of the Jacobean court by placing female figures at the center of the court and at the origin of the gaze. The punishments meted out in these plays function much as did Harington's meeting with James: they work to displace the female as the center and to reinscribe the geography of the court as a masculine enclave. Further, I argue that the specters behind Vittoria and the Duchess are those of females who threatened to disrupt this displacement - Queen Anne and Arbella Stuart - and the one whose presence had made it necessary - Queen Elizabeth. In the end, they are obscured behind the married woman's veil.

A. *The White Devil*

In The White Devil (1610), the figure of Vittoria Corombola serves as a kind of magnet for symbolic attributes of female power. She sets out to cuckold her husband, Camillo, with her brother, Flamineo, playing the part of panderer. In the process, she manages to incite – whether deliberately or not is unclear – her lover to murder her husband. Her crimes, like the remarriage of the Duchess in the *Duchess of Malfi*, send shock waves of anxiety through the world of Webster's court and beyond. Since Vittoria is sometimes considered a first draft of the figure of the Duchess in the later play, I will examine aspects of her presentation before we move on to consider the less apparently culpable heroine of Malfi.

Throughout the play, sexual anxiety is couched in the language of jewels, glass and magnets. Assessing Vittoria's sexual worth, Flamineo rates her "a goodly foil" (i.e., setting) but inadequately matched – "covered by yon counterfeit diamond" (i.e., Camillo, her husband) (I.ii.142). Simultaneously flattering and mocking, he tells Camillo he is

“the adamant shall draw her to you” (I.ii.170). At stake here is who will occupy the position of sexual centrality, who will own the gaze which fixes the locations of the objects around it. Flamineo’s flattery makes Camillo a laughingstock because he in fact is a “counterfeit diamond,” in other words, because he is not a genuine source of light, and concomitantly, cannot compel sexual attraction. By the same token, Flamineo makes fun of him by calling him an adamant: it is exactly the sexual power to draw others to him that he lacks. The question here is nothing less than where royal power resides: who is the center around whom others revolve, who is the sun whose light is reflected.

Critics have long recognized Vittoria’s power. Fredson Thayer Bowers says “[i]t is her play, and she invests it with a quality of magnificence to which no audience can be cold.”¹¹¹ To clarify how the language of light and jewels implicates questions of royal power and the structure of the court, I will draw upon Elizabethan portraiture, specifically, the Rainbow Portrait by Isaac Oliver, painted about 1600, to show how Elizabeth’s iconography used the images of the sun, light and jewels to delineate power. The portrait shows Elizabeth dressed in a gown the color of the sun¹¹² decorated with wildflowers, signifying Astraea. Her cloak is covered with eyes and ears, indicating that she is all-knowing and all-seeing; the crescent shaped jewel above her crown evokes Cynthia, goddess of the moon, and the jeweled snake on her arm with the heart shaped ruby in its mouth symbolizes the control of the passions through wisdom. What interests me here, however, is the rainbow the Queen clasps in her right hand.

¹¹¹ FREDSON THAYER BOWERS, *ELIZABETHAN REVENGE TRAGEDY: 1587-1642* 181 (1959).

¹¹² Mary C. Erler, *Sir John Davies and the Rainbow Portrait of Queen Elizabeth*, 84:4 *MODERN PHILOLOGY* 359, 369 (1987).

The Queen holds the rainbow at its crest; one end seems to spring from between her legs and the other lands in the darkness to her right. An inscription above it, also in the darkness, reads, “Non sine sole iris,” or “there is no rainbow without the sun.” All around her figure is darkness, but her figure seems to give off a golden light. In other words, she is figured as the sun, the source of light, which creates the rainbow, the reflection of that light. No matter how bright the rainbow seems, the picture and the inscription remind us that it is a mere reflection of the source of real light. There is a sexual component here as well. Daniel Fischlin suggests that if there is a masturbatory component in the way the Queen’s left index finger is “inserted in one of the mantle’s folds,” it alludes to her “sexual aloofness, itself a metonymy for her political uniqueness.”¹¹³ He goes on to connect this allusion with Elizabeth’s motto, “semper eadem,” as a figure “around whom political and sexual autonomy are gathered like the folds of her mantle.”¹¹⁴ The confluence of rainbow, pearls, and the folds of the cloak at the Queen’s genitals suggests that she is source of more than light, indeed, of life itself. They also indicate her autonomy and self-sufficiency, and emphasize that, unlike Camineo, she is a genuine source of light, able at once to draw people to her and keep them at a distance.

Vittoria, like Elizabeth, resists the courtier’s objectifying gaze, and the question of reflection and illumination is further complicated in the next scene. Vittoria’s putative lover presents her with a jewel which he instructs her to “wear ... lower” – to which the now eavesdropping Flamineo smirks, “That’s better, she must wear his jewel lower” (I. ii.

¹¹³ Daniel Fischlin, *Political Allegory, Absolutist Ideology, and the Rainbow Portrait of Queen Elizabeth*, 50 *RENAISSANCE QUARTERLY* 175, 186 (1997).

¹¹⁴ *Id.*

225-7). At first glance, the jewel “worn lower” seems like a simple double entendre about sexual possession. But in fact it is more ambiguous, as Elizabeth’s portraiture will once again illuminate. A jewel “worn lower” was part of the iconography of the Virgin Queen. In her Armada Portrait by John Gower (1588), as well as in the Hardwick Portrait (1599), she wears a large pearl in the same place that Henry VIII, in a painting by Holbein, had worn an imposing codpiece. In the Queen’s portrait the viewer’s gaze is at once drawn to the jewel and deflected away from it to the other pearl in her hair, a visual circuit which symbolically links her majesty with her inviolability. At the Queen’s right hand is a mermaid, a creature who entices men into the sea with sexual promise, then disappoints them with a glimpse of her scaly lower half before leaving them to drown. Vittoria’s body, like the painted figure of the Queen, both compels the sexual gaze and turns it away, refusing to submit to interrogation or ownership. Thus the figure of Vittoria embodies qualities associated with Elizabeth, and with female power.

In Act IV Vittoria is put on trial for murdering her husband. In fact, the murder was committed by her lover, Bracciano and her brother, Flamineo; her “guilt” lies in the fact that she told Bracciano a dream which, though ambiguous, may have been read as instigation for the killing. What guilt, then, makes her, instead of the “real killers,” object of the accusation of murder? Tellingly, one of the charges leveled against her is that she has established her own court in rivalry with the official court of the Duke:

Who knows now how . . .
Her gates were choked with coaches, and her rooms
Outbrav’d the stars with several kinds of lights
When she did counterfeit a princes’ court?
(II. ii. 72-5)

At this point, we can see how similar the “gates ... choked with coaches” sounds to descriptions of Anne’s court, and how the image of rooms which “outbraved the stars” calls to mind Elizabeth as a source of light. Her accuser *wants* Vittoria’s court with its “several kinds of lights” to be “counterfeit;” this is the same derogatory adjective which describes Camillo’s sexual ineffectiveness. There is a connection between Camillo’s impotence and the impotence of a court decentered by a royal female’s “several kinds of light:” in both cases, a female has commandeered the center and the gaze.

The lawyer at the trial also accuses Vittoria of being “diversivolent,” a word coined by Webster and not found outside his work. Etymologically it contains the sense of tearing things asunder, creating chaos – similarly to the etymology of the word “devil” of the play’s title, whose origin is a Greek verb meaning to pull things apart, breed chaos. As an alternate source of the gaze, Vittoria decenters and creates chaos just like the devil.

The meaning of the word “devil” is further illuminated by Vittoria’s lover, Bracciano’s, accusation that, having (he thinks) been unfaithful to him, she is “the devil in crystal” (IV. ii. 97). A contemporary idiom for being cheated, this phrase evokes the horror of looking in the mirror and seeing someone other than yourself. As female in the new courtly economy, Vittoria’s role is to reflect the male courtier back at himself (as he in turn reflects the prince). As we have seen, Elizabeth disrupted this system by demanding that her courtiers reflect and respond to her, and Anne likewise refused to be a reflection of James. What is threatening about Vittoria, and what she shares with images of Elizabeth, is her embodiment of a subjectivity which removes her from the locus of the object which reflects Bracciano’s own image back to him. Instead, she is a desiring subject who baffles his interrogatory gaze – and, by extension, who can direct her gaze at

someone else. In his rage Bracciano tells her they will be “as differing as two adamants” (IV. ii. 93), expressing the impossibility of a relationship where one term is not an object in relation to the other.

Both the Duke’s and Camillo’s powerlessness, then, stem from the fact that they are not sources of political reflection or subjects of the sexual gaze – instead they fear that they are objects of the gaze – of women, of someone more powerful – and themselves mere reflections. Both sexual passion and political confusion are described in terms of loss of perspective. Flamineo describes sexual passion to Camillo as a state where “as men at sea think land and trees and ships go that way they go, so heaven and earth shall seem to go your voyage” (I. ii. 156-8). Similarly, Castiglione describes old men who have not got wind of the constellations of the new court as men at sea who think the land is moving instead of themselves. Both states involve a dangerous lack of orientation to where the center of the universe really lies. As Vittoria’s mother – the play’s voice of virtue – puts it: “The lives of princes should like dialls [sundials] move” (I. ii. 285) – in other words, not at all. Her metaphor implies that even the sun, the recently discovered center of the universe, moves while princes stand still and mark its passage. This, again, reminds us of Elizabeth, the “unmoved mover,”¹¹⁵ center of the court and the universe.

The play culminates in suicide and murder. In the final scene, Flamineo, enraged that Vittoria won’t share her wealth with him, produces what he claims to be a casket of family jewels which in reality contains pistols with which he threatens to shoot her. The imagery has become deadly: the jewels have become not only sources of light, but of life

¹¹⁵ Andrew Belsey & Catherine Belsey, *Icons of Divinity: Portraits of Elizabeth I*, in *RENAISSANCE BODIES: THE HUMAN FIGURE IN ENGLISH CULTURE C. 1540-1660* 11-35, 31 (1990).

and death. Vittoria tricks Flamineo with a phony plan for mutual suicide and shoots him, exulting:

This thy death
Shall make me like a blazing ominous star
Look up and tremble.

(I.vi.129-31)

This language asserts that Vittoria is a source of light, and once again invokes images of Elizabeth and Anne, and female rule in general.

But Flamineo, having tricked Vittoria with an unloaded pistol, jumps up unhurt. At this point, the Duke and his followers arrive to exact justice from both brother and sister. To the end, Vittoria insists on her right to self-determination, her usurpation of the princely role now made explicit: she welcomes death as “Princes do some great ambassadors.” While the problems posed by this play are resolved here in slaughter, Flamineo gives a hint as to how the issues could be further developed. Rising unwounded after Vittoria thinks she has killed him, he rails at the faithlessness of women:

O men
that lie upon your death beds and are haunted
With howling wives, n'er trust them; they'll remarry
Ere the worm pierce your winding sheet:

(V.vi.153-5)

These lines provide the link to the Duchess of Malfi, and show why the figure of the remarrying widow was one through which anxieties about female rule could be played out. The remarrying widow, as we shall see, by outliving one man and setting her gaze on another rather than continuing to reflect the first one, laid a claim to the same form of subjectivity as the female queen: the subjectivity of the rule who stands at the

center of the court and of the universe, and makes men around her the objects of her gaze while both compelling and deflecting theirs.

Vittoria is a threatening character who must be destroyed because she is presented, literally, as a source of light. Like Elizabeth before her, she destabilizes the economy of the Renaissance court, threatening both the status of the Prince as source of all imitation, and the self-image of courtiers who, because they are objectified by the Prince's gaze must objectify women. Her destruction contributes the recuperation of the male centered court. However, the *real* threat, Vittoria – “blazing, ominous star” – outliving both husband, lover and brother, has been averted. In *The Duchess of Malfi* it is the starting point.

B. The Duchess of Malfi

1. The Decentered Court

The very first scene of “The Duchess of Malfi” reveals a decentered court as the setting for the Duchess' sexual transgression. Antonio, her secretary, has just returned to Italy from a visit to France, and praises its government, to the detriment, we soon see, of the Italian:

I admire it;
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, which he sweetly terms
His Master-piece, the work of Heaven,
Consid'ring duly that a Prince's court
Is like a common fountain, whence should flow
Pure silver drops in general. But if't chance
Some curs'd example poison't near the head
Death and disease throughout the whole land spread.

(I. i. 4-15)

Antonio describes what is missing in the Italian court – a source, a fountainhead. The clear-flowing fountain was a common Renaissance metaphor for good government, and one which links stable rule with other social structures such as the family. According to *The Carecloth*, an early seventeenth-century marriage manual, sanctified marriage is also a fountain from which “flow all the clear streams of legitimate children of whom alone all good and worthy hopes may be entertained.”¹¹⁶ The guide goes on to remind its readers that a woman who mistakenly thinks herself better than her husband causes this fountain to dry up. Not only does this dual symbolism allow for the common analogy of government of state and home, it also suggests woman’s power to destabilize both structures by misplacing herself in the hierarchy of either one.

Ferdinand’s inadequacy as Prince, in contrast to the French king, is immediately clear. His order to his courtiers, “Methinks you that are my courtiers should be my touchwood, take fire when I give fire; that is laugh when I laugh, were the subject never so witty” (I.ii.43-6), stands in sharp contrast to the French king’s dismissal of flatterers. Though the image of courtiers as touchwood was a common conceit of the time, as an order it marks only the ruler’s impotence. Just as Camillo, the cuckold, needs to be told he is the lodestone,” so is Ferdinand’s failure already inscribed in his demand to be the source of imitation (as in, “if you have to ask . . .”).

Ferdinand’s ineffectiveness as Prince is further illustrated by the latter’s victory at jousting. Ferdinand casually commands “Give [Antonio] the jewel” and then boastfully demands “some real action,” showing his impotence as both mock and real warfare. The

¹¹⁶ *The Carecloth* at 23 (1599).

jewel can be read at several levels: in one sense it can be seen as an ironic symbol of the Duchess' sexual favors, but it has a deeper significance in the iconography of power as the figures of Vittoria and the portraits of Queen Elizabeth have demonstrated.

Ferdinand's anxiety about his ineffectiveness is revealed by the many images in this dialogue which raise questions about breeding, procreation and the source of procreative power. Ferdinand speculates that his courtier's horses are "begot by the wind;" Antonio describes the breeding of noble ideals as "as out of the Grecian horse issued many famous Princes: so out of brave horsemanship, arise the sparks . . . that raise the mind to noble action." (I.ii.64-7). Both similes invoke the sexual potency of horses; the image of the Trojan horse also stirs up anxiety about invasion from within and the power of the female body to destroy kingdoms (to "burn the topless towers of Illium").

It is in the context of the decentered court that we must try to understand the Duchess' remarriage and the catastrophe it unleashes. What is at stake here that was not as pressing in the novella?

2. *Remarriage, Art, and Law*

What fuels the anxiety and rage about the Duchess' remarriage which permeates the play? As Tennenhouse and others have pointed out, Ferdinand's ravings are those of a threatened class, the Stuart aristocracy, fearful of losing its "purity" of blood in the face of incursions made into it by James' prolific sale of knighthoods and honors.¹¹⁷ Such anxiety is easily translated into a need to control the sexuality of the female members of the class, and explains Ferdinand's incestuous obsession with his sister. I argue, however, that there is another component to this anxiety: female subjectivity and the memory of

¹¹⁷ Frank Wigham, *Sexual and Social Mobility in the Duchess of Malfi*, 100 PMLA 167-186 (1985).

the Queen. Lisa Jardine recognizes that the Duchess transgression lies in “asserting her sexual self,” but claims that this shows merely the Duchess’ metamorphosis from “ideal mirror of virtue . . . into lascivious whore.”¹¹⁸ But there is more to it: the Duchess remarriage is threatening because it implies that, like Elizabeth, she is the subject, not the object, of the gaze. The sexually desiring female subject, as I have discussed, claims ownership of the gaze. Antonio’s description of the Duchess early on evokes this aspect of the Duchess’ and Elizabeth’s self-fashioning:

You never fixed your eye on three fair medals,
Cast in one figure, of so different temper.
For her discourse, it is of full of rapture,
You only will begin, and then be sorry
When she doth end her speech: and wish, in wonder,
She held it less vainglory to talk much
Than your penance, to hear her: whilst she speaks,
She throws upon a man so sweet a look,
That it were able to raise one to a galliard
That lay in a dead palsy; and to dote
On that sweet countenance: but in that look
There speaketh so divine a countenance,
As cuts off all lascivious and vain hope.
...
Let all sweet ladies break their flatt’ring glasses

¹¹⁸ JARDINE, *supra* note 4 at 77.

And dress themselves in her.

...

She stains the time past: lights the time to come.

II.ii.113-134

Antonio describes the Duchess as radiant, beginning and endpoint of all visual reference: she “stains the time past, lights the time to come” (I.ii.134). Such a description is fully in keeping with the Duchess’ royal, if not her feminine, nature, and invites comparison with portraits of Queen Elizabeth, which present her as the source of light. In the Armada portrait of 1588, Elizabeth’s face is “a source of light which radiates outward;”¹¹⁹ in the Ditchley portrait of 1592, she stands before a dark sky rent by lightning, while in front of her clouds disperse and the sun shines. As we have seen, the Rainbow Portrait is perhaps the most dramatic depiction of the Queen as source of light. Elizabeth consciously set out to create emanation as part of her iconography, rejecting more modern styles available to her. By the 1570s, due to Spanish activity in the Netherlands, an influx of Flemish painters would have made examples of the new painting styles, with their use of shadow and perspective, available in England, and Isaac Oliver, Elizabeth’s portraitist in the 1590s, had ample knowledge of how to produce effects of depth and shadow.¹²⁰ The Queen, however, disdained shadows in her portraits. Sitting for her portrait by Nicholas Hilliard, she “chose her place to sit . . . in the open alley of a goodly garden, where no tree was near, nor any shadow at all, save that as the heaven is lighter than the earth, so must there be that little shadow that was from the earth.”¹²¹ In sum, the Queen, like the Duchess, “stains the times past, lights the time to come.”

¹¹⁹ Belsey & Belsey, *supra*, note 113 at 11.

¹²⁰ *Id.* at 18.

¹²¹ Quoted in POMEROY, *supra* note 38 at 24-25.

Furthermore, according to Antonio, she is the model for all imitation – especially for women, who should “break their flatt’ring glasses/and dress themselves in her” (I.ii.129). This conceit strikes directly at the heart of the belief that women should mirror men; here is a woman and ruler who has the strength of character to demand that she be emulated.

Also like Elizabeth of the Armada Portrait, even as she draws the gaze and positions herself as the source of imitation, the Duchess deflects the male gaze of desire: Antonio goes on to say:

but in that look
there speakest so divine a countenance,
as cuts off all lascivious, and vain hope.”

I.ii.123-5.

This drawing and deflection of the male gaze, as discussed above, was a crucial part of Elizabeth’s iconography. In the Armada Portrait, all signifiers point to what Louis Montrose calls the Queen’s “virgin knot,” the “ostentatious bow . . . at the apex of the inverted triangle formed by her stomacher.”¹²² The viewer’s gaze is at once drawn toward the spot and deflected by the demure bow, and by the implied “causal relationship between her sanctified chastity and the providential destruction of the Spanish Catholic invaders” - i.e., the sanctity of the realm’s boundaries.¹²³ According to the Belseys, Elizabeth represented herself as “the virtuous focus of masculine desire . . . beautiful but aloof.”¹²⁴ The inverse of this emblematic promise that the female ruler’s chastity ensures the realm’s security appears in Ferdinand’s hysterical threat upon discovery of his sister’s marriage:

¹²² Montrose, *supra* note 33 at 315.

¹²³ *Id.*

¹²⁴ Belsey & Belsey, *supra* note 113 at 20.

That I might toss her palace about her ears,
Root up her goodly forests, blast her meads,
And lay her general territory waste,
As she hath done her honor's.

II.ii.18-21

Contemporary marriage manuals and law show that the widow's remarriage was transgressive because it positioned the woman as subject, not object, of the gaze. Whether a widow remarry or not, the central point is that she must constitute herself as a mirror of the man, and subsume herself into his subjectivity. On one hand, Tilney warns widows that their husbands are not really dead, but merely absent, and admonishes: "Let the widow remember and have still before her eyes and in her mind that souls do not perish together with the body" and instructs that a widow become a "bride of Christ" thus violating her chastity, and, in effect cuckolding her first husband, if she consider remarriage.¹²⁵ On the other hand, a contemporary divine, William Gouge, in his massive marriage manual Domesticall Duties, warns to the contrary that "neither must the love of a former husband or wife be predominant when they are married to another. This other must be a close cleavage as, if they had never been joined to another . . . I deny not but the memory of a virtuous husband or wife ought to be precious to the surviving party . . . but as the virtue of a person deceased may not be buried with the dead corpse, neither may the person be kept above ground with the memory of his or her virtue"¹²⁶

Though on the surface they seem contradictory, both these manuals in fact have a single underlying theme: the bond between husband and wife. In the new companionate

¹²⁵ Edmund Tilney, *A Briefe and Pleasant Discourse of Duties in Mariage, called the Flower of Friendship* unpaginated (1568).

¹²⁶ *Id.*

marriage, contemporary truism had it, the two individuals became one.¹²⁷ In this merging there is no question of which term is dominant, or, the model, and which the subordinate, or, in the reflection. The woman is to mirror the man. He is to be “her daily looking glass . . . whereto she must always frame her own countenance” (Tilney). Or, as Robert Greene put it,

As a looking glass in Christall though most curiously set in Ebonie, serveth to small purpose, if it doth not lively represent the proportion and lineaments of the face inspicient, so a woman, though rich and beautiful, deserveth smal prayse or favour if the course of her life be not directed after her husbands compasse. And as ye Mathematicall lines which Geoometricians doe figure in their carrecters, have no motion of themselves, but the bodyes wherein they are placed, so ought a wife to have no proper or peculiar passion or affection, unless framed after the special disposition of her husband: For, to crosse him with contraries as to frowne when he setleth him selfe to mirth, or amidst his melancholie to shewe her selfe passing merrie, discovereth either a fond or forward will, opposite to that honorable vertue of Obedience.¹²⁸

“The Lawes Resolution of Womens Rights” (1632) notes that the legal term for a married woman is “femme covert;” before marriage she is the “femme sole.” Thus, a married woman is metaphorically “covered,” her face hidden by submersion in her husband’s identity. Similarly, the manual goes on to describe married women as rivers which, when they flow into the ocean, mix with its vaster waters and lose their separate identity. What unites the law and conduct manuals here is the sense that a woman in marriage relinquishes her subjectivity to the man.

¹²⁷ Elizabeth Honig, *In Memory: Lady Dacre and Pairing by Hans Eworth*, in *RENAISSANCE BODIES: THE HUMAN FIGURE IN ENGLISH CULTURE C.1540-1660* 60, 65 (1990).

¹²⁸ Robert Greene, *Penelope’s Web*, in *THE LIFE AND COMPLETE WORKS IN PROSE AND VERSE OF ROBERT GREENE* 139-234, 163-64 (A.B. Grosart ed., 1964).

When the Duchess woos Antonio she continues to demonstrate this subjectivity and the power it conveys. Beginning the process of proposing to Antonio by having him write what she dictates, she positions herself not only as the ultimate author of word and deed, but also as master of the symbolic tool of phallic procreation, the pen. The sexual valence of the pen is a commonplace in the period: as an example, in Thomas Dekker's *Westward Ho?*, the would-be seducer, Signior Justiano, adopts the disguise of a writing master to achieve his goal, and sells his services to the unsuspecting husband in a series of double-entendres: he strives to "please all those that come under my fingers," and hopes that the seduced wife "will fructify." For her part, the wife wishes to replace her old pen (i.e., her husband's) with a new one, for it is "stark naught, and will cast no inck." Women do indeed love best "[t]hat thing that hath nev'r bone in't," as Ferdinand guesses, but it is also what he himself wants and needs: Tongue and penis both, it represents the essence of creative power, and symbolized both sexual and verbal transgression.¹²⁹ Whereas Ferdinand, like Camillo, acts through a proxy, the Duchess directs the actions and meaning of others through her own strength of character.

The Duchess' dictation to Antonio deserves more attention, however. The act of dictation hints at a teacher-student relationship, with the power differential that implies, and it also harks back to a trope associated with Elizabeth's power. In a dialogue written by John Davies for Elizabeth's visit to Robert Cecil at Harefield in July 1602, called "A Conference betweene a Gent. Huisher [usher] and a Post, before the Queene, at Mr. Secretarye's House, by John Davies," Davies praises Elizabeth's writing skill by

¹²⁹ See MARK BREITENBERG, *ANXIOUS MASCULINITY IN EARLY MODERN ENGLAND* 170 (1996); Peter Stallybrass, *Patriarchal Territories: The Body Enclosed*, in *REWRITING THE RENAISSANCE: THE DISCOURSES OF SEXUAL DIFFERENCE IN EARLY MODERN EUROPE* 142 (Margaret W. Ferguson et al. eds., 1986).

analogizing her relationship with Cecil to that of teacher to pupil. The Queen is “some gentle Mrs. of children who, when they guide the hands of their schollers with their own hands and thereby do make them to wryte fayre letters, do yett to encorage them, give them as much prayse as if themselves had done it without direction.” In the dictation scene, the Duchess’ power is magnified beyond even what Davies ascribes to Elizabeth: the Duchess controls the writing hand not by guiding it physically but by controlling what comes out of the pen, what meaning the ink forms on the page.

The significance of Duchess’ dictation is apparent when we see how the metaphor of writing is used in conduct manuals. Vives, in his writing manual “*De Ratione Studii Puerilis*,” directs that the female student should “write down with her fingers anything the tutor may dictate” so that “whilst we are writing, the mind is diverted from the thought of frivolous or improper objects. The lines which are just before the pupil for imitation should contain some weighty little opinion which it will be helpful to learn thoroughly, for by frequently writing out such, they will necessarily be fixed in the mind.” In Vives’ schema, copying the male instructor’s words empties the female student’s mind of “frivolous and improper” - i.e., feminine, unsanctioned - thoughts, and fills it with the opinions of patriarchy, appropriately bite-size for her digestion. Like the marriage manuals, the writing manual instructs the female’s subjectivity to be filled with that of the male’s, whether he be writing instructor or husband. The Duchess subverts both these paradigms as she uses dictation to fill Antonio’s subjectivity with her thoughts and desires, love and marriage.

In a sense, the Duchess’ power over writing gives her immortality. In a 1566 letter, Roger Ascham, the Queen’s tutor, wrote to Leicester, “If I die, all my things die with me,

and yet the poore service I have done to Queen Elizabeth shall live still, and never die, so long as her noble hand and excellent learning in the Greek and Latin tongue shall be known to the world.” In what may be seen as an attempt to commandeer the Queen’s female subjectivity, Ascham seeks to dispel fears of his death by reassuring himself that the contents of her mind - instilled by him - represent his immortality. The Duchess, by filling her secretary’s mind with her thoughts, appropriates this possibility for herself.

3. The Duchess’ Privy Chamber

The play effects a dual process by which the Duchess is driven out of the “secret space” of rulership and by which her own interiority is penetrated and laid open to her brothers’ – and hence the world’s – gaze. The result is to irrevocably separate the “secret places” of statecraft from femininity, on the one hand, and to demonstrate that whatever secret spaces lurk in the female body or consciousness contain not “arcana imperii” but rather, female sexuality – and transgressive sexuality, at that. Ultimately, the lesson is the female body and statecraft do not mix.

To understand how the notion of private space works in the play, we need to understand the history of the relationship between the royal privy chamber and the “arcana imperii.” Initially, over the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the king’s single private apartment, the Chamber, gave way to a more convenient three-room suite, consisting of the Great or Guard Chamber, where the Guard stood, the Presence Chamber, where the enthroned king received visitors, dined in state, and met his Council, and the innermost Privy Chamber, where he slept and worked in privacy.¹³⁰ Henry VII was the first to emphasize the use of the Privy Chamber as a way of “keeping distance” for the most

¹³⁰ David Starkey, *Intimacy and Innovation: The Rise of the Privy Chamber, in THE ENGLISH COURT: FROM THE WARS OF THE ROSES TO THE CIVIL WAR* 71, 73-77 (David Starkey ed., 1987).

secret and intimate state matters – confidential papers and private conversations, all the “king’s secrets.”¹³¹ Under Elizabeth, as always, access to the sovereign was the key to political power, and access to the Queen’s Privy Chamber was vital to anyone seeking it. Naturally, Elizabeth’s Privy Chamber was staffed with women, who controlled access to her. Elizabeth treated her private room, as had Henry VII, as a haven and her attendants as a barrier to the outside world of the court.¹³²

Susan Frye has shown how Elizabeth used the architecture of the court, among other things, to “construct herself as a figure of nearly inaccessible power.”¹³³ Frye goes on to show male frustration over this inaccessibility in scenes of rape and female imprisonment in Spencer’s “Faerie Queen” which take place in a series of three rooms opening into one another, a space that mimics Elizabeth’s spatial self-isolation.¹³⁴ Brilliant as Frye’s insight is, I suggest that it can be broadened to show that one of the projects of Jacobean culture was to restructure the relationship of femininity to the royal “private space” containing the “secrets of state.” This process appears in the contest in *The Duchess of Malfi* as to who owns the Duchess private space – anatomical, geographical and psychological - and it also appears in James’ reappropriation of this secret space for himself as male ruler.

James made clear that he claimed the mysteries of state for his own.¹³⁵ In his first appearance before the Star Chamber in 1616, he repeatedly drew attention to the “mysterie

¹³¹ *Id.* at 74-75.

¹³² *Id.* at 159.

¹³³ FRYE, *supra* note 12 at 104.

¹³⁴ FRYE, *supra* note 12 at 124-128.

¹³⁵ For a general discussion of this aspect of James’ political philosophy, see JONATHAN GOLDBERG, *JAMES I AND THE POLITICS OF LITERATURE: JONSON, SHAKESPEARE, DONNE AND THEIR CONTEMPORARIES* 55-112 (1983).

of the King's power."¹³⁶ He elaborated: "[i]ncroach not on the Prerogative of the Crowne: if fall out a question that concernes my Prerogative of mystery of state, deale not with it."¹³⁷ In *Basilikon Doron*, James' letter to his son on kingship, he calls these mysteries his "secretest drifts."¹³⁸ This theme remained constant throughout James' reign: in a 1621 letter to Parliament, he warned its Members not to "presume . . . to meddle with anything concerning our Government, or deep matters of state," and later defined these as "mysteries of State."¹³⁹

James also sought to physically inhabit "secret spaces" in the machinations of the law. At important state trials, he took part in the proceedings by hiding himself behind a curtain and scribbling questions on scraps of paper which were passed on to the prosecutors to be asked. This is the hidden space of power, where the ruler conceals himself, manipulates events through others, and cultivates his "secret'st thoughts." Indeed, it is the space of the "unmoved mover."

James' appropriation of these secret spaces involved banishing the feminine; as we have seen, Elizabeth too demanded privacy for her "secretest drifts." The process of eviscerating the female ruler's secret or hidden spaces is crucial to the "work" *The Duchess of Malfi* performs. To understand this, it will be helpful to return again to Elizabeth's self fashioning. Louis Montrose has offered a "historically specific way of understanding" the way the female ruler's body was presented as both drawing attention to and then deflecting the gaze from, the Queen's "secret places." Because Elizabeth was a female ruler, these arcana became located at the "secret place" of the female body. All the

¹³⁶ THE POLITICAL WORKS OF JAMES I 333 (Charles H. McIlwain ed., 1918).

¹³⁷ *Id.* at 332.

¹³⁸ *Id.* at 5.

¹³⁹ Quoted in GOLDBERG, *supra*, note 133, at 251 n. 1.

moves in the Duchess of Malfi to penetrate the Duchess private space, I argue, conflate her hidden physical space with her hidden political space, and then uncover the secrets of this space, to show that there is nothing there - nothing, at least, having to do with statecraft. Rather, the play's repeated incursions show that what is there is sexuality - whether transgressive or benign is only secondary. The main point is that the sight of Diana no longer holds terror for Actaeon: what were thought to be mysteries of state dangerous for commoners to behold are in fact merely the secrets of the female body, corporeal and domestic. It is through this inversion that the invasion of the Duchess private space partakes of the banishment of women from the public sphere.

From the beginning of the play, the Duchess' ability to keep secret things about herself is at issue. As both her brothers leave court, Ferdinand warns her "[y]our darkest actions - nay your privats't thoughts /Will come to light" (I.i.324-25), and advises her to stop holding dances where costumes were worn because "a visor and a masque are whispering-rooms/That were never built for goodness." (I.i.345-46.) This lines accomplish two things. First, they deny the Duchess the status of ruler with her "secret drifts." As we have seen, this is, according to James, what a ruler is: someone who keeps secrets and hides his true intentions behind a mask. Here is James in *Basilikon Doron* again:

It is a trewe old saying, That a King is as one set up on a stage , whose smallest actions and gestures, all the people gazingly doe behold: and therefore although a King be never so precise in the discharging of is Office, the people, who seeth but the outward part, will ever judge of the substance, by the circumstances; and according to the outward appearance, if his behavior be light or dissolute, will conceive pre-occupied conceits of the Kings inward intention: which although with time . . . it will evanish, by the evidence of the contrary effects, yet *interim partitur justus*; and

prejudged conceits will, in the meane time, breed contempt, the mother of rebellion and disorder.¹⁴⁰

“Whispering rooms” and secret thoughts are the tools in trade of kingship, but they are forbidden to the Duchess. Secondly, Ferdinand’s warning relegates the Duchess possible secrets to the arena of female – and illicit – sexuality. The “secret’s drifts” of a female ruler (Duchess) have been reduced to sex.

The wooing scene takes place in a figurative private space which is separate from the public world of rulership – a place in which the Duchess’ body can also be her private property to dispose of as she pleases, not the public property of the state. The Duchess, though, retains her position as ruler even in this sphere; Antonio, despite his privileged gender, remains clearly subordinate to her. She has not simply repositioned herself as the object of his gaze: she has asserted her right to own and direct her desire as she pleases.

It is not surprising, in this context, that the next scene shows Bosola both excoriating an old woman for painting her face and vowing to discover the secrets of the Duchess’ body: both involve uncovering the secret spaces of women and revealing corruption and illicit sexuality within. First, upon the old lady’s appearance, Bosola demands “[y]ou come from painting now?,” claims that seeing her face without makeup “inclines somewhat near a miracle,” and lists the contents of her closet – a disgusting array of substances women supposedly use to cover their blemishes– and wins her concession that he is “well-acquainted with my closet.” (II.i.25-51.) He then turns to the real task at hand, tricking the Duchess into revealing that she is pregnant. He plans to do this by offering her ripe apricots, “the first our spring yields,” which, medical lore had it, pregnant women craved. (II.i.70-78.)

¹⁴⁰ MCILWAIN, *supra* note 134 at 43.

The apricots, ripened in horse dung, add a new twist to the invasion of the female ruler's secret places by harking back to Elizabeth's infatuation with her courtier Robert Dudley. The Duchess' desire for her social inferior seems likely to have evoked memories of Elizabeth's infatuation with her Keeper of Horse. The apparently strong possibility that she was considering marriage with him in the late 1550s and early 1560s caused almost as much anxiety as did her wavering on the subject of marriage itself.¹⁴¹ Mary Stuart gossiped gleefully that "the Queen of the English is going to marry her horsekeeper."¹⁴² Apparently, Elizabeth was well aware of the problems inherent in their differences in rank: when Kat Ashley, one of the Queen's closest confidantes and one of the ladies of her bedchamber once "covertly commended Leicester for her unto a husband, [Elizabeth] answered in a passion, "Dost thou think me so unlike myself, and so unmindful of my royal majesty, that I would prefer my servant, whom I myself have raised, before the greatest princes of christendom, in choosing a husband?" It did appear, however, that Elizabeth was distraught for a time at having to face the decision not to marry Dudley. In November of 1560, Elizabeth's servant, R. J. Jones, wrote to Throckmorton in Paris that "the Queen's majesty looketh not so hearty and well as she did, by a great deal; and surely the matter of my Lord Robert doth much perplex her."

Oddly enough, I believe that Ferdinand's placement of his spy, Bosola, as the Duchess' Provisor of the Horse (I.ii.140-141) recalls anxiety about Elizabeth making a secret marriage to Dudley, and represents an attempt to undo that threat. By placing an informer in the position of intimacy to the ruler once occupied by Dudley, the very source of the threat under Elizabeth, the move eviscerates a small private space available to the

¹⁴¹ LEVIN, *supra* note 34 at 72.

¹⁴² *Id.* at 73

female ruler in which clandestine liaisons could theoretically be carried out – at least in the public imagination. Interestingly, Bosola’s sardonic acquiescence - “then say my corruption/Grew out of horse dung” - ignites a series of references to horse manure in the play which, I believe, hark back to this sense of corrupting the threatening private space of the female ruler. It is with “apricocks . . . ripen[ed] in horse dung” (II.i.143) that Bosola tricks the Duchess into revealing her pregnancy by devouring the fruit. This anxiety about, and efforts to eliminate, the private space of the female ruler, pervades the play throughout as the taste of musk pervades Bosola’s apricots (II.i.139).

Bosola’s “apricocks” have further significance. Renaissance tradition associated the apricot with the apple, fruit of the tree of knowledge and symbol of sin, sexuality, the Fall, and wisdom.¹⁴³ Thus, it may at first blush seem to represent the Duchess’ sexual transgressions, such as they are. Indeed, this interpretation is bolstered by the fact that Bosola uses the apricots to uncover the Duchess’ pregnancy. The apple/apricot has a connection to Elizabeth, however. The serpent on her arm in the Rainbow Portrait symbolizes wisdom, but it is also the serpent which lured Eve to sin in pursuit of that wisdom by eating the forbidden fruit. The apple/apricot, then, calls up the tradition of the transgressive female, seeking knowledge beyond her station and subverting patriarchal authority. Perhaps most importantly, it invokes the idea of the woman acting outside of male authority – God’s or husband’s - and persuading the man to imitate her. Like the female prince, Eve acted as the instigator, the model for her male counterparts to follow. Bringing this association of the apricot to light shows its symbolism to be that of a specific

¹⁴³ Dale J. Randall, *The Rank and Earthy Background of Certain Physical Symbols in the Duchess of Malfi*, 17 *RENAISSANCE QUARTERLY* 171, 181-182 (1986).

kind of female transgression – not narrowly sexual, but rather the transgression of female power and subjectivity.

In light of this analysis, it is worth noting that James' response to Anne's attempt to intervene for Arbella Stuart, consigned to the Tower for her secret marriage, was to deny clemency on the grounds that Arbella "had eaten the forbidden fruit."¹⁴⁴ The symbol, then, suggests the specter of Arbella Stuart in the play. Like the Duchess, like Elizabeth, she had acted as both royal and sexual subject. Arbella Stuart's secret marriage to Henry Seymour in 1610 united the two people with the strongest claims to the English throne after James - and, since both had been born in England, arguably better claims. James put great effort into preventing Arbella from achieving just such a clandestine marriage, as I have detailed above. Of course, the Duchess' marriage with her social inferior hardly resembled a similar threat, but the idea of a clandestine royal marriage was nonetheless alarming. Indeed, concern about Elizabeth's affection for Dudley sometimes took the form of rumors that she had, or was about to, marry him in secret, as their daily proximity seemed to make possible, and this is the fear that Arbella's secret marriage made real.

Bosola's apricots do their job too well: they actually induce labor in the Duchess, who flees to her chamber, gasping to Antonio "I fear I am undone." (II.i.177.) Meanwhile, Bosola intercepts the old lady/midwife on her way to help the Duchess, and demands to know whether her "most vulturous eating of the apricocks" indicates pregnancy. (II.ii.2.) Having claimed knowledge of what lies under the old lady's cosmetic paint, Bosola now uses her to discover what lies hidden in the Duchess body. In both cases, the old lady's entrance triggers the uncovering of women's secrets, a

¹⁴⁴ LEWALSKI, *supra* note 40 at 70.

coincidence which should call to mind James' reference to old women and witchcraft in his tete a tete with Harington. I have argued that the references to old women and to "pure white" in that conversation indicate the unmasking of women's secrets as purely physical ones, having nothing to do with kingship and statecraft. In Bosola's jibes, I think we see the same rhetorical moves being made: again we are shown that all that lies hidden in women – even women who claim political power - is sex and corruption.

Finally, Ferdinand invades the Duchess bedchamber itself: in the midst of a bedtime chat, Antonio and Cariola, as a joke, steal out while the Duchess is looking into her mirror, still talking to them, and Ferdinand slips behind her in with a copied key, his father's dagger in his hand. Although his courage deserts him - he hands her the dagger, urging her to "[d]ie then, quickly" – his discovery does evict the Duchess from her court. She and Antonio flee to a holy shrine under the pretense of a pilgrimage. But her brothers send troops to arrest her and bring her back, ironically, to her court, where they imprison her.

4. Prince and Courtier

What links the Duchess' transgression with that of Vittoria in *The White Devil* is that they disturb the economy of the male court. The sexual/political self-determination the Duchess exhibits in joining herself to Antonio destabilizes the delicate relationship of Prince to courtier Castiglione describes/prescribes. When Ferdinand is raving to the Cardinal about his terrible discovery, his brother tries to calm him down by giving him an idea of how he sounds:

How idly shows this rage! which carries you
As men conveyed by witches through the air
On violent whirlwinds: this intemperate noise
Fitly resembles deaf men's shrill discourse,

Who talk aloud, thinking all other men
To have their imperfection.

(II. v. 50-4)

This imagery we have seen before. In *The White Devil* it was Flamineo's description of sexual bliss which mocks the cuckold Camillo into thinking he is the center of things when he is in fact, sexually speaking on the periphery. It is also like the old men Castiglione describes who "sailing, think that everything moves except themselves" when in fact of course it is the opposite. Ferdinand, like Camillo and like the old men of court who cannot adjust themselves to revolve around the new sun are lost in the delusion that they are the center around which court and world turn, the adamant which draws all eyes and all desire. Ironically, Ferdinand's madness is named at that very moment when he has proof that his sister, in positioning herself as a desiring sexual subject, has indeed positioned herself at that very center, that very gaze, which Ferdinand wishes to inhabit.

The fact that the Duchess is a widow makes her action more charged. Her first marriage presumably did not cause Ferdinand to fantasize about "dipping the sheets they lie in, in pitch or sulphur/wrap them in't and then light them like a match" (II. v. 70-1). As we have seen, the structure of marriage remained in widowhood: one in which the wife is a reflection of her husband, be he dead or alive. Not only did the remarrying widow remind men of their mortality, she asserted that she could emerge from her absorption into her husband's consciousness and again be the subject instead of the object of desire, thus destabilizing the positions of all men in relation to all women. Her remarriage hints that her objects of desire are replaceable and thus, perhaps, interchangeable. Changes in the structure of the court made such a threat even more disturbing, as we have seen. The Duchess words to Antonio as she urges him to respond

to her - “This is flesh and blood, sir/Tis not the figure cut in alabaster/Kneels at my husband’s tomb - articulate exactly what is threatening about the remarrying widow.

Thus the Duchess occupies a matrix for several forms of anxiety. As an “unchaste” female ruler who marries “beneath herself” she subverts the boundaries of class, gender and state. As a remarrying widow she suggests the female location as object is not fixed. As both she destabilizes the precarious economy of prince and courtier, husband and wife, man and woman.

5. “Reflections” in Contemporary Art

The anxiety about positioning in relation to the gaze is played out in the scene where Ferdinand spies on his sister in her rooms in order to find out who her husband is. The Duchess has been immersed in affectionate banter with Antonio and her maid, Cariola. In the middle of it, Antonio and Cariola that tiptoe out of the room so that the Duchess, who sits looking into her mirror, will suddenly realize she is talking to herself and they will all enjoy her anger. As they tiptoe out, the Duchess continues to address her reflection:

Doth not the color of my hair ‘gin to change?
When I wax grey, I shall have all the court
Powder their hair with arras, to be like me:
You have cause to love me, I ent’red you into my heart.

(II. ii. 58-61)

The Duchess’ relationship to the mirror here is significant. She uses it to position herself very differently from the way women are positioned in contemporary portraiture and, in fact, throughout Western art. The mirror, a traditional symbol both of female vanity and of a woman’s relationship to men is here subverted. The Duchess does not, as Tilney’s marriage manual instructs, act as her husband’s mirror. Instead, she contemplates

her in her mirror her own reflection, with imperfections. For Ferdinand, this makes her his “devil in crystal,” as Vittoria was to Bracciano: Ferdinand needs everything to reflect himself. But further: she will make these imperfections (greying hair) a source of imitation for the entire court.

To understand how this response to seeing herself shows her to be a ruler, and not an ordinary female, it is helpful to compare the portraits of Elizabeth and Henry VIII with contemporary wedding and marriage portraiture. In marriage portraits, the man is traditionally seated on the left, and woman on the right. The man retains his interiority while the woman presents herself as an object receptive to and dependent on the male gaze.¹⁴⁵ Compare the Armada portrait: the Queen gazes away, beyond the frame of the picture, her thoughts her own.¹⁴⁶ The Duchess’ relationship to her mirror depicts her as Elizabeth and Henry are depicted – autonomous, subjective – and not as married women were shown – on display.

The difference between these two kinds of positioning is analogous to what Thomas Berger has termed the difference between the “naked” and the “nude” in Western art. He draws a distinction between paintings which exhibit unclothed women purely as objects for the gaze of the “absent (male) protagonist” on the one hand and paintings which allow the woman to have her own sexual subjectivity. He points out how mirrors are used as tropes in paintings of “naked” women to enact the female figure’s complicity in her own objectification: she joins the absent viewer in gazing at herself. Note that this is exactly the opposite of how the Duchess uses the mirror in the discovery scene. Instead of criticizing her appearance from a male point of view, she does the opposite. She sets

¹⁴⁵ Honig, *supra* note 125 at 68

¹⁴⁶ Belsey & Belsey, *supra* note 113 at 11.

herself up, grey hair and all, as a figure to be emulated, to set standards. By destabilizing her relationship with the mirror and hence with the “absent protagonist,” she undermines the orientation of the gaze between man and women, courtier and Prince. In Western art, Berger asserts, “men act, women appear.” The Duchess, in the midst of a potential painting, acts.¹⁴⁷

6. The Struggle for Power

Ferdinand’s invasion of the Duchess’ private space in the mirror scene sets off a struggle over the issue of political/sexual power – and it is a struggle which gives no quarter: it’s no coincidence that Ferdinand slides in behind her at the very moment when she utters the phrase “entr’d . . . into my heart.” His appropriation of her private space is complete; even the heart of the female ruler is public property.

¹⁴⁷ JOHN BERGER, *WAYS OF SEEING: A BOOK MADE BY JOHN BERGER AND OTHERS* 1-50 (1972).

Ferdinand is carrying his father's poniard; not resolute enough to stab her, he hands it to her, suggesting that she kill herself. This scene is similar to the pistol scene between Vittoria and Flamineo in *The White Devil*; here, however, the armed struggle does not end the conflict, but initiates it. Again, Ferdinand wishes for the "eyes of a basilisk"—surely the ultimate in potent gazing – to look upon the Duchess' husband, but, significantly, does not even catch a glimpse of him in this scene. One is reminded of his empty challenge to "leave this sportive action and fall to action indeed" of the first act (I.ii.9-10). He is impotent to do either. As she is a ruler, a source of light, he fails at being a ruler, a source not of his subjects' identity but their loss of identity.

Even in death the Duchess asserts her subjectivity and autonomy. She insists on her right to welcome death, to choose it, rather than to admit that it, and, by extension, Ferdinand, have power over her. "I am Duchess of Malfi still" she says to Bosola, grimly bantering with him about the design of her coffin.

Her coffin has already been prepared, however, and the executioners bring it in with them, refuting her early, vital assertion to Antonio that

This is flesh and blood, sir,
'Tis not the figure cut in alabaster
Kneels at my husband's tomb. Awake, Awake, man.
(I. ii. 372-4)

Dead, she will become that figure again – the one dimensional carving whose interiority, like that of the wives in the marriage portraits, is, literally, in this case, all her husband's. The tomb, as Bosola tells her, is the logical reduction of her domestic space: she has gone from wilderness to exile to imprisonment to what he calls "your last presence chamber."

Like Vittoria, she is contemptuous at the end, telling the men who have come to strangle her that "The apoplexy, catarrh, or cough of the lungs/would do as much as they

do” (IV.ii.209-10). It has been argued that the Duchess is a “static protagonist” in that she does not experience growth of character development in the course of the play; I think that this is, ironically, exactly the point, and it is most clear at her death. She is Duchess of Malfi still, that is, a ruler, a woman who claims sexual/political power and her positioning does not change. She refuses to grant her murderers any more power over her than the common cold. She insists on calling her death a gift from her brothers which she chooses to accept – like Vittoria’s princely welcome of ambassadors - even comparing it to “mandragora to make me sleep.” Her use of the term is no accident: mandragora is the “root” of the trouble in both plays. At her death, Vittoria warns her brother that “Millions are now in graves, which at last day/like mandrakes shall rise shrieking” (V.vi.63-4.) Both heroines at the end invoke the symbol of sexual/political power to remind men of their terrible potency.

7. This Sad Spectacle

Most attempts to explain the figures of Antonio and the children “appearing as if they were dead,” which Bosola shows the Duchess in Act Four, scene one, in terms of funeral monuments, the figures of the dead which adorned their tombs.¹⁴⁸ The words of the Duchess in response to the sight, however, point in another direction. She says:

It wastes me more,
Than were't my picture, fashioned out of wax,
Struck with a magical needle, and then buried
In some foul dunghill;

IV.i.53-65.

¹⁴⁸ See, e.g., David Bergeron, *The Wax Figures in the Duchess of Malfi*, 18:2 STUDIES IN ENGLISH LITERATURE 331, 335 (1978).

Any interpretation of these figures, I believe, must account for these words, which bring to mind wax figures of Elizabeth, and the anxiety this caused the Tudor government.¹⁴⁹ In 1578, for example, the Spanish Ambassador wrote in a dispatch to King Philip's Secretary:

A countryman has found, buried in a stable, three wax figures . . . the center figure had the word Elizabeth written on the forehead and the side figures were dressed like her councillors . . . the left side of the images being transfixed with a large quantity of pig's bristles as if it were some sort of witchcraft. When it reached the Queen's ears she was disturbed, as it was looked upon as an augury.¹⁵⁰

When the Duchess describes her putative effigy being buried in a dunghill, she refers to the fact that the heat of the decomposing manure would melt the wax image, thus supposedly killing the person it resembled.¹⁵¹ As the above quote shows, Elizabeth's regime was aware of and worried about these voodoo-like practices, mostly because they indicated treasonous intent among her subjects, but also because of fear of their power augury. What interests me here, however, is the Duchess' declaration that the sight of her apparently dead family "wastes me more" than having her effigy melted in wax. This statement is an astonishing and compact unbundling of her position as a female ruler. She denigrates the political attack on her rulership – the stabbed and melted wax image of the ruler – as trivial compared to the emotional attack upon her private self as mother and wife. In this repositioning of a female ruler who maintained her political status even as she wooed her husband, Ferdinand, and the play, achieve a significant move toward the disassembly of female rule.

¹⁴⁹ For discussions of effigies of the Queen and their political meanings, see Louis A. Montrose, *Idols of the Queen: Policy, Gender and the Picturing of Elizabeth I*, 68 REPRESENTATIONS 108 (1999); MARCUS, *supra*, note 7 at 83-96.

¹⁵⁰ Montrose, *supra* at 112.

¹⁵¹ DRAMA OF THE ENGLISH RENAISSANCE II: THE STUART PERIOD 501 n. 5 (Russell A. Fraser et al. eds., 1976).

8. *Cover her Face*

The Duchess death instantly liberates Ferdinand's remorse and Bosola's conscience. Ferdinand says

Cover her face. Mine eyes dazzle. She died young.

IV.ii.263.

What is the connection between the sudden transformation of the two villains and Ferdinand's need to hide the light of his sister's face? I believe the answer can be found, as so many other answers to questions about a this play, in contemporary marriage law and custom, and images of Queen Elizabeth already discussed. As I have noted, contemporary marriage laws call a married woman a "feme covert," literally, a woman covered or hidden. In fact, some called for the veiling of married women in public on London's streets. Besides referring to the wife's lack of legal agency, this term carried a more tangible sense of the wife's identity being "covered" or blotted out by her husband's. As we have seen, the proper gaze for the married woman was no gaze: she was to reflect her husband and no one else, and constitute herself as the object, not the subject, of his gaze (and perhaps that of the viewer of her portrait). As I have also shown, portraits of Elizabeth depicted her not only as the source of the gaze, but of light itself – one might say she "dazzled" the viewer's eyes.

Thus, covering the Duchess face in death resolves the problem she poses in the play's – and the Jacobean's – world. As a married woman, and widow of that marriage, her covered face describes her subjectlessness, the covering of her identity with that of her (first) husband. As a female ruler, her covered face blots out her face as a source of light, radiance, power. No longer will the court be able to "break their flatt'ring glasses/And

dress themselves in her.” This obliteration of the Duchess as ruler and desiring female subject transforms Ferdinand and Bosola: because she is no longer a threat, remorse and grief can safely emerge. Ferdinand blames Bosola for not secreting her away to escape his wrath; Bosola himself becomes not only repentant, but obsessed with revenge. Indeed, the Duchess is the only figure in the play with the power to give him a sense of identity and meaning, although, ironically, she can confer it only after her death. When she dies he feels as if he has killed his father, a telling image of her “engendering” power.

The Duchess herself becomes even less than a figure on a tomb: she becomes an echo. As Antonio wanders through the graveyard her ghostly voice repeats his final words, creating a sense of its own. Such echoing could also be taken as an image of the way in which widows were instructed to carry on their husbands’ legacy and desires as if in death they were merely absent. But even after *her* death, the Duchess continues to subvert this traditional role: though she repeats Antonio’s words, she imbues them with her own meaning.

Thus in the end, through death, the Duchess seems to become what her brothers and the male dominated court need her to be – although her subversive echo still undermines this identity. She can become it only after death because in life she insisted on her subjectivity. Once the Duchess is gone, Antonio’s son is accepted without a murmur as lawful heir to the Duchy, conclusive evidence that what was at issue here was gender and power, not heredity and power. As in James’ meeting with Harington, distinctions based on gender transcend distinctions among males. The issue is a woman who refuses to sit still for the right portrait, who keeps her secrets, and who resists all efforts to contain her within its frame/prison. Like the Queen, who gazes beyond that

frame, her thoughts are her own. It is only now, with the deconstruction of the symbolic possibility of the woman ruler, that this gaze has become transgressive.

I will complete the frame of this article with another vignette. As Elizabeth lay dying, her fingers became so swollen that her those around her suggested her rings be cut off. She allowed one of them to be removed – the one symbolizing her marriage with England. But the other, one given to her by Essex, she insisted on keeping, and wore it to the grave. This episode encapsulates the transition in cultural definitions of gender and power that I have argued took place in the years after Elizabeth's death: it is eerily as if the Queen herself made the first move in the process by relinquishing her ring of state and keeping the ring of love. In *The Duchess of Malfi* and its cultural context we see this same movement occur, as the female figure is divested of her power in the public sphere and her unknowable *arcana imperii* replaced by the knowable, the corporeal and the corrupt - female sexuality.