

## Continuum Renaissance Drama

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*Continuum Renaissance Drama* offers practical and accessible introductions to the critical and performative contexts of key Elizabethan and Jacobean plays. Each guide introduces the text's critical and performance history but also provides students with an invaluable insight into the landscape of current scholarly research through a keynote essay on the state of the art and newly commissioned essays of fresh research from different critical perspectives.

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# ***THE DUCHESS OF MALFI***

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A Critical Guide

***Edited by Christina Luckyj***



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- Eileen Allman, *Jacobean Revenge Tragedy and the Politics of Virtue* (Newark and London: Associated University Presses, 1999).
20. Susan D. Amussen, 'Gender, Family and the Social Order, 1560-1725' in *Order and Disorder in Early Modern England*, ed. by Anthony Fletcher and John Stevenson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 196-217.
21. My argument here recapitulates some of chap. 4 in Leah S. Marcus, *Puzzling Shakespeare: Local Reading and Its Discontents* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1988), pp. 160-211. Readers who would like more documentation of some of the controversies discussed here will find it in that much fuller treatment.
22. G. C. Moore Smith, ed., *William Heminges's Elegy on Randolph's Finger* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1923), p. 12.

## CHAPTER SIX

### 'Can this be certain?': The Duchess of Malfi's Secrets

Frances E. Dolan

*The Duchess of Malfi* is famous for its remarkable, indeed improbably sustained, secrets: a clandestine marriage concealed even from a resident spy; three pregnancies whose paternity remains unknown to most members of the household; and, more generally, overdetermined and thus obscured motives. Why do the Duchess's brothers oppose her second marriage so vehemently? Why doesn't she grasp how deadly serious their prohibitions are? The play offers us glimpses of intimate moments – bedtime banter between lovers, maternal solicitousness – but those peeks at a cherished but imperiled familial life raise as many questions as they answer. The play freights the Duchess and Antonio's interactions with meaning, teasing us with brief disclosures and drawing our attention to their relationship in large part by making it a secret. But we cannot be sure what we are seeing or what it means, not just because the play withholds this information but because, I will argue, the play insists that one can never be sure about other people's intentions and relationships.

While the play marks what happens between the Duchess and Antonio as deeply interesting to the audience as well as to Ferdinand and to a lesser extent the Cardinal, their relationship is secret rather than private, as several critics have pointed out. Dympna Callaghan describes their marriage as 'perpetually clandestine.' Wendy Wall describes that clandestinity as 'the Duchess's idiosyncratic choice.'<sup>1</sup> Although the audience is in on the fact that the Duchess and Antonio

are married, the couple's experience of or feelings about their marriage remain almost as unknowable to viewers and readers as they are to the Duchess's dangerous brothers. The play, in its emphasis on the excessively and eccentrically secretive, draws our attention to the ways in which all intimate relationships are, to some extent, clandestine, mysteries to their participants as well as to the most zealous observer.

Research into privacy in the early modern period has tended to emphasize that it did not yet exist as we now understand it. The early modern household was embedded in larger networks of relationship and accountable to them; it was vulnerable to scrutiny and intervention from within and without; its walls were riddled with fissures through which co-habitants and neighbours peeped and listened – and then often reported what they'd learned; even its beds and bedchambers were routinely shared. In the play, for instance, Cariola confesses that she 'lies with' the Duchess 'often' and finds her 'the sprawlignest bedfellow' (3.2.11, 13). She depicts this sleeping arrangement as unremarkable. Many households were filled with relatives and servants like Cariola who not only witnessed but participated in the most intimate of interactions. As Wall points out, for instance, 'all four of the primary conjugal husband-wife scenes that critics see as showing the heightened emotional intensity of marital intimacy include Cariola as an active participant.'<sup>2</sup>

Given such material conditions, Lena Orlin argues, 'For most Elizabethans, privacy was less a material condition than a consensual act'. That is, privacy did not automatically attach to a particular place, utterance, action or relationship. It required a conscious choice, and often a contested one. While many scholars have assumed that privacy was emerging as a new value in this period, Orlin emphasizes that, if so, it was suspected more than desired: 'to many [...] privacy seemed a menace to public well-being. It threatened to deprive people of knowledge to which they thought they were entitled and about which they felt a sense of social responsibility.'<sup>3</sup> This entitlement justified vigilant inquiry into what happened behind closed doors. In *The Duchess of Malfi*, Ferdinand insists he is entitled to knowledge of his sister's sexual conduct and that it cannot be kept from him. As he warns her, 'Your darkest actions – nay, your privatest thoughts, / Will come to light' (1.1.231–2). Apparently, he wants her dark actions and private thoughts to be revealed to him, but not to others. He later complains that she was 'too much i' th' light' (4.1.41) – too exposed by her 'own choice' and her 'own way' to public talk (1.2.233, 237). As the play shows, while the contested and compromised nature of 'privacy' ensured that secrets usually came to light, there were also epistemological barriers to interpreting the meaning of those secrets. Even when Ferdinand spies on the

Duchess talking to Antonio at bedtime, he fails to ascertain Antonio's identity. More to the point, he cannot understand the nature of their attachment. And neither, really, can we. In Ferdinand, then, the play depicts an entitlement to knowledge as both destructive and doomed to failure. Drawing our attention to the relationship between the Duchess and Antonio and thwarting our attempts to understand it, the play both provokes our desire to know and invites us to question that desire.

Much critical ink has been spilled about the Duchess and Antonio's marriage, which the two transact between them with Cariola as witness. Are they really married? Although the play is set in Italy, many critics focus on trying to reconstruct the attitudes towards such a marriage in the play's first English audiences. By the seventeenth century in England, it was widely accepted that marriages should be advertised in advance by the calling of banns three times, solemnized in open church by a minister, and recorded in the parish register. Still, many marriages were transacted outside of these rules and they remained binding nonetheless. Such couples might be brought before a church court for their 'irregularity' and punished for their conduct by excommunication, penance or a fee. But unless one spouse or the other was already married to someone else, the marriage could not be dissolved, especially if the couple had children. So if Antonio and the Duchess both agree that they are married and that he is the father of their children, and Cariola stands as their witness, as do members of the audience (as Huston Diehl points out), then their marriage would probably have seemed valid to most people who saw the play whether or not they thought it advisable.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, the Duchess's action under clearly exceptional circumstances harks back to older Catholic modes of solemnizing marriage and anticipates the actions of religious non-conformists who resisted the regulation of marriage by the Church of England.

Although the audience is invited into the secret that the Duchess and Antonio are married, we are also shown that the legitimacy of this marriage is illegible to everyone who lives with them except Cariola. The spouses are themselves the sole authorities on their status. For characters who have not witnessed the secret marriage, as we in the audience have, the uncertainty of their marital status raises doubt as to whether they are married or merely living in sin and casts doubt on their children's legitimacy. They can adduce no minister or document to make their case. No one in the play can know for sure; everyone must take the couple's word for it. Such an undocumented marriage helps us understand why a system of public solemnization, licensing and registration emerged in this period – without it a marriage is open to dispute. As we see in *The Duchess of Malfi*, her brothers can intervene because it is not absolutely clear to everyone that she is married and to whom. If

Antonio disputed the marriage – in a different kind of tragedy – the Duchess would have only Cariola to help support her side of the story.<sup>5</sup>

But if their circumstances are distinctive, their leap of faith is not. Marriage, the play suggests, is always a 'dangerous venture' (1.2. 263). The future is unscripted, unpredictable, a 'wilderness' without path or guide (even when one behaves conventionally) (1.2.274–6). Many critics have argued that the play affirms the ideal of companionable equality between spouses, 'ordinary earthly sexual desire', and maternal care.<sup>6</sup> But even when critics agree that the relationship between the Duchess and Antonio is a love match, they disagree as to whether we should admire or censure the Duchess for setting so high a priority on her own happiness. For a Duchess, is this 'dangerously naïve' or even irresponsible, as an earlier generation of critics argued?<sup>7</sup> Or is insisting on love a visionary, progressive, or even subversive insistence on an emergent and better ideal?<sup>8</sup> The Duchess demands of Ferdinand, 'Why might not I marry? / I have not gone about, in this, to create / Any new world or custom' (3.2.108–10). But for many critics the Duchess's insistence on marrying a second time, choosing her own mate and preferring her steward is innovative and therefore admirable. From this perspective, the Duchess's insistence on what she presents as normative and unremarkable becomes oppositional whether she wants it to be or not.

How best might one describe the relationship between the two once they are married? Some critics emphasize that the Duchess sustains the advantage of her rank throughout the marriage; she remains Duchess of Malfi still, and mistress of her household, while Antonio remains her steward still. She is always the one who initiates action. 'I have fashion'd it already' she advises him, having in seconds and without consultation devised the plan to slander and separate from him (3.2.158). As Theodore Leinwand argues, 'Where we might expect conjugal affect, a caress, we instead find hierarchical relations. Their banter hints that mastery and subjection temper, perhaps structure, their nights together [...] Of course theirs is, famously or infamously, a marriage that began with the woman on top'. Perhaps, at best, they achieve 'reciprocity between unequals' to use Frank Whigham's phrase.<sup>9</sup>

Or perhaps their arrangement suits them both even if it does not conform to modern expectations that companions should be side by side rather than top and bottom (whoever plays each role). Distinguishing attitudes towards remarrying widows in post-reformation England from those in the Catholic Mediterranean, some critics have suggested that the Duchess's decision to remarry would not have seemed scandalous to many people in an English audience.<sup>10</sup> It would certainly not have been a justification for murder. Tragedies set in Catholic countries often exaggerate cultural differences so as to dismiss certain views or

practices as obsolete, irrational or excessive.<sup>11</sup> In *The Duchess of Malfi*, Linda Woodbridge suggests, Webster invites us to ask what is wrong with being or marrying a lusty widow.<sup>12</sup> Many widows remarried; many texts depicted a widow as a particularly attractive marriage prospect. In various representations of remarrying widows, Jennifer Panek finds the possibility of 'orderly inversion', a possibility that might apply to the Duchess's marriage to Antonio. Asking 'to what extent might the widow's position of power from which she enters a second (or third or fourth) marriage remake the conditions of marriage itself?', Panek suggests that 'a certain set of circumstances [...] may have created a space where a wife's government of her husband could be orderly, accepted, and unremarkable' – for both a wife accustomed to rule and a husband accustomed to serve or obey.

Panek concludes her essay by suggesting provocatively that 'sometimes, the bedroom may be the only place where the man wants to be on top'.<sup>13</sup> But we cannot assume that he would want to be on top even there or that the woman being on top is any less acceptable at night than in the day. Panek's concluding remark evokes the bedtime banter between the Duchess and Antonio in which she calls him a 'Lord of Misrule', to which he responds that his 'rule is only in the night' (3.2.7–8). If he is a Lord of Misrule then he is both a ruler, at least at night, and he is stepping out of his usual subordinate role. This is the kind of inversion that draws attention to the hierarchy it reverses. Leonora Leet Brodwin, too, assumes that Antonio is on top at night. Brodwin resolves the conflict between the spirits of greatness and of woman in the Duchess by imagining that she manages to have it both ways through a kind of shift work: she 'saves herself by halves' (adapting Antonio's phrase at 5.3.48): 'She will be both sovereign by day and secret wife by night'.<sup>14</sup> Brodwin seems to accept an association of submissiveness with the categories woman and wife. In contrast, Linda Woodbridge celebrates the Duchess as a 'hero of desire' without trying to defend her against being on top; she suggests that the Duchess's sovereignty might be sexy.<sup>15</sup>

Other critics insist on 'sexy reciprocity' between the spouses. Barbara Correll argues that the class and gender disparities between husband and wife balance each other out because of 'the links between administrative hirelings and women, who are marginally but instrumentally positioned in the power hierarchy, who are essential but threatening to social power'. For Correll, the Duchess 'raises Antonio to reciprocity'. The play's utopian possibility, then, inheres in its positive depiction of the Duchess's desire for 'a realm of egalitarian reciprocity and power sharing'.<sup>16</sup> Judith Haber argues that the play goes even further: the Duchess 'effectively positions herself (and Antonio) both as subject and as object, both as penetrator and as penetrated'.<sup>17</sup>

So while critics agree that there is something sexy about the relationship between the Duchess and Antonio, their interpretations of the nature of that sexiness vary widely. Critics argue persuasively that Antonio is on top, that the Duchess is, or that they engage in sexy reciprocity. This indeterminacy is precisely the point. However compelling the erotic teasing among the Duchess, Antonio and Cariola, we cannot be sure what it means.

In this particular case, knowing that the wife is a Duchess and the husband a steward, even peering at them as they prepare for bed and talk about sex, does not enable us to know for sure how they interact. The class disparity between them is part of what helps them keep their marriage a secret; no one, not even Bosola, the 'politic dormouse' (1.1.199), guesses that the Duchess might have married Antonio until she finally reveals that secret herself, giddy with the pleasure of hearing Bosola praise Antonio. Antonio himself explains that no one knows how to read the situation. They say the Duchess is a 'strumpet', not imagining her to be married.

They do observe I grow to infinite purchase  
The left-hand way, and all suppose the Duchess  
Would amend it if she could. [...]

For other obligation  
Of love or marriage between her and me,  
They never dream of. (3.1.28–30; 35–7)

The class disparity between the Duchess and Antonio leads observers to posit a familiar story – a dishonest steward – and to ignore other possibilities that are equally conventional or at least imaginable, such as the lusty widow and the steward whose ambition leads him to marriage rather than theft. The Duchess plays to the popular disparagement of Antonio when she accuses him of theft as an excuse to get him out of her castle and away from her brothers (3.2).

The fact that observers never dream of love or marriage between the Duchess and Antonio protects their relationship. But secrecy grants them more than safety and sustainability; the Duchess suggests that the potential for danger adds savour and excitement to their relationship. Wondering if they should sleep apart while Ferdinand is in the castle, she suspects 'But you'll say / Love mixed with fear is sweetest' (3.2.64–5). Whatever Antonio and the Duchess feel for one another, whatever the nature of their intimacy, its secrecy and their consequent fear are constitutive of their love. In the wooing scene, the Duchess reassures Antonio that 'all discord without this

circumference / Is only to be pitied and not feared' (1.2.378–9). By 'this circumference' she seems to mean the ring she has given him, or their embrace, or, more generally, their marriage. But, as her later remark about 'love mixed with fear' suggests, fear is *within* their relationship and not simply held at bay outside it. While Ferdinand fears and attempts to eradicate secrets, the Duchess, and she suggests, Antonio, have chosen and even enjoy secrecy, and the fear of discovery it entails. The only hint we get of why the Duchess keeps her secret as long as she does is that it pleases them both to do so. Even if love, sexuality and marriage are a consolation for the uncertainty and meaninglessness in Malfi, they are also themselves a ground of epistemological mystery.

Historical context cannot resolve this indeterminacy because all of the models of marriage and of conjugal sexuality critics find in the play were available in the period, widely represented, variously espoused or lamented. Nor can the play itself prove anything about contemporary attitudes – towards clandestine marriage, widows' remarriage, how and why one should marry or how spouses should interact. The play proves only that these were all contested issues and that the contestation itself made it difficult to read marriage from the outside. A remarrying widow might be viewed as self-indulgent, dutiful or irresponsible, depending on her circumstances, the perspective from which she was viewed, and the genre of the work in which she was discussed. The Duchess and Antonio's marriage might operate as a hierarchy determined by rank, a hierarchy determined by gender, or a partnership between companions made possible in part because the two hierarchies balance one another out. The spouses might toggle between different modes of relation. The play does not make it wholly clear. The one thing the Duchess tells us about their sexual relationship is that fear heightens it.

Even the play's arguably most famous line mystifies the Duchess's relation to her marriage. When she announces, movingly, that she is 'Duchess of Malfi still' (4.2.137), she insists not only that who she is cannot be scared out of her, stripped away or alienated by madness. She also proclaims that her status was never subsumed, diminished or transformed in marriage. One can take this as positive or negative intelligence about the marriage. The Duchess did not surrender power, status, title or name to her husband. Most wives changed their names at marriage – that is how the Duchess of Malfi became the Duchess of Malfi, after all. As a result of this convention, women sometimes disappear from the historical record when they marry. Yet the Duchess of Malfi refers to herself as she is defined by her first husband rather than her second. In her proclamation, the Duchess asserts that, in the

midst of her eccentrically covert marriage, she remained herself uncovered, a *feme sole*, still known as she was as a widow, rather than a *feme covert*, defined by her second husband's name and status.

The Duchess's reproductive life is as secretive as her marriage. Bosola curses that her loose gowns prevent him from inspecting the big belly that, he suspects, encloses 'the young springal cutting a caper' (2.1.156). As Lynn Enterline reminds us, the body Bosola longs to see, and invites the audience to imagine, was, of course, played on stage by a boy actor. The truth of the maternal body constantly recedes from our grasp. 'If one could actually see the body hidden beneath the "rich tissew," the play asks its viewers, what would one know? Would seeing be knowing?'<sup>18</sup> The play suggests that it would not, even as it teases us with its constant emphasis on concealment. The Duchess gives birth to her first child by Antonio in the middle of the night, under the cover of the lie that she has been poisoned. She bears two more children between Acts II and III. Michelle Dowd argues that the Duchess has these children in a 'parallel universe'— and that, as a result, 'the audience is essentially put in the same position that Ferdinand and Bosola find themselves in earlier in the play, forced to follow a receding trail of evidence about the Duchess's reproductive life'. Dowd argues that the impossibility of proving that the Duchess is pregnant, or of pinning down who the father is, drives Bosola to give the Duchess apricots as a kind of test 'to provide empirical evidence of an otherwise inscrutable female condition'.<sup>19</sup> However unusual the clandestine births may be in *The Duchess of Malfi*, they point to the ways in which all pregnancies were inscrutable, all births might be viewed as uncanny disruptions rather than predictable consequences of doing what comes naturally.

As various historians point out, one could not prove pregnancy in the early modern period, let alone paternity. Although various symptoms were considered indicators, none was definitive. As Eve Keller puts this, 'the maternal body was understood to be opaque; given to ambiguous changes, it was ultimately uninterpretable'.<sup>20</sup> Even signs we might assume to be incontrovertible – quickening or fetal movement and growing 'great bellied' – could mislead, deceiving even the woman who had the symptoms. Take the phantom pregnancies of Queen Mary Tudor. Rumours circulated in September 1554 that her doctors had told her she was pregnant; she does not seem to have believed it herself until she felt quickening in November of 1554. By late May of 1555, there were rumours that she was not, in fact, pregnant; her doctors continued to insist she was – until she emerged from 'semi-seclusion' in July without having given birth. She claimed to be pregnant again, and seven months along, in January 1558. By April it was clear that, again, she had not been pregnant. Defending Mary against charges that she

was 'delusional' or 'hysterical', her biographer, Judith Richards, reminds readers 'just how hard it could be in early modern times to determine whether a woman was indeed pregnant' – until she gave birth. If Mary was confused, so were her doctors. These pregnancies are evidence less of Mary's psychological state than of the secrecy of pregnancy itself.<sup>21</sup>

While women, especially married women, were sometimes assumed to have privileged access to the secrets of the gendered body, rooted in their own experience of sex, pregnancy and childbirth, they were also distrusted as authorities. When it came to the mystery of 'the opaque female body', according to Laura Gowing, 'female testimony was at once absolutely necessary, and fundamentally unreliable'. To the extent that women were assumed to have some knowledge it 'was always provisional and comparative'. Even women themselves could only speculate about pregnancy and the causes of and cures for illness. By the seventeenth century in England, 'it was less and less possible to represent, and treat, female bodies as women's secrets' because male physicians were asserting more ownership over knowledge of women's anatomy.<sup>22</sup> Katharine Park similarly argues that the meaning and ownership of the 'secrets of women' shifted dramatically in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Italy from women as possessors of secret knowledge about the body, particularly sex and reproduction, to women as themselves secrets. As objects of arcane knowledge, women's bodies were as mysterious to them as to most men; only male medical experts were supposed to be able to decipher these enigmas, yet their knowledge, too, remained contingent and speculative.<sup>23</sup>

Mary Tudor's 'semi-seclusion' is a reminder that women's 'confinement' or 'lying in' might entail not just a cozy withdrawal into a world of women but, for privileged women, a kind of domestic imprisonment for a month or more. This is a parallel universe, as Dowd calls it, into which most elite pregnant women were compelled.<sup>24</sup> Paradoxically, in keeping her pregnancies secret, the Duchess remains in free circulation before and after the births. As Haber points out, the castle's officers are locked in rather than the Duchess during the birth of her first child. This reverses the usual practice of confining the mother, which is then re-asserted when the Duchess is imprisoned in her own castle.<sup>25</sup> Before that final confinement, the Duchess's dissimulation of her pregnancies allows her to circulate more freely than other elite pregnant women, who had to stage their pregnancies and births in the interests of documenting a legitimate succession.

For most early modern women, clandestine births were more suspicious, and more severely punished, than clandestine marriages. It was assumed that married women would have no cause to hide pregnancies or births. But since unmarried mothers could be punished for 'bastard

bearing' or pressed to reveal the name of their child's father, they had incentives to conceal their pregnancies and births. Such concealment then might be taken as criminal in itself. About a decade after *The Duchess of Malfi* was first performed, a 1624 statute declared that, if an unmarried woman concealed her pregnancy and delivery, and her baby was born dead, she could be convicted of infanticide unless she could produce a witness to the birth who confirmed that the infant was stillborn. A widow and a Duchess could guard her body's secrets more successfully than could an unmarried woman, especially one who was a dependent in a household. For a vulnerable woman, such as a servant rather than a Duchess, female spies among her neighbours might be as menacing as Bosola, especially since they had freedoms he does not: they might squeeze a woman's breasts or search her body and bedclothes for evidence of delivery.<sup>26</sup> By disguising her pregnancies and deliveries, the Duchess places herself in the legally suspect position of single women giving birth to illegitimate children. Since one could not usually tell after the fact whether a child had been stillborn or if the mother had killed or criminally neglected the newborn, the law took the mother's status (married or unmarried) and the circumstances of the birth (secret or open) as sufficient proofs.<sup>27</sup> This statute, written to control unmarried women's reproduction, affords insight into the epistemological, ethical and legal complications uncertain marital status and clandestinity could entail.

In the play, the Duchess's unsuccessful attempt to keep her pregnancies a secret ultimately makes her family vulnerable by provoking suspicion and intervention. 'If women's secrets can be seen as a source of autonomy, authority or protection, they can seem, too, to be a weapon against women', as Gowing points out.<sup>28</sup> Celia R. Daileader argues that the opacity of the female body often worked as a provocation to male violence.<sup>29</sup> Here, that provocative, if quotidian, opacity is shrouded in extra layers of secrecy. When Bosola sends news that the Duchess has had a child, Ferdinand says 'rogues do not whisper't now, but seek to publish't' (2.5.5). By the time the Duchess has three children, Delio asks Antonio: 'What say the common people?' To which he replies: 'The common rabble do directly say / She is a strumpet' (3.1.24-6). The problem is no longer the fact that she is married but rather that her success in keeping her marriage a secret has helped to make the open secret of her pregnancies scandalous.

The Duchess's secrets are no longer hers to keep or to reveal. The Duchess invites 'private conference' with Ferdinand about 'a scandalous report' that is being spread 'touching [her] honour', attempting to defuse the scandal by introducing it herself. But this strategy requires her to go out of her way to deny her marriage and children. While Ferdinand

dismisses these rumours as 'paper bullets, court calumny, / A pestilent air, which princes' palaces / Are seldom purged of', reassuring his sister to 'be safe in your own innocency', it is this gossip that seems to provoke him to solve the mystery, to violently plumb the Duchess's depths (3.1.46-51, 55). Threatened by Ferdinand in the next scene, the Duchess's first line of defense is 'I am married' (3.2.81). But how could he have known that? Nor does her candour make much difference at this point, after years of deception and denial.

Throughout, the play depicts its characters trying, and failing, to confide their own secrets – not just information but also emotions, commitments and values – as well as trying, and failing, to grasp what others hold inside them. Antonio, returning to the Duchess's bedchamber just after Ferdinand has left, conspicuously and conveniently late, wishes he could tell Ferdinand of his 'warrantable love' (3.2.147). Yet he and his wife lack a warrant that could mean anything to Ferdinand. Antonio cannot 'relate' his 'warrantable love' to Ferdinand precisely because his warrant resides in his heart. According to the Duchess, Antonio both holds her heart in his own bosom (1.2. 359) and has been 'entered into' her heart (3.2.60). If the heart is exchangeable, it is also a container for what one receives from a loved one. Secret devotion is to be worn 'on th'inside of [the] heart', as Bosola facetiously promises (3.2.305); to be intimate is to be 'a secret to your heart' as Julia has been to the Cardinal (5.2.223). Whereas the Duchess makes Antonio's bosom 'the treasury of all my secrets' (1.2.409), the Cardinal mocks the possibility that anyone can so serve another when he taunts Julia: 'Think you your bosom / Will be a grave dark and obscure enough / For such a secret?' (5.2.256-8). The bosom or, more specifically, the heart contains secrets but it cannot promise to hold them safe; it cannot produce them as a 'warrant' legible to Ferdinand. At parting from the Duchess, Antonio's heart is 'turned to a heavy lump of lead' (3.5.89) – a dead weight rather than a warrant or a sanctuary for another's secrets.

For Ferdinand, the heart's contents are at worst poisonous and at best unknowable. Ferdinand and the Cardinal's hearts are, as Bosola claims, 'hollow graves / Rotten and rotting others' (4.2.308-9). Ferdinand describes his own heart as wrapped in the lead from the coffin of the Duchess's first husband (3.2.111-13); he describes the Duchess's heart as 'a hollow bullet / Filled with unquenchable wildfire' (114-15). He earlier threatens to use the Duchess's bleeding heart as 'a sponge' to wipe his memory clean (2.5.15-16). Ultimately, Ferdinand claims his heart was injected with gall by the Duchess's marriage (4.2.276). His sister's illegibility leads him to proclaim that he 'will no longer study in the book / Of another's heart' (4.1.16-17). Whereas Cariola claims that her heart is an open book – advising a suspicious Antonio 'when / That you

have cleft my heart, you shall read there / Mine innocence' (3.2.142-4) – Ferdinand does not think the heart is legible. Since, as the Duchess recognizes, 'false hearts speak fair / To those they intend most mischief' (3.5.25-6), she knows that he means it literally when he writes of Antonio, 'I had rather have his heart than his money' (3.5.35-6). He wants to rip out the heart in part because he despairs of deciphering it.

If the heart is a grave or an illegible book in this play, the conscience, too, is alternately described as self-evident and an enigma.<sup>30</sup> The Duchess asserts independence of conscience as well as a capacity to consecrate her choices without the sanction of clergy: 'What can the church force more?' (1.2.394); 'How can the church build faster?' (1.1.397). When she presumes to sanctify her marriage to Antonio herself, she preserves it from the hypocrisy the play associates with the church, its rituals and its leaders. Julia tells her husband she is visiting an old anchorite when she visits the Cardinal (2.4); Ferdinand advises the Duchess to keep Antonio in an anchorite's chamber so that his identity will not be found out (3.2); the Duchess refuses to be cased up like a holy relic (3.2); the Cardinal suggests that Bosola hunt down Antonio by bribing Delio's confessor (5.2); and the Cardinal poisons the 'book' which he requires Julia to kiss (5.2). The Church is associated with secrecy and with the inability to keep secrets even under the seal of confession. In such a context, the Duchess's claim that she and Antonio can 'force more' and 'build faster' than the church seems justified. But in administering an inviolable 'sacrament o'th' church', as she later calls her marriage (4.1.38), the Duchess also mires herself in the deception and intrigue the play associates with the church, long before she follows Bosola's advice and pretends to go on a pilgrimage to Our Lady of Loreto so as to justify leaving her country (and fleeing from her brothers). When Cariola balks at the idea – 'I do not like / This jesting with religion, this feigned pilgrimage' – the Duchess dismisses her as a 'superstitious fool' (3.2.319-21). In some ways a dismissal of superstition, and a willingness to use outward forms to suit her own purposes, corresponds to the Duchess's willingness to make her marriage sacred and secret at once. Yet the Duchess also refuses here to reflect on her own complicity in deception.

If anything, the Duchess becomes more enigmatic as she suffers, shoring up her boundaries rather than breaking open. She closes around her secrets and defines herself through them. In the process, the meaning of her secrets shifts so that, while they remain fundamentally unknowable, they also come to stand as the core of her identity, and the engine of her stoical endurance. As she faces her death, the Duchess's 'strange disdain' (4.1.12) ossifies her into the monument she first insisted she was not ('This is flesh and blood, sir: / 'Tis not the figure cut

in alabaster / Kneels at my husband's tomb' (1.2.363-5). She imagines herself to be her own 'picture, fashioned out of wax' (4.1.62); according to Cariola, she becomes her own 'picture in the gallery' 'like some reverend monument / Whose ruins are even pitied' (4.2.30, 32-3). Standing her ground, she likens herself to a taunted bear: 'I am chained to endure all your tyranny' (4.2.59).<sup>31</sup> Critics have variously read the Duchess as 'a female Christ' and a figure for the virgin Mary.<sup>32</sup> But if the play associates the Duchess with the sacred, it also views her from an iconoclastic perspective, emphasizing the materiality of the idol, the 'picture' rather than the spirit it represents. Despite Ferdinand's and Bosola's combined efforts to make her 'fly in pieces' (3.5.104), she becomes hardened into a kind of statue, mute and mysterious.

One might argue that, in death, the Duchess does fly in pieces. Her voice survives her as an echo in the ruins of an ancient abbey (5.3). Cariola briefly survives her. She tries on the Duchess's roles of wife and mother, claiming to be engaged and to be pregnant as if either will save her from death. As the Duchess's story shows, marriage and pregnancy are vulnerabilities not protections. Perhaps something of the Duchess is split off into her echo or into Cariola's ill-advised protestations, but it is her brothers who seem to be fragmented by her death. Ferdinand attacks his shadow and robs graves (5.2); the Cardinal is menaced by his own reflection: 'when I look into the fishponds in my garden, / Methinks I see a thing armed with a rake / That seems to strike at me' (5.5.5-7); Bosola claims that 'the Duchess / Haunts me' (5.2.328-9).<sup>33</sup> All three are, then, divided against themselves by the Duchess's death. Knowledge of the Duchess's death, her final secret, proves fatal. Julia dies because she knows this secret; Antonio learns it as he dies.

What happens after death or what death means is the play's ultimate secret. In parting with Antonio, the Duchess says 'I know not which is best, / To see you dead, or part with you' (3.5.64-5). In these lines, she acknowledges that both death and parting entail equally wrenching losses of his company. She also acknowledges the great danger he is in – and the almost unbearable uncertainty that lies ahead for them both. To see him dead would at least mean that she knew what had happened to him, that she knew the worst. 'Dost thou think we shall know one another / In th'other world?' the Duchess later asks Cariola (4.2.17-18). Cariola insists that the answer is yes, but the Duchess and Antonio seem to share the conviction that the only certainty in life is the inevitability of suffering, loss and death. To her son at parting she says 'Thou art happy that thou hast not understanding / To know thy misery, for all our wit / And reading brings us to a truer sense / Of sorrow' (3.5.66-9). As Antonio says, 'Heaven fashioned us of nothing; and we strive / To bring ourselves to nothing' (80-1). 'Our value never can



be truly known' until we are dead, as the Salmon advises the Dogfish in the Duchess's parable (3.5. 134–5).

As the play unfolds, other characters come to endorse this certainty that all is uncertain. The mayhem at the end of the play emphasizes the impossibility of having enough information to choose appropriate courses of action. Antonio says at the start that Ferdinand 'Dooms men to death by information, / Rewards by hearsay' (1.1.94–5). But everyone in this play makes ill-informed decisions. At the beginning of Act V, Antonio asks Delio 'What think you of my hope of reconcilment / To the Aragonian brethren?' to which Delio responds, sensibly, 'I misdoubt it' (5.1.1–2). For Antonio to imagine there is any hope at this point reveals how little he understands the situation. The Cardinal prepares listeners not to credit his own cries for help and thus not to intervene to help him (5.5). Bosola kills Antonio, the one person he hopes to save, 'in a mist; I know not how – / Such a mistake as I have often seen / In a play' (5.5.92–4). Bosola concludes 'We are only like dead walls or vaulted graves / That, ruined, yields no echo' (5.5.95–6). In the images of 'dead walls and vaulted graves,' Bosola suggests that humans are not sanctuaries for secrets. They are empty. The secrecy that begins as the Duchess's strategy for outwitting her brothers' prohibition against her marriage is revealed at last to be the defining condition of human life, at least in the courts of princes. We are all mysteries to ourselves and one another. 'Contempt of pain – that we may call our own,' Delio concludes (5.3.56).

One of the uneasy pleasures the play affords is that it includes us in secrets that elude even a professional spy; but, in doing so, it sometimes threatens to place the viewer in Ferdinand's anguished position of wanting to see but failing to understand, or in Bosola's position of grimly labouring to turn what we 'observe' into a 'parcel of intelligency' (2.1.69; 2.3.67). The Duchess hints at this uncomfortable identification when she confides 'I account this world a tedious theatre, / For I do play a part in't 'gainst my will' (4.1.81–2). Ferdinand is a negative avatar for the spectator who must expose and destroy what is kept secret from him. He is also a failure. On hearing from Ferdinand that the Duchess 'hath had most cunning bawds to serve her turn, / And more secure conveyances for lust / Than towns of garrison for service' (2.5.9–11), the Cardinal asks 'Can this be certain?' (2.5.12). Ferdinand does not really answer him. Of course, one cannot be certain of this rumour, which we in the audience know to be false, but neither can her brothers be certain that the Duchess is actually married or, more important, what that marriage means to her and her husband. When Ferdinand asks 'how thrives our intelligence?', Bosola must answer 'uncertainly' (3.1.58). Uncertainty fuels the play's plot; it also serves as the evasive

'answer answerless' to the various questions the play poses.<sup>34</sup> By refusing to resolve its own mysteries, and revealing that Ferdinand's curiosity leads to suffering and death rather than certainty, the play invites us to resist identifying with Ferdinand's bloody insistence on knowing. The Duchess and Antonio, revelling in the freedom and frisson of the secret, suggest that one might, instead, surrender one's self to *not* knowing: 'I am lost in amazement; I know not what to think on't' (2.1.177).

## Notes

1. Dympna Callaghan, 'The Duchess of Malfi and Early Modern Widows', in *Early Modern English Drama: A Critical Companion*, ed. by Garrett A. Sullivan, Jr., Patrick Cheney and Andrew Hadfield (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 272–86, esp. 15; Theodore B. Leinwand, 'Conjugium Interruptum in Shakespeare and Webster', *ELH*, 72 (2005), 239–57 (p. 252); Wendy Wall, 'Just a Spoonful of Sugar: Syrup and Domesticity in Early Modern England', *Modern Philology*, 104.2 (2006), 149–72 (pp. 164 and 155).
2. Wall, 'Just a Spoonful', 162.
3. Lena Cowen Orlin, *Locating Privacy in Tudor London* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 173, 192. While Lisa Hopkins argues that 'to the Duchess, interiors represent safety', work such as Orlin's suggests that the interior is not necessarily safe (Lisa Hopkins, *The Female Hero in English Renaissance Tragedy* [Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002], pp. 122–3).
4. Huston Diehl, *Staging Reform, Reforming the Stage: Protestantism and Popular Theater in Early Modern England (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997)*, p. 195.
5. Martin Ingram, *Church Courts, Sex and Marriage in England, 1570–1640* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 189–218; David Cressy, *Birth, Marriage and Death: Ritual, Religion, and the Life-Cycle in Tudor and Stuart England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 316–35; Dympna Callaghan, 'Introduction', *The Duchess of Malfi: Contemporary Critical Essays*, ed. by Callaghan (Houndmills: Macmillan, 2000), pp. 1–24; Subha Mukherji, *Law and Representation in Early Modern Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 17–54. As Leah Marcus argues in her essay in this volume, clandestine marriage was legal in many Italian states.
6. Theodora A. Jankowski, 'Defining/Confining the Duchess: Negotiating the Female Body in John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*', in Callaghan, *Duchess of Malfi*, pp. 80–103; Christina Luckyj, *A Winter's Snake: Dramatic Form in the Tragedies of John Webster* (Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 1989), pp. 46–9; Margaret Mikesell, 'Matrimony and Change in Webster's *Duchess of Malfi*', *Journal of the Rocky Mountain Medieval and Renaissance Association*, 2 (1981), 97–111; Mary Beth Rose, *The Expense of Spirit: Love and Sexuality in English Renaissance Drama* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), esp. 155–77; Sara Jayne Steen, 'The Crime of Marriage: Arbella Stuart and *The Duchess of Malfi*', *Sixteenth Century Journal*, 22.1 (1991), 61–76; Linda Woodbridge, 'Queen of Apricots: The Duchess of Malfi, Hero of Desire', in *The Female Tragic Hero in English Renaissance Drama*, ed. by Naomi Conn Liebler (New York: Palgrave, 2002), pp. 161–84 (p. 178).
7. James L. Calderwood, 'The Duchess of Malfi: Styles of Ceremony', in *Twentieth-Century Interpretations of The Duchess of Malfi*, ed. by Norman Rabkin (Edgewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1968), pp. 73–84 (p. 79); Lisa Jardine, *Still Harping on Daughters: Women and Drama in the Age of Shakespeare* (Sussex: Harvester,

- 1983), p. 90; Clifford Leech, *John Webster: A Critical Study* (London: Hogarth Press, 1951), p. 69; Joyce E. Petersen, *Curs'd Example: 'The Duchess of Malfi' and Commonwealth Tragedy* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1978), p. 74.
8. According to Frank Whigham, 'the duchess is a family pioneer who ruthlessly carves out for herself the privatized domestic realm of the future, based on personal rather than familial or class imperatives' ('Sexual and Social Mobility in *The Duchess of Malfi*', *PMLA*, 100.2 [March 1985], 167–86 [p. 171]). Whigham's important essay was revised and reprinted in his *Seizures of the Will in Early Modern English Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). See also, among others, Catherine Belsey, *The Subject of Tragedy: Identity and Difference in Renaissance Drama* (London: Methuen, 1985), p. 197. For a particularly thoughtful challenge to arguments that depict the Duchess's end as 'a historical beginning', see Wall, 'Just a Spoonful of Sugar'.
  9. Leinwand, 'Conjugium Interruptum', 250; Whigham, 'Sexual and Social Mobility', 173 and 176. Katherine Rowe argues that the play depicts how the Duchess's wayward will dismembers the one flesh she and Antonio are supposed to form through marriage, with tragic results. See Katherine Rowe, *Dead Hands: Fictions of Agency, Renaissance to Modern* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), pp. 86–110.
  10. See, for instance, Margaret Lael Mikesell, 'Catholic and Protestant Widows in *The Duchess of Malfi*', *Renaissance and Reformation*, n. s. 7.4 (1983), 265–79, who argues that the play places caricatures of 'Catholic' views on the remarrying widow in the mouths of its villains; see also Jennifer Panek, *Widows and Suitors in Early Modern English Comedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).
  11. Lara Bovilsky, *Barbarous Play: Race on the English Renaissance Stage* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), pp. 103–33; G. K. Hunter, 'English Folly and Italian Vice', *Dramatic Identities and Cultural Tradition: Studies in Shakespeare and His Contemporaries* (New York: Barnes and Noble Books, 1978), pp. 103–21.
  12. Linda Woodbridge, *Women and the English Renaissance: Literature and the Nature of Womanhood, 1540–1620* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984), p. 260.
  13. Jennifer Panek, 'Why Did Widows Remarry? Remarriage, Male Authority, and Feminist Criticism', in *The Impact of Feminism in English Renaissance Studies*, ed. by Dymrna C. Callaghan (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2007), pp. 281–98, esp. 288, 286, 287, 294.
  14. Leonora Leet Brodwin, *Elizabethan Love Tragedy: 1587–1625* (New York: New York University Press, 1971), p. 284.
  15. Woodbridge, 'Queen of Apricots', p. 178.
  16. Barbara Correll, 'Malvolio at Malfi: Managing Desire in Shakespeare and Webster', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 58.1 (2007), 65–92, esp. 72, 81, 83, 86.
  17. Judith Haber, "'My Body Bestow upon My Women': The Space of the Feminine in *The Duchess of Malfi*", *Renaissance Drama*, 28 (1997), 133–59, esp. 140.
  18. Lynn Enterline, *The Tears of Narcissus: Melancholia and Masculinity in Early Modern Writing* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), pp. 248, 259. See also 279, 398n. 59.
  19. Michelle M. Dowd, 'Delinquent Pedigrees: Revision, Lineage, and Spatial Rhetoric in *The Duchess of Malfi*', *English Literary Renaissance*, 39.3 (2009), 499–526, esp. 519–20 and 508. Enterline argues that, for Ferdinand, the Duchess's maternity causes a profound disturbance (*Tears of Narcissus*, pp. 244–45).
  20. Eve Keller, *Generating Bodies and Gendered Selves: The Rhetoric of Reproduction in Early Modern England* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2007), p. 134; see also Laura Gowing, *Common Bodies: Women, Touch and Power in Seventeenth-Century England* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003), p. 45.
  21. Judith M. Richards, *Mary Tudor* (London: Routledge, 2008), pp. 173–79, 223 (p. 173).
  22. Gowing, *Common Bodies*, pp. 44, 46, 48.
  23. Katharine Park, *Secrets of Women: Gender, Generation, and the Origins of Human Dissection* (New York: Zone, 2006), pp. 77–120. See also Patricia Parker, *Shakespeare from the Margins: Language, Culture, Context* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), pp. 229–72.
  24. At the same time, vagrant women routinely gave birth outside. See Paul Griffiths, *Lost Londons: Change, Crime, and Control in the Capital City, 1550–1660* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 55–60.
  25. Haber, "'My Body Bestow upon My Women'", 143.
  26. Laura Gowing, 'Secret Births and Infanticide in Seventeenth-Century England', *Past & Present*, 156 (August 1997), 87–115.
  27. Frances E. Dolan, *Dangerous Familiars: Representations of Domestic Crime in England, 1550–1700* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), pp. 127–39.
  28. Gowing, *Common Bodies*, p. 51.
  29. Celia Daileader, *Eroticism on the Renaissance Stage: Transcendence, Desire, and the Limits of the Visible* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 84; see also Michael Neill, *Issues of Death: Mortality and Identity in English Renaissance Tragedy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), pp. 180, 178.
  30. On conscience and on forgetting as a strategic un-knowing in the play, see Garrett Sullivan, *Memory and Forgetting in English Renaissance Drama: Shakespeare, Marlowe, Webster* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 109–31. See Katharine Eisaman Maus, *Inwardness and Theater in the English Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995) on the perceived difficulty of knowing another person.
  31. Macbeth similarly remarks: 'They have tied me to a stake. I cannot fly, / But bear-like I must fight the course' (5.7.1–2).
  32. On the Duchess as 'a female Christ' see Daileader, *Eroticism*, p. 87; as a figure for the virgin Mary, see Dale B. J. Randall, 'The Rank and Earthy Background of Certain Physical Symbols in *The Duchess of Malfi*', *Renaissance Drama*, 18 (1987), 171–203; see also Diehl, *Staging Reform*, pp. 156–81 and Neill, *Issues of Death*, pp. 328–53.
  33. As Correll argues, Bosola is not moved by the Duchess's death but by Ferdinand's refusal to pay him ('Malvolio in Malfi', p. 85). For an opposing view, see Diehl, *Staging Reform*, pp. 200–01 or Dymrna Callaghan, '*The Duchess of Malfi* and Early Modern Widows', p. 283.
  34. Replying to Parliamentary petitions urging her to execute Mary Stuart in November of 1586, Elizabeth I offered 'an answer without answer', asking Parliament to 'hold yourselves satisfied with this answer answerless' (*Elizabeth I: Collected Works*, ed. by Leah S. Marcus, Janel Mueller and Mary Beth Rose [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000], pp. 199–200). Mary was executed 8 February 1587.