Unnatural and Unconventional Liaisons in English Renaissance Drama

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Unnatural and Unconventional Liaisons in English Renaissance Drama
The Duchess of Malfi, Women Beware Women, and 'Tis a Pity She's a Whore

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Dedicated to the Memory
of
Lutz Scheer

(26.3.1956 – 20.8.2010)

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Preface

It is a rare occasion in academia when a master thesis excels beyond the expected parameters of the ordinary thesis. Friederike Schmiga's *Unnatural and Unconventional Liaisons in Renaissance Drama* belongs to this category of surprising achievements. On account of its sterling quality, the thesis was nominated for the annual reward of the German Shakespeare Association and won the prize for the best thesis on the study of Shakespeare and the literature of his contemporaries. The publication of this work in the present format is designed to highlight Ms. Schmiga's achievement in a more general medium.

Renaissance drama has for a long time been known to indulge in violence and cruelty. In imitation of Seneca's tragedies, the genre of the revenge tragedy, initiated in England by Thomas Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy* (1580s), flourished as a particular exemplar of a theatre of cruelty *avant la lettre*. Revenge tragedies were characterized by a final blood-bath on stage which wiped out most of the protagonists of the play; they also included gory and unsavoury acts of revenge by poison and intrigue as much as by dagger and sword. Both *The Duchess of Malfi* and *Women Beware Women* – two of the three plays that Schmiga's thesis analyses – can be argued to include representative features of the revenge tragedy. In *The Duchess of Malfi* this appears most forcefully in the cruelty of the duchess's brother Ferdinand when he frightens her with images of her supposedly dead husband and children. *Women Beware Women* includes the typical final blood-bath and displays a number of heartless schemers (though they fall into their own traps). The revenge tragedy requires a

motive for revenge, and this motive is very frequently supplied by a female family member whose sexual mores are suspect or have been compromised. In this the revenge tragedy resembles the contemporaneous *domestic tragedy* (the key example of which is the anonymous *Alice of Arden*), in which there is typically a murder of a husband by the wife. Among the canonical tragedies outside the Shakespeare canon, it is Middleton's Beatrice-Joanna in his *The Changeling* who comes closest to the pattern of the wife murderess in the domestic tragedy. However, the problem of female chastity plays a central role in all of the revenge tragedies.

The question that Friederike Schmiga's thesis brings into the forefront of attention is the unnaturalness and unconventionality of the sexual relationships in early modern revenge tragedy. She points out that the societal and clearly patriarchal preconceptions about women's role in society are treated as 'natural' by most of the tragedies and that women who actively plan to or do engage in relationships outside the fixed roles that have been created for them are immediately seen as transgressing their 'natural' femininity, are considered to be deviants and hence become targets for punishment and causes of male revenge geared towards righting the family honour.

In the three plays that Ms. Schmiga analyses, women step out of their prescribed roles in a variety of different ways. In *The Duchess of Malfi* (1613-14), Webster delineates the tragedy of the widowed duchess who has dared take a husband without consulting her brothers, and has moreover chosen her steward, thus marrying far beneath her social rank, thus marrying for love. The duchess has thus transgressed in double manner against the

codes of her society. She has herself taken the initiative to get married instead of allowing herself to be given away in marriage by her male family members; and she has given preference to affection rather than family honour in her choice of a husband. Her inclinations for her steward are not necessarily unnatural, but her marriage is clearly an unconventional one which therefore incites her brothers to spy out the secret and take revenge on the waywardness of their sister.

Women Beware Women (1621) by Thomas Middleton, the play that is discussed most extensively in the thesis, displays a whole panoply of unconventional and unnatural love relationships and marriages. This starts with Leantio and Bianca. Leantio has seduced the upper-class Bianca and eloped with her. This blemish in her character (sullying the family honour) develops apace when she becomes the mate of the Duke, thus instantiating Shakespeare's dictum that lilies fester far worse than weeds. Even though the play puts least blame on Bianca's behaviour (hinting at her rape by the Duke and charges Leantio with distrust and eventually political malpractices), Bianca comes to stand at one end of a scale of unconventional and transgressive types of female behaviour. Livia, a widow of evil repute, is perhaps next in line with her relationship with Leantio (which, legally, is adultery), though Livia's unnaturalness lies in her scheming, cruelty and murderousness. Isabella's love for her uncle crosses the line from merely socially transgressive to 'unnatural' love, though her situation as a mere object to be traded by her family for money is poignant enough to make even that love relationship seem less scandalous than it might be, particularly because of Livia's lie

that seems to render the relationship adulterous but not incestuous. In fact, despite all the various sexual relationships in the play, the most striking impression of unnaturalness comes about through the intrigues, particularly the murder plans, with which the play teems and which lead to the gory finale.

Ford's *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* (1629-33) is perhaps the most scandalous of the plays in terms of transgressing moral and religious notions of acceptable relationships. Sibling incest, a theme that a number of postmodern authors have also resorted to for the sake of *épater les bourgeois*, figures both as a transgressive move and as a symbol of narcissistic love that evades the cruelties of the patriarchal heterosexual marriage market. Given the circumstances of the ambience in which protagonists of revenge tragedies find themselves, this unnatural liaison emerges as purer than most other enforced love relationships in the play.

Friederike Schmiga outlines these paradoxes of the revenge drama and analyses the patriarchal structure that gives rise to the various transgressions and enormities, resorting to recent theoretical models from gender studies, feminist criticism and new historicism. In this manner she is able to make an incisive contribution to the study of early modern drama and its representation of female characters.

Freiburg, October 2014
Monika Fludernik

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Freiburg, January 2015
Friederike Schmiga

1 Introduction

One of the most fascinating aspects of English Renaissance drama is its tendency to stage and explore unnatural and unconventional liaisons. Beyond their dramatic and sometimes even sensationalist potential, love relationships that deviate in some respect from the norm are sites of tension and define a kind of "social" space where contradictions, both personal and supra-personal, are likely to erupt and to materialise and where innovation may take shape.[1] What I have called 'supra-personal' contradictions are particularly interesting, because they are inherent in the discursive definitions of, for instance, gender roles or marriage, and as such they cannot be attributed to a given couple's idiosyncracies. An analysis of such liaisons may therefore uncover the potential and the limitations of fundamental concepts such as 'man' and 'woman', 'husband' and 'wife' as well as of broader conceptions such as 'lawful' and 'illicit' love and their implicit but consequential hierarchies. Moreover, liaisons have not only personal but also greater social, economic and political dimensions, which are all inseparably interlocked in Renaissance thought and not yet divided sharply into separate realms, the so-called 'private' and 'public' spheres. Thus, the existence of unnatural and unconventional liaisons could potentially have consequences not only for people's personal lives but also for the proximate larger social units, for example their families or communities. When en-

1. Although in general usage the term 'liaison' tends to designate illicit love relationships, it will be used here in a more inclusive sense as a basic term for relationships, whether lawful (such as marriage) or illicit (liaisons in the narrow sense of the word). Cf. "liaison, n." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, Third Edition June 2014. Web. 28 Aug. 2014.

acted on stage, plays which depict such liaisons may be regarded as contributions to coeval discourses on love, sexuality and gender as well as investigations through the medium of drama of the role of these phenomena in establishing, maintaining and destroying social order and personal happiness.

The dramatic output of the period is vast, but among the plays that stand out in the first three or four decades of the seventeenth century, especially from the point of view of a study of unnatural and unconventional liaisons, are *The Duchess of Malfi* (1613-14) by John Webster, *Women Beware Women* (1621) by Thomas Middleton and *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* (1629-33) by John Ford.[2] Thus, the plays which will be analysed herein date from a later stage of the literary period commonly referred to as the English Renaissance. More specifically, two of the three plays form part of the literature of the Jacobean period while the third is arguably "Jacobean in spirit".[3] Each play has a dis-

2. Barker and Hinds date the performance of *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* between 1629-33 (cf. Barker and Hinds 2003: 421) but Roper cautions that "[s]o far as facts go, *'Tis Pity* may have been written at virtually any date before 1633 [...] It may quite easily have been a Jacobean play in fact as well as in spirit" (Roper 1975: xli). It is certain, however, that the play was first published in 1633 (cf. Roper 1975: lxii). Mulryne concludes his discussion of possible dates for *Women Beware Women* by stating that: "On balance, the few years before 1624 offer a more probable date than those after. Accordingly, [...] 1621 [may well be] the actual date of composition or performance" (Mulryne 1975: xxxvii-xxxviii). Jowett's discussion confirms this date: "The more credible of the alleged topical allusions tend to converge on 1621 itself" (Jowett 2007c: 416). The play was first printed in 1657 (cf. Jowett 2007b: 1140). Marcus dates the first performance of *The Duchess of Malfi* between 1613-14 (cf. Marcus 2009: 5); the play was first published in 1623, "in the same year as Shakespeare's First Folio and about a decade after the play was first performed on the stage" (Marcus 2009: 61).

3. Cf. Hopkins's evaluation of Ford's dramatic output: "Nevertheless, though the eight surviving plays which have been more or less securely as-

tinctive atmosphere and style, but they share a common interest in the tragic potential of unnatural and unconventional love relationships. To describe the various ways in which such liaisons deviate from the ideal of virtuous ("chaste") love, the basic question which guides my approach is why a given liaison is problematic, and in particular problematic from whose perspective and for what reason(s). As such, the term 'problematic' is of course too vague and unspecified to function as an analytical category; yet precisely because it is open and inclusive, it is a useful heuristic tool which can be used to locate those aspects that are made the subject of discussion both on the level of the storyworld of the plays and on the level of the audience and contemporary discourses about sexuality, gender roles and the different types of love relationships. Thus, the term is suitable for this task because it directs analytical attention not to instances of the prototypical ideal but towards those liaisons that deviate in some respect and are made the site of contest and struggle.

It is noticeable that the three plays discussed herein rely on similar conventions and settings as frames for presenting unnatural and unconventional liaisons. First and foremost, they are all Italianate tragedies: whereas the action of *The Duchess* is set in the duchy of Amalfi, in Rome, Loreto and Ancona, *Women* is set in Florence and *'Tis Pity* in Parma.[4] Beyond this general characterisation, these plays may be best described as hybrids combin-

cribed to him seem probably all to have been written after 1625, it could reasonably be said that they are not Caroline in feel, since they all to a greater or lesser extent hark back to a considerably older model or models of drama" (Hopkins 2010: 1).

4. Although *The Duchess* is usually classified as a tragedy (cf. e.g. Watson 2003: 333-338), Mulryne has argued that the play has more affinities with

ing elements from popular genres such as domestic tragedy, revenge tragedy and city comedy. While none of these plays would qualify as a prototypical domestic tragedy, Baldick's definition of the genre as "[a] kind of tragedy in which the leading characters belong to the middle class rather than to the royal or noble ranks usually represented in tragic drama, and in which the action concerns family affairs rather than public matters of state" (Baldick 2008a: 96) captures an important feature of all three plays. They all focus on family affairs: the central conflicts involve members of the same family (as defined both by blood ties and affinity) and are caused by decisions or actions that directly or indirectly affect the institution of the family (and liaisons, whether lawful or illicit, always affect the family).[5] In *The Duchess*, the central conflict is provoked by the Duchess's attempt to live by an alternative conception of family, an attempt which poses a serious threat to established values as represented by her family of origin. In *Women*, Livia is the agent and proponent of the laws of "love" conceived of as "another country" (1.2.138), and her commitment to furthering the cause of "love" rather than the social and moral

tragicomedy (cf. Mulryne 1970). For more details on the use and meaning of Italian settings see Hoenselaars 1993 and Mahler 1993.

5. Baldick's qualification that domestic tragedy tends to be set in middle class environments may be neglected in this context. With Henderson one could object that this would be unncessarily restrictive, because "domestic concerns were not confined to a specific class, plot line, or genre" (Henderson 1997: 192). In fact, analysis can be made more fruitful by "[i]nvoking the domestic not only as a genre but as a culture" (Henderson 1997: 174). This move allows us to accomodate the fact that representations of family affairs may be read as metaphors or allegories for contemporary social or political struggles or that (as pointed out above) personal decisions concerning liaisons and marriages as the foundation for creating new families do indeed have social, economic and political significance.

order threatens to undermine the web of lawful and morally acceptable liaisons. In *'Tis Pity*, it is Annabella and Giovanni's attempt to withdraw from social constraints, and Giovanni's intellectual effort to justify his love, which cause tensions that lead up to the final destruction of their family.

What sets these plays apart from more prototypical domestic tragedies is their shared attention to the social context and the effect of this context on their protagonists. This is an element they share with the city comedy, as Foster explains in her discussion of "city tragedy" (her coinage).[6] In the case of *Women* and *'Tis Pity*, which are set in the cities of Florence and Parma respectively, the notion's applicability seems clear, but the concept can be extended to include *The Duchess*. Remarkably, Foster singles out "Webster's courts" to illustrate her claim that in the drama of the period, the focus had shifted from representing "tragic individuals" to increasing "emphasis on a whole social group" (cf. Foster 1988: 181).[7] Commenting on *The Duchess*, *Women* and *'Tis Pity*, Mikesell points out that "the social themes of these plays

6. "In fact, *Women Beware Women* and *'Tis Pity* can be characterised as city tragedies in part because of their affinities with city comedy" (Foster 1988: 182). She discusses the use of "multiple-plot structure" and "city types" as well as scenery and the invocation of urban life (cf. Foster 1988: 184). However, *The Duchess*, too, exploits multi-plot structure and types – the play has at least one significant subplot, identified by Luckyj, who analysed the Julia-episodes as a complement rather than a contrast to the main plot centred on the Duchess, (cf. Luckyj 1987), while Bosola is often construed as the embodiment of the Renaissance malcontent, for instance by Marcus: "Bosola is based on a recognizable English type–the unemployed university graduate whose lack of employment has made him cynical about those in high places, yet drawn to power like a moth to flame" (Marcus 2009: 39).

7. Her observation is corroborated by Wymer, who sees Webster's plays as "an interesting revision of the Shakespearean norm. Rather than concentrating on the experience and sufferings of 'great men' he gives equal

foster concentration on the horizontal relationships of a group of characters interacting together" (Mikesell 1991: 237). Indeed, *Women* presents a vision of the corrupt world in Florence and *'Tis Pity* of Parma.[8] This general tendency, namely the distribution of dramatic action and conflict over more than one character, thus yielding a multitude of protagonists, plot lines and conflicts, reflects on the status of revenge in these plays. Rather than centring on one character's revenge – the standard situation of revenge tragedy (cf. Baldick 2008b) – the plays depict several characters' revenge plots, which frequently involve "complex intrigues and disguises" (Baldick 2008b: 286), thereby creating a whole "vicious revenge ethic" (Foster 1988: 196).[9] In contrast to standard revenge tragedies, those meting out revenge here are often motivated by more twisted or complex reasons than simply "to avenge the murder of a loved one" (Baldick 2008b: 286), for instance Giovanni, who kills his lover in order to revenge himself upon her husband and to forestall Soranzo's revenge, or the Duke, who sets Hippolito against Leantio in order to punish Lean-

importance to the lesser men and the women who are dragged down with them" (Wymer 2010: 162).

8. Wells analyses Middleton's discursive production of city life in the comedies (cf. Wells 1981: 37-60, esp. 52), while Chakravorty discusses the role of Florence in *Women* (cf. Chakravorty 1996: 127-144) and Hopkins demonstrates the specific relevance of Parma as the setting for *'Tis Pity* (cf. Hopkins 2002a).

9. Foster counts five revenge plots in *'Tis Pity* (cf. Foster 1988: 192), in particular Hippolita on Soranzo, Grimaldi on Soranzo, Richardetto on Soranzo, Soranzo on Annabella and Giovanni, and Giovanni on Soranzo. Her method applied to *Women* yields the same number: Leantio on Bianca, the Duke on Leantio, Livia and Guardiano on Hippolito, Hippolito on Livia, Isabella on Livia. In *The Duchess*, there are only two revenge plots, namely Ferdinand on the Duchess and Bosola on the Cardinal.

tio for threatening Bianca and to pave the way for marrying her himself. Thus, as love relationships (both legal and illicit) and their impact on family affairs constitute the focus of the plays, and as they are both the cause and site of conflict and revenge, DiGangi's phrase "tragedy of love and revenge" (DiGangi 2002: 574) summarises the generic hybridity of *'Tis Pity* as well as of *Women* and *The Duchess* with apt precision.[10]

The criticism discussed herein reflects my interest in the social, economic and political contexts of the plays and their participation in discourses on love, sexuality and women's roles. At the same time, it equally reflects "the general critical trend in [Renaissance literary] scholarship," which (as Clark shows in her discussion of criticism on *'Tis Pity*) has moved "away from moral, psychological and aesthetic approaches in favour of the social and political" (Clark 2010: 60). In this sense, the present study is indebted to this criticism for opening up and establishing such an approach to Renaissance drama. I will proceed with a brief survey of the most relevant literature, which will be roughly divided into four sections: 1) research on the social and discursive order in Renaissance England, 2) research on incest and the meaning of kinship ties or family relations, 3) research on the concepts of womanhood and the representation of women and 4) research on (new) concepts of love and marriage.

1) One of the most remarkable and persistent themes of research on the social context is the close interconnection between social and sexual status as well as between the private and pub-

10. In *'Tis Pity* another link is that love turns into revenge: "toutes les intrigues amoureuses s'y transforment en machinations vengeresses" (Marienstras 1981: 285).

lic spheres. Thus, Ingram begins his discussion of "Family and Household" by reminding the reader that the institution of the family (which was conceived of as a household) was "the basis of social order and personal security" (Ingram 2002: 93). According to him, the family was associated with manifold social tasks. In particular, Ingram discusses the complexities and "pitfalls" of marriage, explains the meaning of infidelity (with an emphasis on cuckoldry) and finishes with an assertion of the value of drama for historical research on the family (cf. Ingram 2002: 94-107). By contrast, Amussen concerns herself with the family-state-analogy, and more specifically with the use of this analogy in patriarchal political theory – known as "paternalism" – and in household manuals (Amussen 1985). By contrasting gender order to class order, she shows that whereas class order was challenged by people when it conflicted with social order as transformed by economic developments (cf. Amussen 1985: 210-214), the gender order was not questioned in this way, despite the fact that "[t]he reality of gender relations rarely conformed to theory" (Amussen 1985: 210). The institution of marriage constituted the reference point for another important notion, as Ruggiero shows. He studies the contribution of the concept of marriage to the emergence of a discourse of "civic morality" and its "intersections" with the "counterculture of the illicit" (Ruggiero 1993: 11), which he traces back to the former's discursive overdetermination of the institution of marriage (cf. Ruggiero 1993: 15).[11] His essay pro-

11. Stallybrass makes a similar observation. In his discussion of the dialectic between "incorporation and exclusion" (Stallybrass 1986: 130) he shows that "[t]he ideological formation of the family and the state was staked out across the physical bodies of 'criminalized' women" (Stallybrass 1986: 130).