

“Woeful Woman’s Tragedy:” Sibling Incest, the Family, and Female Agency in Jacobean Drama

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Incest is fascinating in its depravity. Both historical and contemporary audiences of Jacobean incest plays are intrigued and horrified by such sexual exploitation; even without present-day conceptions of genetics and psychology, Jacobean society shared a modern abhorrence of incest combined with a morbid fascination with its machinations. The drama that featured incest was often lambasted for its depiction of immorality; commentators feared the plays would encourage viewers to act on incestuous desire, an act so deviant it veered completely from accepted morality. Here was inhumanity incarnate: a brother exploiting the trust of his sister, a sister twisting the pure love of a caring brother. However, I argue that three of these Jacobean incest plays—Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher’s *A King and No King*, John Webster’s *The Duchess of Malfi*, and John Ford’s *Tis Pity She’s a Whore*—do not portray incest as a terrifying deviation from upright society. Rather, their incestuous relationships push the ownership and control of women within the family to their logical, though radical, conclusions, illustrating the inherent flaws in Jacobean structures of familial obligation and duty. To audiences who find incest perversely fascinating, it is easy to absolve collective guilt by viewing the act as an isolated, grotesque transformation of the family into a corrupted mass of kinship. But that self-sanctimonious view is challenged in these plays, as incest is shown to be merely filial obligation pressed to its extreme, over-adhering to—rather than deviating from—society’s demands and expectations.

This paper will examine sibling incest specifically, because an interest in stories of sexual relationships between brothers and sisters emerges in English literature only in the 16th and 17th centuries. Medieval writers found parent-child incest much more rewarding for their purposes; “whether writers wanted to titillate their readers or to encourage them to confess their sins, stories of sibling liaisons were apparently less shocking, and therefore less effective, than the stories about liaisons between parents and children which were so popular in the later Middle Ages” (Archibald 193). The increased interest in sibling incest intersects with the rise of theater, situating *A King and No King*, *Duchess*, and *Tis Pity* as examples of a uniquely Jacobean phenomenon: the sibling incest play. There also exists a gap in research on incestuous dynamics not as explicitly unequal as those between parents and children; “Is not the ‘pure’ relationship of brother to sister the human association that most nearly approaches absolute gender neutrality” (Shell 195)? However, patriarchal implications for the family exist even in this seemingly equitable relationship between brother and sister; to ignore the gendered power differential inherent in Jacobean siblinghood is to dramatically misunderstand these plays. In exploring this phenomenon, then, I build on feminist and new historicist readings, privileging the stories of the plays’ female protagonists and situating them within the historical context in which they were written and received.¹

The three plays I examine yield three different views on sibling incest: the imagined (“fictional,” as Lois Bueler terms it) but ultimately nonexistent incest between the unrelated Panthea and Ar-

¹I have chosen not to take a psychoanalytic route in this study, primarily because such readings necessarily focus on the actions and motivations of the brothers in each play. However, I recommend Otto Rank’s *The Incest Theme in Literature and Legend* and Luis Zenón’s *In Words and Deeds: the Spectacle of Incest in English Renaissance Tragedy* as psychoanalytic studies in literature at large and, more specifically, Jacobean drama.

ances in *A King and No King*, the unrequited desire of Ferdinand for his sister in *Duchess*, and the seemingly loving and requited incest between *'Tis Pity's* Annabella and Giovanni. In each play, the brothers act as pursuer, the origin of incestuous desire, with their sisters seemingly swept up in the brothers' passions. And yet, the outcomes of the three versions of an incestuous relationship—imagined, unrequited, and requited—depend deeply on the actions of the three female protagonists as they interpret their socialization into self-sacrificial femininity. In submission, rebellion, and attempted subversion, with love or disgust, the heroines of these plays react to the expectations placed on them both by society within the plays and the Jacobean audiences without. Their experiences form a critique of the accepted framework of the family, casting incest not as a corrupting force or even as a symptom of decaying morality, but as a manifestation of the deeply harmful concept of familial ownership of women. The plays call for a complete overhaul of Jacobean family structure; as their heroines prove, working with, without, or within the family present no ways to attain freedom.

Historically, incest was deeply embedded in the shifting cultural conditions and political views of the era encapsulating the reigns of Henry VIII, Elizabeth I, and James I, all three of whom were “threatened” by allegations of incest. These accusations within the royal family should not be viewed as an indication of degenerating morals, but rather as acceptable strategies for creating and preserving power and identity. Henry VIII was the first to employ incest as a political tool in England, divorcing his wife Catherine of Aragon on the biblical grounds of Leviticus 18:16, that to take your brother's wife as your own is to reveal “your brother's nakedness” (McCabe 31). Catherine, who had been married to Henry's brother Arthur, was considered Henry's sister by this injunction, and their marriage of over two decades was incestuous. However, as Richard A. McCabe suggests, “Henry was less concerned with sexual ‘pollution’ than with ridding himself of a partner unable to produce a male heir,” using incest to assign female culpability in Henry's uncertain legacy (McCabe 52). Henry then went on to marry Anne Boleyn, but again used incest as a means to end the marriage, sentencing her to death for alleged adulterous relations with her brother (McCabe 53). To his subjects, Henry portrayed incest as a corrupting force within his family, weakening his lineage and poisoning England's future; in all actuality, however, Henry created these accusations to preserve the status quo of the patriarchal family structure. As Anne's daughter, Elizabeth I was attacked by her enemies as the product of a possibly incestuous union, and yet she too used the language of incest to maintain independent control over the throne, refusing to marry and “[appearing] to her subjects in the multivalent form of mother-wife-virgin” (Boehrer 50). In a world where she was expected to surrender the power of the monarchy to a husband as soon as possible, Elizabeth leveraged the language of incest to retain sovereignty, operating within and upholding patriarchal constructs of femininity. Upon his succession, James I also created his identity in terms of incest as he situated himself as Elizabeth's heir, addressing her in letters as “sister,” “Madam and mother” and signing as “Your most loving and devotid [sic] brother and son,” hoping to escape his position as political outsider and secure his place within the royal family (Boehrer 89). In this way, the language of incest is not only revealed as inherently malleable over the course of multiple monarchies, but also becomes an instrument to preserve patrilineal succession, reinforcing and playing into concepts of women as commodities both at court and on stage.

As the earliest, chronologically, of the three plays, Beaumont and Fletcher's 1611 *A King and No King* sets the scene for later portrayals of incest in a number of compelling ways, even if the play itself is overwhelmingly conventional. *A King and No King* is not as extensively studied, or performed, as *Duchess* or *'Tis Pity*, perhaps because of this conventionality; there is no actual incest, characters consistently play into expected conceptions of gender, class, and age, and when the play is over, nothing of importance has changed, with the exception of a double marriage typical of a comedy. Even the imagined incest is at least reciprocal; as Lois Bueler notes of the play, “a mutually incestuous passion has the moral virtue of not victimizing the unwilling and the psychological disadvantage of being that much more difficult to resist” (Bueler 119). However,

Bueler ignores the lack of female agency that makes the play (and its central relationship) so unsettling; yes, the incest is difficult to resist, but is it even consensual? The heroine, Panthea, throws herself into societal expectations for self-sacrifice, devoting herself to her brother to the point of self-erasure. Beaumont and Fletcher present the audience with a woman complicit in her degradation, providing a warped image of Jacobean ideals, not *corrupted*, but rather taken to their logical conclusion, by incest.

As emblematic of the absurd nature of the play, Arbaces and Panthea are characters whose masculine and feminine traits, those seen as desirable in Jacobean society, are taken to their extremes. Arbaces takes on the mantle of a bull, likening himself to an animal and shifting the connotations of ideal masculinity towards the bestial. The comparison between Arbaces and animalistic passion begins harmlessly enough, as the play opens with the king emerging triumphant from his battle with Tigranes. When Mardonius, the king's advisor, suggests that the king has "talked enough" on his success, Arbaces blusters, "Talked enough!/ While you confine my words, by heaven and earth,/ I were much better be a king of beasts/ Than such a people" (I.i.232-235). If Mardonius seeks to limit his speech, Arbaces argues, he may as well become a dumb animal. But as lust for his sister reaches a fever pitch, Arbaces again asks for this animalistic lack of reason, a stupidity that would allow him to forget both words and morality: "Is there no stop/ To our full happiness but these mere sounds,/ 'Brother' and 'sister'?" (IV.iv.113-114). Rather than facetiously likening himself to "a king of beasts," Arbaces declares he has "lost/ The only difference betwixt man and beast,/ [His] reason," heightening the masculine image of conqueror and killer that he possessed in the first scene (IV.iv.64-66). As such, the "mere sounds" of brother and sister lose their meaning; after all, he asks, "What is there that acknowledges a kindred/ But wretched man? Who ever saw the bull/ Fearfully leave the heifer that he liked/ Because they had one dam?" (IV.iv.135-138). Arbaces' transformation into the animal that copulates with its sibling without troublesome human reason highlights and normalizes the animalistic tendencies inherent in society's concept of ideal masculinity. As Panthea's lady in waiting says to another of the princess's suitors, "The princess hates thee deadly and will sooner/ Be won to marry with a bull, and safer,/ Than such a beast as thou art" (IV.ii.67-69). As Panthea is indeed lawfully married to "the bull" of the play at its close, his animalism is disregarded once the incest has been disproven.

Panthea provides a similarly amplified view of ideal femininity, though where Arbaces' absurd and toxic masculinity pushes him into the realm of the beastly, Panthea's feminine devotion makes her a highly successful sister, though this is no less troubling than Arbaces' failure as a king. Panthea becomes increasingly violent and fanatical in her desire to please her brother and continually elects to deny herself her own agency if it would assuage Arbaces' scorn. Panthea begins this self-destruction on a small scale when Arbaces' orders, "Let me not hear you speak again" (III.i.204). Panthea's reply—"I would I were past speaking"—illustrates her sisterly devotion, but it also demonstrates her willingness to rob herself of her primary mode of communication and defense against the injustice she faces, all in the hopes that it will appease her brother even momentarily (III.i.211). This desire is compounded later in the scene when she reduces herself to "a lost thing... / one not worth the owning," (III.i.224-227). The ambiguity of the word "owning" makes it unclear if she is a possession seeking a master or a daughter with no family to offer her support, but Tigranes' subsequent statement, "Acknowledge yourself mine... / And then see if you want an owner" (III.i.234-235) erases this uncertainty and leaves Panthea as a pawn and an object devoid of agency (*OED*, "own," v. 1a, 3b). Panthea's disenfranchisement at her own hands continues as she wishes herself imprisoned if it will ease Arbaces' distress: "if anything I write/ For my enlarging should beget his anger —/ Heaven be a witness with me, and my faith/ I had rather live entombed here" (IV.i.30-33). Panthea's fanatical duty to her brother leads her to willingly offer up her right to human interaction and free movement. Her devotion is wholehearted and genuine to the point of absurdity, a self-destructive fanaticism that becomes repulsive rather than commendable as the play wears on. Panthea gives a literal meaning to selflessness; where Arbaces' animalistic appetites make him inhuman, Panthea

becomes a nonbeing in her willing self-erasure.

The society of the play itself is pushed to the extremes of Jacobean “immorality” as it facilitates and becomes complicit in Arbaces’ incestuous desire. Bessus the sycophant uses Arbaces’ desire to curry favour with the king; when Arbaces declares Panthea “As far from having part of blood with me/ As the naked Indians,” Bessus replies, “No, marry, she is not [your sister], an’t please your majesty./ I never thought she was; she’s nothing like you” (III.i.173-178). Bessus’ words are as opportunistic as they are unintentionally prophetic. He pushes this mercenary pursuit of approval when he agrees to procure Panthea for Arbaces’ sexual enjoyment: “I’ll do your business as well as they that look better. And when this is dispatched, if you have a mind to your mother, tell me, and you shall see I’ll set it hard” (III.iii.169-172). The line is later echoed by Putana, Annabella’s lascivious nurse in *‘Tis Pity She’s a Whore*, when she says, “What though he be your brother? Your brother’s a man I hope, and I say still, if a young wench feel the fit upon her, let her take anybody, father or brother, all is one” (*‘Tis Pity* II.i.42-45). However, Putana’s declaration of sexual free-for-all is tempered by her genuine affection for her charge; Bessus offers to procure both sister and mother as per his political opportunism: “I will do anything without exception, be it a good, bad or indifferent thing” (III.iii.141-142). With the trappings of morality stripped away, Bessus’ proposal lays bare the mercenary exchange of women within the Jacobean conception of the family. This political scheming and reduction of women to pawns can also be seen in Ligones’ speech to Tigranes upon the discovery that his daughter Spaconia will become queen. “Then I have made a fair hand; I called her a whore. If I shall speak now as her father, I cannot choose but greatly rejoice that she shall be a queen. But if I should speak to you as a statesman, she were more fit to be your whore” (V.ii.68-72). Ligones can only approach the marriage as a business transaction; on one hand, he stands to benefit from the political influence he will wield as father of the queen, but he also cannot help but view Spaconia as an inferior commodity. Completely divorced from his interpretation of the match is consideration for his daughter’s happiness or security. The system of exchange allows no concern over the emotions and safety of women; incest, far from revealing a developing immorality in the system, displays its cool amorality, the chilling lack of compassion and inhumanity upon which it is built.

Inevitably, the truth of Arbaces’ parentage is revealed; he is no king, and the true heir is Panthea. Yet as soon as her right is revealed, Arbaces engages her in marriage. She literally only has time to voice confusion—“Why kneel you to me/ That am your vassal?”—before Arbaces asks her to marry him, not even sharing with her the reality of her birthright, instead merely correcting her title from princess to queen a few lines later in typical Arbacean afterthought (V.iv.331-332). Any hope for female agency in the play is snuffed out before it can draw breath, as Panthea is made queen and relegated to consort almost immediately. As Boehrer phrases it, in *A King and No King*, “the institution of marriage translates female sovereignty...into patriarchy...while at the same time consolidating and strengthening the structures of royal inheritance” (Boehrer 101). Ultimately nothing has changed in the play; married to Panthea, Arbaces will soon be king again, and having learned nothing but his true heritage, none of the “passions” that make him a poor king have been resolved. He remains as changeable and violent as ever, declaring of Gobrius’ tale, “Why, I will have them that know it racked/ To get this from ‘em,” showing an unsettling mixture of joy in his absolution from incest and an eagerness to resort to torture undesirable in a king (V.iv.262-263). Panthea is no less fanatical in her devotion to Arbaces, responding that she will marry him “more willingly than I would draw this air,” showing a need for his approval more pressing than breathing (V.iv.337). Bueler argues that “the marriage of Arbaces and Panthea is clearly appropriate; in fact, it is utterly necessary for the well-being of the nation,” and yet the very marriage Mardonius warned against—“if you do this crime, you ought to have no laws”—is taking place and Iberia clearly suffers for it (Bueler 144, III.iii.98-99). In fact, the marriage may have inauspiciously recalled, for some audiences, Claudius’ rotten court in *Hamlet*: “Therefore our sometime sister, now our queen...” (*Hamlet* I.ii.8). Bessus remains in Arbaces’ favour despite his dangerous lack of loyalty, and the

kingdom is as insular as ever. Panthea marries almost literally “within the family,” foregoing, from a political standpoint, the very external ties the exchange of women via marriage is meant to cement. Instead, the agreement of peace between Tigranes and Arbaces is maintained not through marriage or ransom, but simply by spoken agreement:

ARBACES

Will you go
With me and help me? Pray you, do.

TIGRANES

I will.

(V.iv.351-353)

This agreement seems less than binding, especially considering both men have been proved “more unconstant/ Than all ill women ever were together” over the course of the play (IV.ii.48-49). Largely, the kingdom and characters have weathered the debacle unchanged.

One would imagine, in mending the play’s incest, that the world of *A King and No King* would be transformed, wickedness punished and morality rewarded. Indeed, on a surface level, the happy ending portrays James’s reign as setting England to rights, rescuing the monarchy from Elizabeth’s womanly control and safely resituating it in male hands. But the incest is merely a symptom of the larger social ills that plague the play’s society. The kingdom remains unchanged because, for all intents and purposes, Arbaces and Panthea are still the siblings they always were; Arbaces, instead of learning to view Panthea as more than “a heifer that he liked,” is saved from actually having to curb his animalistic lust, while Panthea gladly transfers her devotion from brother to husband, never mind that they’re the same person. She is rewarded for her self-destructive willingness to please her brother in a fairytale ending, and yet not so, as her kingdom is snatched from her hands and its care placed back into the control of a man who would both praise her and imprison her in the same breath. Instead of being transformed into “humans,” the “siblings” are merely half-heartedly translated into “lovers;” “there is no difference between sibling affection and sexual desire” because the distinction has never been enforced (McCabe 199-200). Incest is not the problem; rather, the inhumanity inherent in the family structure emerges from the play’s absurdity, making the comedy surprisingly sinister and hollow.

Where Panthea gives herself over entirely to her role as self-sacrificial daughter, sister, and wife, the Duchess of Malfi breaks entirely with the role she is expected to play within her family, denying both the obligations and the incestuous desire her brother sets in store for her. *The Duchess of Malfi*, first performed in 1613, two years after *A King and No King*, moves deeper into the territory of actual incest; although Ferdinand’s lust for his sister in the play is not reciprocated, his threats to possess her body, mind, and soul nonetheless play on societal expectations for women to gratify the needs of their male family members, whether through advantageous marriages or, as suggested in *Duchess*, their more carnal desires.² In presenting a heroine who refutes both societal expectations and her brother’s incestuous advances, Webster contrasts Panthea’s blithe acquiescence with a more rebellious Duchess.

The Duchess’s desire to break with the expectations of her family occurs almost immediately in the play: she marries her household steward in the first scene, and she is not shy about voicing her rebellion, nor does she think herself outside her rights as a human being for doing so.

²Bueler writes, “The pathological insistence of Ferdinand... upon reserving his sister’s sexual activities to his own purposes, and his fevered imaginings when he cannot, are sufficient for including the play in my corpus of incest dramas” (Bueler 138). For an overview of the scholarly work on the presence of incest in the play, see Frank Whigham’s “Sexual and Social Mobility in *The Duchess of Malfi*.”

DUCHESS

Why might not I marry?
I have not gone about, in this, to create
Any new world, or custom.

FERDINAND

Thou art undone.
And thou hast ta'en that massy sheet of lead
That hid thy husband's bones, and folded it
About my heart.

(III.ii.109-114)

This exchange between the Duchess and Ferdinand illustrates the interplay between the Duchess's refusal to adhere to social norms and her brother's incestuous desire. In flouting her brothers' injunctions to remain unmarried, the Duchess exhibits a dangerous level of female agency and freedom that, within contemporary Jacobean opinion, would need to be curtailed to preserve family harmony, reputation, and social prospects. But the Duchess breaks with these expectations in marrying Antonio, especially in a private ceremony detached from Church and state authority. Although Richard Adair points out that clandestine marriages "were genuine, valid, and binding marriages under canon law," David Cressy complicates this fact in claiming, "[Weddings] were supposed to take place in open church, in public view, at times when witnesses could easily observe the proceedings. . . [Clandestine weddings] were treated as seriously deficient" (Adair 140, Cressy 317-318). Of her *per verba de presenti* ceremony, the Duchess asks, "How can the church bind faster" than her own work (I.i.491)? In his commentary on the play, Roger Stilling claims that the Duchess' brothers have forced her into a smothering, furtive relationship, dooming her to live "a secret marriage and a secret life" (Stilling 241). However, I argue that the Duchess's "secret marriage" is less an act of fear and failed subversion, but rather a clean break from her brothers' expectations.

To Ferdinand, the Duchess claims, "I have not gone about, in this, to create/ Any new world, or custom," but it is impossible that she could have married Antonio, a man far below her station, without flying in the face of the world and customs in which she lives. A world in which she could marry so wastefully, squandering her family's political capital on the mere steward of her household and removing herself from the marriage market, would need to be entirely new and separate, and so the Duchess breaks from her brothers and creates her own family. The Duchess continually transgresses against the accepted norms of her society in the play. She revels in her low-born husband, telling Ferdinand later, "when I choose/ A husband, I will marry for your honor;" having already married Antonio, she either means that Ferdinand's (and their family's) honor is worth no more than a steward, or that the brothers' marital scheming is dishonorable and must be nipped in the bud (III.ii.43-44). The Duchess even jokes, in asking for her death, "The Church enjoins fasting;/ I will starve myself to death" (IV.i.75-76). As a Janus-faced word, "enjoin" might mean "to prescribe authoritatively" or conversely "to forbid," but the Duchess scorns the Church in either usage; either she perverts a traditional display of piety into assisting her suicide, or she flouts the authority of the Church in ignoring their rules (*OED*, "enjoin," v. 2a, 3). The Duchess glories in her freedom and irreverence, painting a threatening (though not unsympathetic) portrait of female agency.

The Duchess attempts to break entirely with her family, inadvertently creating a "new world" removed from obligation and subjugation. Ferdinand begins his revenge for this rebellion by displaying wax figures of her husband and children, watching the reveal from offstage and remarking triumphantly to Bosola afterwards, "Excellent: as I would wish; she's plagu'd in art," meaning that the figures are in fact wax and not the actual corpses of the Duchess's loved ones (IV.i.111). However, his statement alludes to the Duchess's "art" or artifice: her marriage to Antonio and the

concealment of her husband and children from her brothers for three years. Here, Ferdinand makes it clear that he feels he is matching the Duchess lie for lie, tormenting his sister with the false image of her dead family just as she has tormented Ferdinand in the discovery of her secret marriage. Shortly after receiving word of his sister's decision to wed again, and presumably far below her station, Ferdinand seethes to the Cardinal,

FERDINAND

Methinks I see her laughing -
Excellent hyena! - talk to me somewhat, quickly,
Or imagination will carry me
To see her in the shameful act of sin.

CARDINAL

With whom?

FERDINAND

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

(II.v.38-46)

It is tempting to focus on the lowliness of the Duchess's imagined partners, but I believe McCabe is correct when he writes, "[Ferdinand] uses the issues of rank as a cover for increasingly prurient and explicit sexual fantasies" (McCabe 251). Ferdinand does not merely abhor the pollution of his blood through social mobility; unlike his brother, Ferdinand wants to keep the Duchess to himself. While both brothers expect to exert complete control over their sister's availability for remarriage, they go about it in different ways. Ferdinand tells the Duchess, "Marry, they are most luxurious/ Will wed twice," (I.i.297-298) signaling his expectation that she will not marry again at all, whereas the Cardinal warns, "You may flatter yourself,/ And take *your own choice*: privately be married/ Under the eaves of night," illustrating that it is merely her choice of husband that would be suspect in such a situation, not the idea of remarriage in general (I.i.316-318, emphasis mine). The idea of these menial workers allows Ferdinand to persevere on his own sexual betrayal under the guise of "threatened aristocracy," visualizing partner after partner for his sister, both blowing the wrongdoing of her marriage out of proportion and driving himself to distraction (Whigham "Incest and Ideology" 266). Ferdinand drives himself half-mad simply because he cannot gain access to the Duchess' sexuality, which he believes he is owed under the Jacobean conception of the family. His lust is not transgressive, but rather socially sanctioned and threatened by the Duchess' defiance.

After revealing the wax figures, Bosola begs Ferdinand to end the torture and allow his sister to take holy orders: "Send her a penitential garment to put on/ Next to her delicate skin, and furnish her/ With beads and prayer-books" to atone for her deception (IV.i.119-121). To which Ferdinand replies, "Damn her! that body of hers,/ While that my blood ran pure in't, was more worth/ Than that which thou wouldst comfort, call'd a soul" (IV.i.121-123). While Ferdinand wants to control and crush the Duchess via his imprisonment and psychological torture, he cares nothing for her soul, the one aspect of his sister to which Ferdinand has neither access nor ties of kinship. He even refuses to concede that the Duchess *has* a soul, a blasphemous and dehumanizing claim that pushes his treatment of his sister towards its predictable (though unsettling) conclusion: she is an unfeeling, unthinking object. His fetishization of their siblinghood falls into sharp relief in his declaration of ownership over the blood running pure through her veins, and thus the body powered by that blood, mirroring a similar statement in his exchange with the Cardinal, when he says, "I could kill her now,/ In you, or in myself, for I do think/ It is some sin in us, heaven doth revenge/ By

her” (II.v.63-66). Ferdinand references both the blood and sin shared by the siblings, manifesting in all three of them, but he believes the Duchess’ sin is a reflection on the two brothers rather than a consequence and manifestation of the Duchess’ personal choice and agency. These feelings of ownership prompt wildly disproportionate punishments on the part of Ferdinand; he swears,

I will send her masques of common courtesans,
Have her meat serv’d up by bawds and ruffians,
And cause she’ll needs be mad, I am resolv’d. . .
(IV.i.124-126)

Ferdinand will surround her with filth because in his opinion her body is now tainted and useless, and although Bosola argues her soul may yet be saved (though whether it needs saving at all is debatable), the Duchess has denied Ferdinand access to her body and withheld from the Cardinal the potential for political and monetary advancement in her remarriage. In removing herself from this equation, she is useless within the patriarchal paradigm of the family.

This perceived uselessness removes any qualms the brothers might have had about killing her, and in her last words before her strangulation, the Duchess condemns her brothers for their immorality in combining the concepts of death and feasting.

DUCHESS
Go tell my brothers, when I am laid out,
They then may feed in quiet.
They strangle her.
(IV.ii.234-235)

To “lay out” means, “to stretch out and prepare (a body) for burial. . . to knock (a person) unconscious; to kill” (*OED*, “lay out,” v.1). The Duchess tells Bosola bitterly that after she is silenced in death, her brothers will be able to go about their lives in peace, no longer troubled by her willfulness or scandalous remarriage. However, the close proximity of the word “laid” to the description of eating also links the phrase to another definition: “to set out (a table), to spread (the cloth), place in order (the plates, dishes, knives and forks, etc.) in preparation for a meal” (*OED*, “lay,” v.1 35b). Although the addition of the word “out” to the line partially clouds this interpretation, the Duchess’ choice to depict her brothers *eating* in peace lends significance to the image of the Duchess’ body being laid out like a feast. The use of the verb “feed,” only rarely used to describe the conventional eating habits of humans, harshly portrays her brothers as vultures digging into her corpse (*OED*, “feed,” v. 1c, 1d). Earlier in the scene, when the Duchess asks, “Who am I?” of Bosola, presumably to understand what he thinks she has done to deserve murder, he likens her to rotted food: “Thou art a box of worm-seed, at best, but a salvatory of green mummy:—what’s this flesh? a little crudded milk, fantastical puff-paste” (IV.ii.124-126). Yet here, the Duchess denies this association, stating, “I am Duchess of Malfi still,” refusing to be labeled by her murderer and, by extension, her brothers (IV.ii.141). Her later choice to portray herself as a feast set out for her family can therefore be understood as deliberate and sarcastically self-sacrificial.

The Duchess recognizes her brothers’ expectation of complete control over her body, personal choices, and external assets, and parodies such fraternal authority in her final words. In describing an image of a cannibalistic feast, she posits her brothers’ literal consumption of her body as the only remaining act of oppression they can force upon her, having already trapped and fed on her agency, her wealth, and her mind. She uses her final words to condemn their morality as well as to justify her marriage as an escape from the entrapment forced upon her. The rebellion that typifies the Duchess’ character carries through to her last words as she argues that her brothers’ actions, not her own, are the transgressions against moral decency.

The Duchess’ rebellion, though surprisingly sympathetic, is nonetheless unsuccessful, but where saintly Panthea receives a disappointing quasi-reward for her adherence to societal expectations,

the Duchess is martyred for her refusal of familial obligations. In the same way that Panthea's depressing marriage twists the expectations of comedy as a genre, *Duchess* toys with the audience's expectations of revenge tragedy as well. Ferdinand pursues vengeance for the wrongs the Duchess has leveled against his lust and their family's honor, and yet, it is the Duchess who wins the audience's favor as she privileges her happiness above the machinations of her brothers. But the Duchess too is ground under the heel of the family, not married to her "brother" like Panthea, but meeting a far more final end in strangulation at the hands of her oppressors. Beaumont and Fletcher illustrate that under such subjection, one must not give in to one's ownership; in *Duchess*, Webster shows that breaking from it entirely is no better option.

So what about striking a happy medium? Twenty years after *The Duchess of Malfi*, John Ford's *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* ruminates on the concept of sibling incest and again pushes it further toward the scandalous, presenting an ostensibly consensual incestuous relationship with which the audience is maneuvered into sympathizing. Alongside Annabella, the audience is presented with a series of suitors, all unfeeling, unchaste, or uncouth; it is unsurprising when she picks the least offensive, and most loving, of the bunch, who also happens to be her brother. To maintain the relationship, Annabella incorporates strategies demonstrated by both Panthea and the Duchess and attempts to subvert her family's ownership of her body and mind by perversely taking a lover from *within* the family, attempting to twist her incestuous relationship into a tool to further her own ends.

Giovanni's words immediately after he stabs his sister—"Thus die, and die by me, and by my hand./ Revenge is mine; honour doth love command," the idea that honour must keep love in check—apply to the ordeals of both siblings in the play (V.v.85-86). However, the phrase provides a case study of gendered inequality, based on the connotations of and inherent inequality in the word "honour" and how these expectations relate to the preservation and repression of love in Jacobean society. Within the context of the scene in which it is spoken, the phrase refers to Giovanni's "necessary" killing of Annabella to keep her out of Soranzo's bed. While Annabella turns from their incest in an attempt to repent, as "there's but a dining-time/ 'Twixt us and our confusion," Giovanni interprets her refusal as evidence of her faithlessness and sudden preference for Soranzo: "What, changed so soon? Hath your new sprightly lord/ Found out a trick in night games more than we/ Could know in our simplicity?" (V.v.17-18, V.v.1-3). Giovanni sees Annabella much as Putana does earlier in the play, taking any man available when she "[feels] the fit upon her:" "greedy of variety of lust" (II.i.44, II.v.42). Giovanni's honor, and that of men in general in *'Tis Pity*, relies on the ownership of women and the appearance of their unquestioning obedience. When Soranzo raises his sword against Annabella earlier in the play, threatening to kill her and the unknown father of her child, Vasquez warns him, "Sir, in any case smother your revenge; leave the scenting-out your wrongs to me. Be ruled, as you respect your honour, or you mar all" (IV.iii.98-100). If Soranzo is known to have taken his revenge himself, he exposes Annabella's disobedience and makes public his cuckoldry; for the sake of his honour, this revenge must be undertaken out of the public eye. Soranzo makes a show of forgiving Annabella, but immediately after she exits, he reveals, "I carry Hell about me; all my blood / Is fired in swift revenge," making his image of benevolent honor and masculinity an act designed to facilitate his revenge in secret (IV.iii.148-149).

Giovanni, however, throws public opinion to the wind by killing Annabella himself, showing a lack of concern for both heavenly and popular judgment, but his revenge also hinges on his concept of ownership over his sister. Giovanni's jealousy is not brought to critical mass until Annabella refuses to sleep with him; the idea of sharing Annabella with Soranzo is abhorrent, but the reality of the transfer of her ownership into an exclusive relationship with her new husband is untenable. "Honour doth love command," and Giovanni kills his sister to enact revenge on both her and Soranzo and to recalibrate his ownership over Annabella. The repetition of the first person singular immediately after the murder emphasizes this ownership, especially in its use of the sexual euphemism for orgasm "to die": "die by *me*, and by *my* hand" (V.v.85, emphasis mine). His justification for the murder is

not merely emotional, but borne out of societal expectations of Annabella's unquestioning obedience and exclusivity; if Giovanni's honour requires her death, then she should (and must) die.

Giovanni's public (and gory) revenge alienates him from the community in a way his incest did not. Ronald Huebert writes of the lovers, "For Giovanni and Annabella, love is a force that excludes them from society; by glorifying their act of incest they try to place themselves above the little world of Parma" (Huebert 80). This may be true for Giovanni's love (it is certainly true for his revenge), but Annabella's goal is *not* the Duchess', to create a new world and custom with Giovanni. Annabella genuinely desires to fit into the accepted family structure without sacrificing her own happiness, but Giovanni would rather transcend morality than subvert or escape the family. Like Arbaces, Giovanni too wants to forego language—"Shall a peevish sound,/ A customary form, from man to man,/ Of brother and sister, be a bar/ 'Twixt my perpetual happiness and me?"—but he would rather rise above the crudity of human words than surrender to beastliness. He is the Jove to Annabella's lesser Leda, more than man (II.i.16). However, Annabella, as woman, is definitely less than man; in fact, throughout the play, she is several times called "creature:" "wretched creature," "sweet creature," "deceitful creature" (III.vi.6, IV.i.46, IV.iii.110), with creature meaning, simultaneously, "a created thing or being" and "a person who owes his or her fortune, and is subservient to, a patron" (*OED*, "creature," n. 1a, 4). Annabella, and all women of the time, were considered beings created, shaped by, and owing their allegiance and loyalty to the men in their lives, and a woman is only valuable if she displays appropriate obedience to the appropriate men: fathers, brothers, husbands. Annabella's actions in her incestuous relationship with Giovanni push the boundaries of this concept of honour; she transgresses by surrendering her virginity outside of marriage and risking the public exposure of her pregnancy, but under the logic of ideal femininity, this disgrace would be mitigated by the fact that she has obeyed the whims of her brother, a man to whom as an unmarried woman she owes unquestioning loyalty.

Annabella's story begins falling into the example set by Panthea as her socialization into self-sacrifice is pushed to its logical conclusion; Giovanni's position of power in their relationship prevents her subversion of the family from succeeding, and she is forced to take on the self-erasing feminine ideal, while those around her ignore her well-being to maintain their appearance of honour. Annabella conceives a child, "normally—as in *The Duchess of Malfi*—a life symbol... always associated with sickness and death rather than health;" it is the proliferation of the family through incest that precipitates Annabella and Giovanni's downfall (Stilling 271). When Annabella must hide her pregnancy, Friar Bonaventura encourages her to marry Soranzo: "First, for your honour's safety, that you marry/ The Lord Soranzo; next, to save your soul,/ Leave off this life, and henceforth live to him" (III.iv.36-38). Of paramount importance is the appearance of being correctly ruled by the correct men in a marriage to a titled man outside of her family, while of secondary importance is actually ceasing her incestuous relations with Giovanni. The Friar places less import on Annabella's soul than on preventing the public knowledge of her sexual relationship with her brother, which would jeopardize the honour of her brother, father, and family. This idea of socially-mandated self-sacrifice for women is furthered by the technique - "spiritual terror" - that the Friar uses to bargain with Annabella (McCabe 238). While with Giovanni he attempts reason ("These are no school points; nice philosophy/ May tolerate unlikely arguments,/ But Heaven admits no jest" (I.i.2-4)) and offers alternatives ("Look through the world,/ And thou shalt see a thousand faces shine/ More glorious than this idol thou ador'st" (I.i.59-61)), with Annabella the Friar resorts to petty scare tactics.

FRIAR

I am glad to see this penance; for believe me,
You have unripped a soul so foul and guilty,
As I must tell you true, I marvel how
The earth hath borne you up. But weep, weep on,
These tears may do you good; weep faster yet,

Whiles I do read a lecture.

ANNABELLA

Wretched creature!

FRIAR

Ay, you are wretched, miserably wretched,
Almost condemned alive.

(III.iv.1-8)

He emphasizes how the siblings' incest has damned Giovanni and how he will inevitably view it as entirely his sister's fault: "Then you shall hear/ How he will cry, 'O, would my wicked sister/ Had first been damned, when she did yield to lust!'" (III.iv.28-30). Not only are both their damnations solely Annabella's fault for surrendering to Giovanni's advances, but any hope her brother has of redemption lies with her; to the Friar, her soul is merely a bargaining chip to be leveraged to secure her brother's salvation. The Friar never brings up the damnation of Annabella's soul in his attempts to sway Giovanni from his incestuous desire; the state of a woman's spiritual condemnation is trivial when compared with the possibility of saving a man's reputation.

As the play progresses, Annabella becomes aware of the inequity surrounding the self-sacrificial nature of female honour. She discusses the transactional nature of her marriage with Soranzo:

ANNABELLA

You were deceived in me: 'twas not for love
I chose you, but for honour. Yet know this,
Would you be patient yet, and hide your shame,
I'd see whether I could love you.

SORANZO

Excellent quean!

Why, art thou not with child?

ANNABELLA

What needs all this,
When 'tis superfluous? I confess I am.

SORANZO

Tell me by whom.

ANNABELLA

Soft, sir, 'twas not in my bargain.

(IV.iii.21-28)

Annabella has cottoned on to the idea that her worth is entirely dependent upon and only useful for enhancing male honour, and she bald-facedly engages with this role, reducing her marriage to a "bargain," a mercenary negotiation for her brother's salvation. She even places Soranzo in a traditionally feminine position, asking him to "be patient yet, and hide [his] shame," as honour in *'Tis Pity* depends not on actual moral character, but rather on "hiding one's shame" and preserving the illusion of purity at all costs. She seems to glory in the idea that, for a moment, she has reversed the paradigm of sacrifice within the play. Rather than women's honour depending upon and bolstering

men's (as in the case of Hippolita, whose reputation is ruined in her affair with Soranzo while he escapes the rumors unscathed), in marrying the pregnant Annabella, Soranzo's reputation depends on his acceptance of her unfaithfulness.

However, as the scene draws to a close, Soranzo reasserts the paradigm by threatening Annabella with violence to achieve his revenge, retaking the toxic masculine norm. Annabella, meanwhile, is relegated to the role of object to be acted upon, stating that she will attain revenge via her death: "strike, and strike home./ I leave revenge behind and thou shalt feel't" (IV.iii.70-71). In killing her, Soranzo will inevitably reveal his shame and his loss of control over his wife, destroying his reputation. But Annabella's eventual revenge, even in its passivity, backfires just as Hippolita's does as she tries to poison Soranzo. Though both Soranzo and Annabella die by Giovanni's hand, it is not Soranzo who bears the brunt of shame, or indeed any shame at all. It is Annabella who is declared a whore in the last line of the play, and rather than ruining Soranzo's reputation, her memory is dragged through the mud upon her death. The reassertion of the standard treatment of women also manifests in Annabella's manic singing as Soranzo begins to threaten her life and the life of her unborn child. In Italian, she sings, "*Che morte piu dolce che morire per amore? . . . / Morendo in grazia a lui, morirei senza dolere*" (IV.iii.59, 63). Translated, she asks, "What death is sweeter than to die for love? Dying in favour with him, I could die without pain" (Lomax 353). *Grazia*, rather than "favour," may alternatively translate to "grace," meaning that to die in Giovanni's grace would be a satisfying and painless death. She thus places Giovanni at the level of God and casts herself as a zealous devotee in his grace. Annabella voices the heart of female self-sacrifice, a senselessness treated as a norm in Jacobean England; if a woman can die in favour with the men in her life, nothing else matters.

Compared to Panthea's bittersweet marriage and the Duchess' principled martyrdom, Annabella's murder and subsequent defamation is gutting. Arguably taking the most reasonable route through the quagmire of familial obligation in attempting to subvert her subjugation from within the patriarchal system, Annabella's reward is to be remembered fondly by no one. In fact, none of the women in the play even approach a happy ending; "the impossibility of marriage within the framework of reference of the play and the only alternatives that appear open to a woman—to be an object of exchange, called a whore, or dispatched to a convent—points to the theme of sterility," of the discontinuation of the family (Marienstras 197). In *'Tis Pity*, Ford exhausts the options of a woman working against oppression at the most basic level. The doors to agency close on women one by one, leaving only the overhaul of the entire patriarchal family structure, the cessation of the ownership and "protection" of women by their male relatives, as a viable option for equality.

If incest is merely the traditional Jacobean family structure pushed to its extreme, one might consider the outcomes of these heroines—in which marrying an abusive and unstable buffoon is the most hopeful fate of the three—to paint a very bleak picture of society. What is a woman to do, if she can't acquiesce to, escape, or undermine these oppressive systems? But in using incest to show the inherent flaws in the family, these playwrights remove the burden of navigating exploitation from women's shoulders. Incest is no longer only a "woeful woman's tragedy," an exclusively feminine problem that, while unfortunate, is relegated to the realm of isolated occurrence too insular to be dealt with by the larger community (*'Tis Pity* V.i.8). Rather, these plays pose incest not as a corrupting yet contained force, but rather as an illustration of the flaws that are the responsibility of society at large.

Whether through revulsion at Panthea's self-erasure, unexpected enthusiasm for the Duchess' rallying cry for escape, or pity for Annabella the "whore," these plays open the door to the audience's questioning of the ownership of women and the toxic masculinity inherent in the familial status quo. In turn, the plays interrogate the very basis of society: the patrilineal and patriarchal structure that feeds all families, from nuclear to royal. As England moved further away from Elizabeth's reign, the disparity in power between men and women grew more and more apparent as the Elizabethan ideal of accessible female agency grew more and more distant. Discussion of incest has of course

not stopped with Jacobean incest plays, and its inclusion in the burgeoning art form of Renaissance theater paved the way for its presence in subsequent emerging art forms: the novel, film, and television. As demonstrated in Jacobean drama, incest becomes a way to expose and condemn less specific but unfortunately more pervasive forms of gendered violence: domestic abuse, trafficking, and rape. Modern-day problematization of incest and the feelings of patriarchal entitlement that foster it owe much to the pioneering efforts of Beaumont, Fletcher, Webster, and Ford. Under the scandalous cover of writing about incest, *A King and No King*, *The Duchess of Malfi*, and *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* exercise their truly revolutionary stances on family disillusionment and dissolution, opening a closed world and giving voices to the women trapped in tragedy.

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