

Southern New Hampshire University

The Personal is Political  
A Feminist Approach to Renaissance Literature

A Capstone Project Submitted to the College of Online and Continuing Education in Partial  
Fulfillment of the Master of Arts in English

By  
Kayla Morrison


Clinton, Massachusetts

March 2023

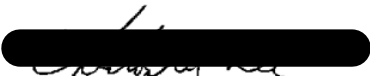


Student: Kayla Morrison

I certify that this student has met the requirements for formatting the capstone project and that this project is suitable for preservation in the University Archive.

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Capstone Instructor

3/8/2023  
Date

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Associate Dean of Liberal Arts  
Southern New Hampshire University

3.13.23  
Date

## Abstract

This project connects themes of the second wave feminist movement of the 1970s to Renaissance literature. A close reading of John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* and William Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* reveal prevailing themes of the movement. Feminist writers such as Carol Hanisch, Betty Freidman, and Simone de Beauvoir speak out against the same challenges faced by women in both Renaissance plays. Issues of financial autonomy, status, and sexuality arise in both Renaissance literature and second wave feminism. Utilizing a new historicist and feminist lens, research proves Renaissance writers were aware of feminist issues which later emerged in the 1960s-1970s movement.

## The Personal is Political: A Feminist Approach to Renaissance Literature

Although the feminist movement is associated with the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, gender-related unrest is evident in the literature produced much earlier. Margaret Walters, a participant in the first Oxford Women's Liberation Conference, explains that issues for women living under patriarchal rule surfaced as early as the eleventh century. She writes, "For centuries, and all over Europe, there were families who disposed of 'unnecessary' or unmarried daughters by shutting them away in convents" (1). The socio-political structure had little use for unmarried women; therefore, their marital status determined their futures. This practice directly connects a woman's personal choice of marriage to her position in public life. Walters continues, "For some, this must have felt like life imprisonment; but for others, conventual quiet seems to have facilitated genuine fulfillment: it allowed some women to . . . read and think, and discover their own distinctive voices" (1). The early empowerment women found from breaking away from gender norms and expectations is a trend evident in Renaissance literature and well into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. William Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* and John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* highlight issues that gained traction during the second-wave feminism movement of the twentieth century. Through a feminist and new historicist approach, it is evident that women's issues were long recognized. The war cry, "The Personal is Political," though coined during second-wave feminism, encapsulates issues existing millennia earlier.

The global nature of women's issues and the emergence of women's dilemmas in literature proves the long-existing struggles of an oppressed gender. Second-wave feminism rebelled against a hegemonic patriarchal structure and its effects on women's personal lives. Honor Moore explains the concept as, "how a woman's problem might not be hers alone but part of her

oppression under the patriarchy" (xix). Women addressed issues such as abortion, education, job security, and gender expectations. The recognition of widespread gender bias and oppression generated a slogan adopting the title of Carol Hanisch's 1969 essay, "The Personal is Political." Women rallied against the expectation of a nuclear family and pushed for equality. Theorists and feminists alike have carried the phrase into contemporary conversations about gender equality. Ph.D. Julia Schuster, argues, "While Hanisch's essay was situated in the second wave women's movement of the United States, the echo of her slogan reached feminists across the west and across generations" (647). Although second and third-wave feminism highlights the issues of women and governance, their arguments existed centuries earlier in the works of William Shakespeare and John Webster.

While much scholarship explores the oppression of women and the unfair treatment of their bodies, few scholars address the prevailing theme identified during the second wave of feminism in Renaissance literature. Theodora Jankowski, Washington State professor and author, explores the role of the female body in Webster's play but confines the research to the time period without looking ahead and identifying later trends. Jankowski writes that the Duchess exhibits a "failure to create a successful means by which she can rule as a woman sovereign" (222). The larger issue identified by Webster is that of patriarchal society. The Duchess lives in a world that refuses to allow her to rule as a woman sovereign. Similarly, Shakespeare's Tamora is underestimated as a cunning warrior based on her sex. Both women face challenges due to patriarchal tendencies, which are later identified and challenged during second-wave feminism. Reading Renaissance literature as a precursor to later feminist movements shows the prevalence of women's issues and a trend of systematic oppression. The issues of the twentieth century were not identical to Renaissance concerns. However, women's sexuality, marriage, and exchange

value were still important topics of consideration. Chandra Talpade Mohanty explains, "While the global division of labor in 1995 looks quite different from what it was in the 1950s, ideologies of women's work, the meaning and value of work for women, and women workers' struggles against exploitation remain central issues for feminists around the world" (981). The issues Mohanty identifies existed well before the 1950s and are preserved in Renaissance literature.

To fully understand the women's movement and the plays written by Shakespeare and Webster, contemporary audiences must continue to consider the historical context as well as the later movements that correspond to the writing. Texts reflect the cultural moment in which they were written. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan write, "The New Historicists renewed a sense of the importance of history to literary studies" (809). Reading Shakespeare and Webster's plays as artifacts of Renaissance culture reveals gender issues that transcend millennia and emerge as the later women's movement. The authors explore and illuminate the tension created between a personal and political or public life for women. Systematic oppression existed, limiting women's options for marriage, damaging their credibility as important figures, and dictating personal decisions related to bloodlines.

Shakespeare and Webster's texts reflect a repressive and patriarchal political structure. Women's issues and the blurred lines between personal and political life existed as a problematic paradigm of the Renaissance, which permeates history and contemporary issues. Second-wave feminists protested the very issues characterized in Shakespeare and Webster's writing. The playwright's characters face dilemmas of love and politics. Shakespeare and Webster's texts reveal a series of social norms and instances of patriarchal limitations for women. The texts reflect their cultural moment and historical considerations of the era. Queen Elizabeth I's unique

position led to questions about women in power. Her lineage and therefore decision against marriage became a public issue. Tamora, in Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*, and the Duchess in Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* struggle with their roles in society and sexual freedom.

Feminists during second-wave feminism fought for abortion rights and supported career women.

Women during the twentieth century faced conflicting priorities between building careers and fulfilling the prescribed role of homemaker. Second-wave feminists, like Carol Hanisch and Betty Freidman, recognized, documented, and protested social norms and laws prohibiting equal footing between men and women. Their struggles mirror those of women in the Renaissance. During second wave feminism and the Renaissance, women's marriages, sexual activity, and bodies existed as public objects. The trending issue of split expectations is recognizable throughout Renaissance literature and second-wave feminism. The pioneers of second-wave feminism rallied against long-existing oppressive social structures evidenced in Renaissance literature. These parallels connect literature from the sixteenth century to more significant political movements.

The Renaissance was an era of uncertainty, permeated by questions of despotism and succession. Queen Elizabeth I is regarded as a successful monarch, but her rule faced challenges due to her gender and hegemonic expectations. William Shakespeare lived and wrote during Queen Elizabeth's reign until she died in 1603. Her rule presents the issue of succession without an heir. Elizabeth I refused to marry and chose not to produce children to inherit the throne. This personal decision led to political consequences and public upset. However, Elizabeth made calculated decisions regarding marriage. David Bevington speculates that Elizabeth's motive for avoiding marriage was not merely personal preference but a conscious political strategy. He writes, "She remained unmarried throughout her life, in part, at least, because marriage would



have upset the delicate balance she maintained among rival groups, both foreign and domestic" (I-14). As a woman in power, Elizabeth I's personal decisions about marriage, courtship, and reproduction became inherently political. Just as second-wave feminists rebelled against pressures to produce a nuclear family, Elizabeth I rebelled against marriage and child-rearing as a monarch. Elizabeth I's unique situation highlights the shortcomings of a patriarchal structure and bleeds into the literature of the time.

Shakespeare's text encapsulates the gender issues of his time. Stephen Greenblatt, a new historicist, recognizes the reflection of reality in literature. He claims, "If the textual traces in which we take interest and pleasure are not sources of numinous authority . . . they are signs of contingent social practices" (5). *Titus Andronicus* addresses women's positions, limitations, and dilemmas in the public and political sphere. The theme of women's divided duties under patriarchal influence is evident in Shakespeare's work and his historical moment. Shakespeare lived under Elizabethan rule most of his life and performed several of his plays for the Queen. A 1602 copy of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* states, "it hath bene diuers times acted by the right Honorable my Lord Chamberlaines seruants. Boeth before her Maiestie, and else-where"(Folger Digital). Due to his familiarity with court and current politics, it is arguable that Shakespeare's representation of women stems from his audience. However, the later writing of John Webster highlights similar instances of female oppression under patriarchal rule. The continued tradition of exposing patriarchal tendencies in Renaissance literature indicates that these playwrights recognized the impossible position of women during the Renaissance. Shakespeare was not only writing to please his patron, the Queen, but exposing larger political issues which permeate history.

*Titus Andronicus* offers important insights regarding gender expectations and tensions during the Renaissance. The cultural significance of the political events during the play's production illuminates the prevailing issues of patriarchal rule and gender inequality. Shakespeare's female characters are faced with gender-based dilemmas, just as Elizabeth I was pressured to marry and bear children. The female characters Shakespeare presents face challenging situations due to their lack of personal autonomy in making decisions. The play is a revenge tragedy depicting the decline of Titus, a Roman warrior. It presents two prominent female characters, Tamora, the Queen of the Goths, and Lavinia, Titus' daughter. Tamora engages in a political marriage. She leverages her situation to gain control and power in the text. Lavinia faces abuse and humiliation due to her personal and political decisions regarding marriage. Tamora and Lavinia's sexual encounters are public knowledge and addressed as such.

Tamora enters the text as a captive of war and a mother. She is in a desperate state; her future is determined by her ability to manipulate her own gendered body. Lavinia, in contrast, is the beloved and chaste daughter of Titus. The men in the play value her body, describing her as "Rome's royal mistress" (1.1.243). Lavinia and Tamora react to their socio-political situations differently, yet both women are dead at the end of the play. The brutal treatment of the only two female characters in Shakespeare's text highlights the impossible position women faced in the Renaissance. It mirrors the arguments about unfair treatment that arose during second-wave feminism. By examining both women and their reactions to their mistreatment, it is evident that Shakespeare recognized the tension between political life and personal decisions. He does not offer solutions or adopt a war cry as later generations in the feminist movement did, but he sparks the idea that society mistreats and oppresses women.

Tamora's invisibility to men in power emerges as a more significant trend recognized by second-wave feminism. Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* explores gender issues and the oppressed role of middle-class housewives. Friedan discusses feelings of confinement related to women's gender roles. She explains the same phenomenon Tamora faces in the first act of Shakespeare's play. Friedan writes, "Sometimes a woman would say 'I feel empty somehow . . . incomplete.' Or she would say 'I feel as if I don't exist'" (20). The women in Shakespeare's play and the housewives described by Friedan are invisible to men in power. Tamora faces limited options for success. The men in the play reject her as a legitimate ruler. Her position is ignored by Titus and later by her lover, Aaron. Tamora's only option for advancement from captive to ruler is through marriage. Until she can attain power her voice is ignored by the men around her. Katherine Turk explains this phenomenon as seen in second-wave feminism. She writes, "The women we met in *The Feminine Mystique* felt trapped in a world where men monopolized positions of power and autonomy" (24). Women faced discrimination in the workplace, their education was suggested to focus on domestic duties, and it was widely believed that women belonged in the home. Tamora faces a similar unjust power structure in Act I of Shakespeare's play. She is stripped of her political power, and cannot appeal to Titus with any of her strengths. She relies on the only commonality between herself and Titus, she attempts to appeal to him as a parent. Tamora asks Titus to show mercy and the male warrior silences her. Tamora is forced to assume a subservient role based on her sex. Titus ignores her title and ferocity as a warrior and reduces her to her biological sex. In the eyes of Rome, Tamora is merely a woman. She exists as an object to be exchanged. She endures a torturous life as a woman and a public figure.

Upon returning home and claiming victory against the Goths, Titus is encouraged to sacrifice "the proudest prisoner of the goths" (1.1.96). The ceremonial murder is committed *Ad*

*manes fratrum*, or in memory of Titus' fallen sons. Tamora, the captured Queen, is not considered the proudest or the noblest, and she is passed over for her eldest son, Alarbus. Titus claims, "I give him you, the noblest that survives, / The eldest son of this distressed queen" (1.1.103-102). Tamora is depicted as "distressed" instead of noble or brave. Her capture indicates that she may have fought in battle alongside her sons. However, her position is disregarded. This scene identifies the patriarchal structure as Tamora is ignored in her position. She appears only as a woman despite her role as the ruler of the Goths. The position of women during the historical moment was limiting and lesser than that of man. This reduction of identity places Tamora at a disadvantage despite her position as Queen. Titus's decision to execute Alarbus instead of Tamora diminishes her role and importance. He marginalizes Tamora and discounts her rule by passing over her as "the proudest prisoner" (1.1.96). The blatant disregard from Tamora's male captors mirror issues brought forth in the feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s. The erasure of power in the presence of men is a problem addressed by second-wave feminism.

After Titus announces his decision to kill Alarbus at his own sons' funeral, Tamora attempts to appeal to him as a woman. She recognizes the absence of respect and her lack of political clout in Rome; therefore, she begs as a mother for the pardoning of her son. Tamora exclaims,

Victorious Titus, rue the tears I shed,

A mother's tears in passion for her son.

And if thy sons were ever dear to thee,

O think my son to be as dear to me (1.1.105-108).

She disregards her royal position and clings to the traditional expectation of women. She appeals to Titus as a mother and caretaker for her children. In a failed attempt to gain his sympathy, she

tried to gain his favor as a parent. Tamora has no other legitimate claim to equality. She is captured, considered less than the proudest warrior, and entirely at the Roman's mercy. Stanton explains the brevity of the situation, stating, "Tamora is a Goth, not a Roman, a woman, not a man; Titus cannot or will not attempt to share her perspective. He orders the dismembering and burning of Alarbus" (46). The sacrifice is a tradition of war. However, Titus' ignorance of Tamora's position makes the sacrifice a ritual perpetuating misogynistic ideals. He only sees Tamora as a woman and erases her identity as a ruler. This action in Act I of Shakespeare's play highlights a lack of respect for women within the patriarchy. Despite her high position, tenacity as a ruler, and love as a parent, Tamora is cast aside, and her son is sacrificed. She is invisible as a holistic being and only recognized as a woman. Women of second-wave feminism recognized the same dilemma. They were capable of joining the workforce, pursuing careers, and contributing to society as more than mothers but were discouraged. Freidan reflects, "College educators suggested more discussion groups on home management and family to prepare women for the adjustment to domestic life" (23). Women's education and general opinion directed young female students to focus on building families and contributing only as wives and mothers. Just as Titus and the Romans ignored Tamora for her strengths, twentieth-century women were ignored for their education and ambitions.

After her position as Queen of the Goths is ignored, Tamora recognizes the need to adhere to normative expectations. Her technique is echoed in Hanisch's essay, describing the state of women, "Women as oppressed people act out of necessity (act dumb in the presence of men), not out of choice" (Hanisch). She is taken as a wife by Saturninus, the new Emperor. She promises, "If Saturnine advance the Queen of Goths / She will a handmaid be to his desires, / A loving nurse, a mother to his youth" (1.1.337-339). She emphasizes her abilities to mother her new

husband's children and to satisfy Saturninus' desires. Tamora strategically becomes the consummate woman and thus becomes the Empress of Rome, attempting to reclaim her place as a powerful woman and ruler. She exhibits the shuffling technique described in Hanisch's essay; instead of acting ignorant in front of men, she acts feminine. Tamora presents herself as a desirable and tame woman to secure her place as Empress. She uses marriage to her advantage by outwardly exhibiting femininity, while inwardly, she plots revenge for her son's death.

Later in the play, Tamora engages in a politically unacceptable affair after marrying Saturninus. She begins a relationship with Aaron, a slave of low social ranking. Tamora's affections for him are inappropriate based on her position. They also challenge normative racial biases. Aaron is a black slave, referred to in the text as a "barbarous Moor" (5.3.4). This relationship represents romantic love, free from societal and political rules. Tamora's interest in Aaron is fueled by passion instead of status. The coupling of Aaron and Tamora directly violates normative marriage expectations. Barbara Harris explains the typical goal of marriage and relationships in the Renaissance as "financial security and social position. . .since . . .women acquired what they and their contemporaries called their livelihoods or livings through marriage" (43). Women, particularly those in power, were expected to marry within their class and maintain royal bloodlines. The affair with Aaron contradicts patriarchal values and represents the problematic position women faced. Unable to marry or engage in relationships of passion, but forced to act according to politics. Female bodies are treated as sources of reproduction and connecting entities between families.

Tamora's affair exacerbates her difficult situation when she becomes pregnant with Aaron's son. By engaging in a relationship based on emotions versus class, Tamora exemplifies the issue of political and personal life for women. Those in power held more wealth, and their

marriages were particularly important. Queen Elizabeth's marriage would have held political implications, just as her decision to remain single dictated the future of England. Aside from challenging the boundaries of class and race, Tamora's adultery places her in a dangerous position. Ira Clark explains, "Adultery was widely held to be a much more serious offense in the wife than it was in the husband" (40). As a reformed Goth and woman in the public sphere, Tamora's punishment for cuckolding Saturninus would be severe. Tamora's pregnancy and child endanger her position and her safety. Upon giving birth, Tamora orders the execution of her son. Her harsh decision reaffirms the risks of her affair. Aaron, like Titus, ignores Tamora, despite being her lover. She requests that Aaron "christen [the baby] with thy dagger's point" (4.2.73). She is the Empress of Rome, a powerful woman, and yet, her direction is ignored. Aaron responds to Tamora's order by saying, "It shall not die" (4.2.85). He outwardly and fearlessly rejects her rule by keeping his son alive. Throughout the play, Tamora fights against her invisibility in the face of a patriarchal society. Her struggle to be heard matches the issue of invisibility Friedman identifies in *The Feminine Mystique*. Tamora and women during the second wave of feminism recognized a disregard for female voices.

Aaron and Tamora's relationship proves that even women in power were questioned and oppressed. Aaron continues to reject Tamora's position, and despite his lowly status, he refers to his son as his heir. He recognizes his son as a connection to the rule of Rome and seemingly plans for him to inherit the throne. Tamora becomes invisible after birthing Aaron's heir, paralleling the feelings of twentieth-century women Friedan describes. Aaron neglects to consider Tamora's legitimate sons and her direct order to dispose of the child. His reaction perpetuates patriarchal ideals and assumes Tamora's purpose ends with childbirth. Simone de Beauvoir explains the role of women within the domestic sphere, "the children born to her

belong to the husband's family. If she were an inheritor, she would to an excessive degree transmit the wealth of her father's family to that of her husband; so she is carefully excluded from the succession" (106). Aaron assumes that his paternity outweighs Tamora's position as Empress and mother. He adheres to the normative structure dictating that men dominate their wives' decisions, wealth, and children. Through their illegitimate child, Arron assumes a claim to power and status.

Tamora is viewed only as a single woman by the Romans. She is paired with a husband instead of treated as an enemy ruler. Her accomplishments are neglected, forcing her to trade her body in marriage for the opportunity to exact revenge. Theorist Judith Butler argues that gender is performative. She writes, "gender is a kind of imitation" (956). Her research focuses on the instability of gender as a social construct. However, when applied to Tamora in Shakespeare's play, it is evident that his character is performing feminine to reconcile her personal and political life. The performance stems from Tamora's expected role as a mother, wife, and woman. Although she has more to offer, her cunning, ability to rule, and title as Queen, the men in Rome only see her as a one-dimensional figure defined by gender. Tamora leverages their expectations and secures her seat as Empress. She tries to split herself into a public woman, outwardly presenting as a mother, yet she maintains her internal political motives and drive for revenge. Her actions in the play reflect Hanisch's observation as a second-wave feminist and Butler's gender theory. Society perpetuates problematic ideals for women, expecting them to act within specific prescribed roles such as mother and wife. The problem of women appealing to men out of necessity for advancement is prevalent in Renaissance literature and later feminist movements.



While acting feminine, Tamora crafts a plan to exact her revenge on Titus and Rome. She married the Emperor out of necessity but took on a lover to fulfill her personal needs and desires. Tamora's situation exemplifies the impossible overlap of personal and political life for women. She expresses love for Aaron, calling him "my lovely Aaron" (2.3.10). Tamora's affair represents the private life she desires despite her need to maintain power and become Empress in a tense political situation between Rome and the Goths. Tamora admits her deep love by stating, "Ah, my sweet Moor, sweeter to me than life!" (2.3.51). Despite her feelings, she is torn between two versions of herself, the public Empress, and the private lover. Because of Tamora's split position, Aaron is also distressed. He claims, "Madam, though Venus govern your desires, / Saturn is dominator over mine" (2.3.30-31). Venus is known as the god of sex and fertility. Aaron implies that Tamora is ruled by her sexuality but then claims Saturn dominates his desire. His words reference Saturninus, Tamora's legal husband. Aaron's claims show patriarchal tendencies claiming women as property. Tamora's desires are not as important as her legal marriage and husband, who is her assumed ruler. Saturninus dominates Tamora sexually and politically by owning her in marriage. Due to her gender, Tamora is placed in a dilemma between love and marriage, sex, and abstinence with her lover.

Aaron's words have a secondary implication. By stating that Venus rules Tamora, he claims her sexual desires control her. Women in the Renaissance were expected to remain chaste until married and unbridled passion held negative connotations. Lavinia and her husband Bassianus recognize Tamora's sexual nature. They meet her in the woods after she steps away to visit Aaron. Lavinia addresses the scandalous situation addressing Tamora,

Under your patience, gentle Empress,

‘Tis thought you have a goodly gift in horning,

And to be doubted that your Moor and you  
Are singled forth to try experiments. (2.3.65-69).

Women were often monitored to ensure they were not engaging in unacceptable sexual behavior. For example, women in the Renaissance had chambermaids. In Webster's later play, *The Duchess of Malfi*, the Duchess' brothers employ a spy to monitor her actions. Webster and Shakespeare recognize the male gaze without naming it in their plays. They show the surveillance and objectification of women through the heavy emphasis on sexual behavior and lack of privacy. The chastity of women was so coveted that they were monitored even while sleeping and in their lodgings. Finding Tamora alone in the woods, Lavinia assumes she was planning to have relations with Aaron. She also reveals that Tamora is rumored to have the gift of "horning" or cuckolding. This exemplifies that society does not allow women to have private relations or interactions, particularly when they are well-known or in positions of power. Her marriage to Saturninus allowed her to shift from captured Queen to Empress, but it did not fulfill her personal needs. She married based on her desperate position, not for compassion. Therefore, trapped in a loveless marriage, Tamora cannot successfully balance her personal life with the public life she must lead for self-preservation.

Tamora's passions are not private but discussed throughout Rome. Shakespeare's emphasis on Tamora's private affairs made public proves the problem women faced of blurred lines between their domestic and public lives. Although her sexual behavior should be considered a personal affair, it is openly discussed in the play. Bassianus accuses Tamora of adultery when he asks,

Why are you sequestered from all your train,  
Dismounted from your snow-white goodly steed,

And wandered hither to an obscure plot,  
 Accompanied but with a barbarous Moor,  
 If foul desire had not conducted you? (2.3.75-79)

Bassianus' question is accusatory and misogynistic. He asks Tamora why she has abandoned her white horse, a metaphor for chastity. White is often representative of virginity; women wear white before marriage and before they consummate their relationships. By dismounting her horse, Bassianus contends that Tamora is impure and sexually independent. He calls her passion "foul," negatively categorizing female sexual agency. Though Tamora loves Aaron, society rejects and criticizes her relationship. Later in the play, Aaron regards Tamora similarly. He states that Tamora is a "most insatiate and luxurious woman!" (5.1.89). The reactions men have to Tamora's passions show the impossible position of an independent woman. In the public sphere, Tamora is criticized by her subjects. In her private relationship, she is still shunned for her sexual behavior, though Aaron willingly engages in intercourse with his mistress. Webster similarly presents a scandalous relationship in *The Duchess of Malfi*. In Webster's play, a female character is criticized, like Tamora, for her sexual agency. Women participating in the later feminist movement identified double standards set forth by the patriarchy.

Second-wave feminism saw the need for comradery and formed women's groups. Participants began talking about trends at work and home. Hanisch explains, "One of the first things we discover in these groups is that personal problems are political problems . . . I've been forced to take off the rose-colored glasses and face the awful truth about how grim my life really is as a woman" (Hanisch). They recognized similar struggles and forms of misogyny in their lives. Honor Moore explains, "The aim of these groups was not merely to share intimate stories, but to find commonality and to analyze it, in order to understand how a woman's problem might

not be hers alone, but part of her oppression under patriarchy" (xix). The importance of validation and power in numbers is observed in *Titus Andronicus*. By placing the two female characters in conflict, Shakespeare exposes the need for sisterhood. Had Tamora and Lavinia expressed sympathy for one another, Lavinia when finding Tamora in the woods, and Tamora when dealing with Lavinia's treatment, they may have avoided some of *Titus Andronicus'* unpleasantnesses. Mirroring the empress' earlier appeal to Titus as a woman and parent, Lavinia begs Tamora to spare her during an altercation in the woods. Lavinia asks, "Do thou entreat her show a woman's pity" (2.3.147). She asks for a swift death and begs Tamora to save her from her two sons, who plan to rape Lavinia. In response, Tamora states, "I know not what it means-away with her" (2.3.157). She rejects the societal norm of mother and caretaker; she renounces the bonds of gender and resolves to let her children rape Lavinia. By ignoring Lavinia's pleas, Tamora rejects any notion of solidarity between women.

Tamora embodies the concept of a split self during her interactions with Lavinia. The split exemplifies the unfair and unrealistic expectations women face. The exchange in the woods shows the inability of women to fulfill both public and private demands. Tamora shifts into a masculine role despite being a biological woman by rejecting Lavinia's request for mercy. Lavinia's final words in the play describe Tamora, "No grace, no womanhood? Ah, beastly creature, / The blot and enemy to our general name/ confusion fall" (2.3.182-184). Tamora presents as masculine in order to protect her affair and political marriage. However, when her sons arrive, she quickly shuffles into a feminine role. She leans on normative expectations and adopts a damsel in distress persona, claiming, "But straight they told me they would bind me here / Unto the body of a dismal yes / And leave me to this miserable death" (2.3.106-108). She portrays herself as a victim and expresses relief at the arrival of her male sons. Tamora calls their

arrival "wonderous fortune" (2.3.112) and commands her sons to "revenge [her] as [they] love [their] mother's life" (2.3.114). The newly named Empress of Rome must shift between exhibiting masculine behavior to maintain control and feminine behavior in front of her husband and sons. Tamora represents the impossible position of women in power.

Despite her reproachful actions, Tamora is a victim of the patriarchal structure of society. Unable to remain a powerless captive, she became the wife of Rome's Emperor. In her new position of power, rumors spread about her sexual behavior, and Tamora is otherved by those around her. She is unable to marry her lover legally and is caught in her affair. She is cruelly treated for her actions but not provided with suitable alternatives. At the end of the play, Tamora is tricked into cannibalism and murdered. Titus exacts his revenge for her son's rape of Lavinia and tells her both sons are "...baked in this pie,/Whereof their mother daintily hath fed, /Eating the flesh that she herself hath bred" (5.3.61-63). Scholars often identify Tamora as the villain of *Titus Andronicus*, but her unfortunate position leads to many of her horrible actions, and her death is tragic. Although her decisions and reactions to those around her are extreme, Tamora's character is often torn between societal expectations and her own convictions. After her capture, she experienced an impossible situation. Titus stripped her of her authority and murdered her eldest son. In return, Tamora approves the rape of Lavinia. Her treatment of Titus' daughter serves a dual purpose. It allows her to exact revenge for her son's death and enables her to treat a woman as an equal to men. When Tamora is ignored as a warrior and Queen, Titus considers her status below his own. Her brutal treatment of Lavinia requires audiences to think of women differently. Shakespeare presents a woman suffering for her father's actions, reversing the earlier scenario of a son suffering for his mother. His portrayal of Lavinia and Tamora places men and women on equal ground in terms of war and revenge.

Lavinia maintains her femininity throughout the text but is also met with a disturbing and disappointing fate. Though she is not an empress, she is the daughter of Titus and is held in high regard throughout Rome. Her position is a public one; therefore, her marriage and homelife are not dictated by her wants but by her father and politics. She is regarded as a symbol of Rome instead of an individual woman. Following traditional sixteenth-century values, Lavinia is viewed as an object and property. Despite her high rank, Lavinia is limited by the patriarchal structure. Sir Thomas Smith, a diplomat during the sixteenth century, explains the role of women. He writes, "we do reject women, as those whom nature hath made to keepe home and to nourish their familie and children, and not to medle with matters abroad, nor to beare office in a citie or common wealth no more than children and infantes" (30). Lavinia is not directly involved in political decisions; however, since husbands decide the class status, marriage is an important and public issue. She belongs to her father and later her husband. She has only fifteen lines throughout the play. Compared to Tamora, who has forty-nine, Lavinia is virtually silent. Lavinia and her relationships are integral to Shakespeare's text despite her limited lines. She is an example of the ideal woman, and yet, she is still punished for her personal decisions.

After returning from war and declining his election as Emperor, Titus declares Saturninus as the ruler of Rome. In return, the newly appointed Emperor resolves to repay Titus for his humble actions. Saturninus promises,

I give thee thanks in part of thy deserts,  
 And will with deeds requite thy gentleness.  
 And for an onset, Titus, to advance  
 Thy name and honorable family,  
 Lavinia, I will make my Empress (1.1.238-242).

As the Emperor, he decides to take Lavinia for a wife but has not consulted her. He only tells Titus his intentions and assumes they will be well received. Titus' reaction fulfills the expectation for sixteenth-century hegemonic social expectations. Bevington states, "women's identity in marriage was subsumed under that of their husbands-as it was subsumed under that of their father's before marriage" (1187). Marriage functions as a pathway to advancement; by marrying someone of higher status, Lavinia brings honor and prestige to the Andronicus name. Gayle Rubin accurately explains the state of women in society. She claims, "Women are given in marriage, taken in battle, exchanged for favors, sent as tribute, traded, bought and sold" (910). Titus gives Lavinia away through marriage; in return, his class status is advanced. This marriage ritual exemplifies the issue observed by Rubin and emphasized during second-wave feminism. Though women in power, like Tamora, were targets of patriarchal oppression, all women were affected. Those in lower classes still faced issues of choice and lack of freedom through misogynistic traditions. The physical female body throughout literature often functions as a bargaining chip in negotiations as well as a means to reproduce royal bloodlines. Both Titus and Saturninus expect Lavinia's children to be heirs to the Roman empire. This new role as Empress offers her family a stable future as rulers. Neither man asks for Lavinia's consent because she is considered an object to be traded between men. She is exchanged for social advancement.

After Saturninus' proposal, his younger brother, Bassianus, claims Lavinia for himself. He tells Titus, "this maid is mine" (1.1.279). He takes Lavinia by the arm, and the two flee the capitol. Lavinia remains silent throughout the marriage negotiations and conflict. Her silence implies her willingness to marry Saturninus at her father's wishes. Despite her alleged relationship with Bassianus, Lavinia is loyal to sixteenth-century values. She is quiet and obedient. Additionally, Lavinia never confirms her love for Bassianus. The text describes her

fleeing as a 'rape' which is defined as a kidnapping. Bernice Harris explains the Renaissance use of rape regarding Tamora, "She had been Queen of the Goths when Titus seized her and took her with him. This is rape, as in an abduction, in that the Goths are dishonored by this exchange" (3). Harris does not consider the double rape of Lavinia, taken by Bassianus and later ravished by Tamora's two sons. Lavinia never declares her love for either proposed marriage in Shakespeare's text. Her body is not her own but a public object passed between men. Emily Demeter-Goebel explains, "Early statutory law . . . conflated sexual assault with abduction, blurring the distinction between the two" (77). This combination definition of rape exposes the oppressive nature of patriarchal societal structures. Pilar Rodriguez Martinez identifies rape and legislation as prominent issues presented during the radical second wave of feminism. She explains, "Within feminist movements, communication between women who had been raped was fundamental in raising consciousness in a process of radicalization and rebellion, while public opinion in the 1970s, excused men and placed the responsibility directly on the woman who had suffered attacks" (152). Though she follows the lead and agrees to marry Saturninus and then obliges Bassianus when he takes her arm and flees, she does not verbalize her personal intent or feelings to either man. Lavinia's silence and willingness to forego love prove her image as the ideal woman. She casts her feelings aside to appease the men in her life.

Second-wave feminism attacked the idea of female shame for the sake of being female. Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* acted as a catalyst for second-wave feminism. Nadine Changfoot explains, "*The Second Sex* was a beacon for equality feminism during second-wave feminism" (12). De Beauvoir contends that women are systematically oppressed. Toril Moi writes, "Beauvoir shows how . . . fundamental assumptions dominate all aspects of social, political and cultural life and, equally important, how women themselves internalize this



objectified vision, thus living in a constant state of inauthenticity" (90). Lavinia exemplifies de Beauvoir's assertions in her actions. She does not speak out as an authentic individual but remains obedient and internalizes the patriarchal expectations surrounding women and marriage. Despite her obedient role, Lavinia still faces unimaginable punishments and a terrible end. Shakespeare's treatment of Lavinia exemplifies the damaging effects of a patriarchal social structure. His observations give way to the later actions and protests of second-wave feminism. Upon discovering Tamora and Aaron, Lavinia is taken by Chiron and Demetrius, violated, and mutilated. After they kill Bassianus, Lavinia recognizes her immediate danger. She begs,

O Tamora, be called a gentle queen,  
 And, with thine own hands kill me in this place!  
 For tis not life that I have begged so long;  
 Poor I was slain when Bassianus died (2.3.168-171).

Lavinia's pleas prove her lack of self-value. She claims her life ended with the death of her husband. Because she is a widow, she feels death is appropriate and better than being physically violated. The conflict continues, and Lavinia reveals her concern not for her life but for preserving her body. She asks,

'Tis present death I beg, and one thing more  
 That womanhood denies my tongue to tell.  
 O, keep me from their worse-than-killing lust,  
 And tumble me into some loathsome pit  
 Where never man's eye may behold my body. (2.3.173-177)

Lavinia begs to keep her virginity in exchange for her life. Shakespeare presents the most extreme example of disillusionment under the patriarchy by showing that Renaissance society

values chastity over life. Emily Detmer-Goebel asserts, "Lavinia's chaste refusal to say the word 'rape' reminds the audience that even to speak of rape brings a woman shame" (75). A society that cannot acknowledge rape cannot prevent it. Lavinia's preposterous requests evoke sympathy as she is a virtuous and sympathetic character. By eliciting sympathy from the audience, Shakespeare shows how damaging the current structure is to women. The upsetting situation Lavinia faces is one second-wave feminists fought fervently against. Honor Moore writes about the movement's literature, "One heard poems about fathers and mothers and sisters, about rape and women artists, about Gertrude Stein, about miscarriages. . ." (xxii). Charon and Demetrius ravage Lavinia, and instead of murdering her as she requested, they cut out her tongue and cut off her hands. This act forces her to live in shame of her lost virginity and prevents her from identifying her attackers or any details of the horrific event.

Marcus, Lavinia's uncle, finds her in the woods after her attack. Instead of focusing on her wounds, he worries about her father's reaction. Marcus laments while Lavinia stands in front of him, bleeding, "come, let us go and make thy father blind, / For such a sight will blind a father's eye" (2.4.52-53). The lack of concern for Lavinia highlights the importance of her public life. Later in the text, Titus kills Lavinia out of shame. He asks, "Was it well done of rash Virginius, / To slay his daughter with his own right hand / Because she was enforced, stained, and deflowered?" (5.3.36-38). The response from Saturninus is affirmative. He states, ". . . the girl should not survive her shame, / and by her presence still renew his sorrows" (5.3.41-42). According to Shakespeare's characters, the shame and sorrow a rape victim brings her father is justification for murder. If Lavinia is an object and a symbol of Rome, her murder is not personal but political. By killing her, Titus is removing the shame of Rome. This impossible situation highlights the dangerous overlap of personal and political life for women in the Renaissance. The

conflict between person and political life for women continues into later literature and well into second-wave feminism.

Webster and Shakespeare experienced a culture that observed the problems of a patriarchal structure. Their texts expose the overlap in governance and the personal lives of women. Shakespeare's contemporary, John Webster, was several years younger. Webster lived from 1580 to 1632. His play, *The Duchess of Malfi*, was performed twenty years after the death of Elizabeth I. Due to Elizabeth's lack of an heir, there was speculation about her succession. King James VI of Scotland ultimately assumed the rule of England; as the cousin of Queen Elizabeth, his royal bloodline made him an appropriate inheritor of the throne. However, James I's rule was not guaranteed. Arabella Stuart was a possible successor. She married William Seymour against James' wishes and was later imprisoned in the Tower of London. *The Duchess of Malfi* presents some parallels between Arabella Stuart and the Duchess. Jankowski argues, "the play. . . participates in the discursive construction of women in the early modern period and helps to reveal the contradictions in the notion of the female ruler" (222). Despite the restoration of a male ruler, Webster and his contemporaries continue to explore and question the role of women in power and the tension between personal and political life. The return to a normative patriarchal leadership did not silence the voice of women. Issues of power and the political place of women arise in the play. The same issues arise in second-wave feminism when women outwardly rebelled against unfair wages, healthcare issues, and gender discrimination.

Webster's play, *The Duchess of Malfi*, explores gender inequities through its representation of women. The three women in the play face challenges according to the larger systematic oppression. The Duchess is the main character; her marriage is the play's focal point. Bevington describes the text as "the depiction of an innocent, energetic, sexually enterprising,

and morally appealing woman who exposes herself to destruction by attempting to live, love, and marry as she wishes in a world dominated by powerful men and the power seeking men who follow them" (1749). The Duchess in Webster's tale is a victim of the patriarchy, just as Tamora and Lavinia are in *Titus Andronicus*. Tamora and the Duchess are sexually independent women, and their actions have severe consequences. Bevington blames The Duchess stating that she exposes herself to her own destruction. The real culprit is not The Duchess, but the impossible balance women were expected to maintain between overlapping personal and political expectations. Jankowski makes a similar unfair assumption that the Duchess fails to create a situation where she can rule successfully. Both scholars overlook the impossible expectations of women. Their private decisions yield public consequences; just as Elizabeth I's decision not to marry influenced the future of England, the Duchess' relationship holds political importance. Additionally, women's decisions outside of the political realm are greatly influenced by the larger political scope. In the Renaissance, women's relationships were important for bloodlines and class. Therefore, male family members often arranged marriages. During Second Wave feminism, women began to realize the control expectations and legislation held over their bodies and decisions. Renaissance literature exposes issues of oppression while second-wave feminists began to rebel against patriarchal domination.

Tamora and the Duchess must face the inherently public nature of successorship. Due to their positions, Tamora and the Duchess are often in the public eye. Their personal decisions about sex and marriage hold political consequences for themselves and those around them. Women in the Renaissance faced limited options for marriage and independence. The Duchess is an unmarried woman of high social standing. Bevington explains that the death of her husband allows her some freedom, "Widows. . . headed households and help property in their own

names" (1749). She exists as a powerful, single woman in politics. The Duchess is introduced in Act 1 of the play. Antonio, her steward, and lover, describes her favorably. He claims, "[The Duchess'] days are practiced in such noble virtue" (1.1.201). The Duchess is identifiable as the play's heroine from her early description. Webster invites his audiences to sympathize with her through his language. Although she possesses agency, she is noble and virtuous. The Duchess is a sexually independent woman, yet Webster provides her with a favorable description. His introduction indicates the cracks in the patriarchal structure. The Duchess is a heroine despite her non adherence to gender expectations. The play encourages audiences to consider her difficult position as a wealthy widow with two brothers who try to interfere with her personal decisions.

The play transitions quickly from introducing the Duchess to concerns about her sexual agency and the possibility of re-marriage. Much like Lavinia in *Titus Andronicus*, the Duchess is overwhelmed with male opinions about her domestic choices. Her two brothers, the Cardinal and Ferdinand, oppose a second marriage for their sister. They hire Bolsa, a recently released criminal, to spy on the Duchess. Ferdinand states, "She's a young widow; / I would not have her marry again" (1764). Their refusal to support another marriage stems not from love for their sister but from political motivations. Bevington writes, "The Brothers. . . have unstated political motives for discouraging her remarriage (they may, for instance, exercise influence over the Duchess's state that they would lose were the Duchess to marry another great nobleman)" (1750). The brothers recognize the advantage of their widowed sister. Without a husband to own her wealth and guide her decisions, the brothers have some claim to influence.

The political structure of the Renaissance limited women's independence. In Renaissance culture, women held an assumed duty to their male family members. They served their fathers or brothers if no father is present, and later their husbands. Harris explains, "Aristocratic women

were expected to be obedient to their fathers, husbands, and eldest brothers” (28). The social structure allows Ferdinand and the Cardinal an opportunity to try and influence their sister's decisions and access her wealth. Similar issues of monetary discernment surfaced during second-wave feminism. Women joined the workforce and began to question the nuclear family. They fought for economic independence and control over their bank accounts. Although men remained the breadwinners for most households, women began to assert their worth as individuals and independent consumers. Webster's presentation of the Duchess' unique position shows a similar dilemma women faced during the Renaissance.

Ferdinand and the Cardinal's concern with the Duchess' marriage has a second purpose. Ferdinand exhibits an obsession with bloodlines and class. Jankowski explains, 'It also becomes easier to understand Ferdinand's obsession with the Duchess's blood and her reference to 'all [her] royal kindred' who might lie in the path of her proposed marriage to a lower rank, which would pollute this blood" (227). Bloodlines were important during the Renaissance, as evidenced by Queen Elizabeth I and King James I. Families within the aristocracy were expected to marry within their station. The Duchess' marriage to Antonio directly violates the expectations of her brothers and the patriarchy. Tamora faced similar issues when she bore Aaron's child. Both women engaged with partners outside their expected class and faced difficult consequences. By presenting the issue of marriage and expectations in their texts, Shakespeare and Webster acknowledge the patriarchal construct existing in Renaissance England.

The role of women in society is challenged during second-wave feminism but is acknowledged in Renaissance drama. A structure that values men over women leaves limited opportunities for female independence. The Duchess maintains independence from a husband in her widowed state but must keep her brothers at bay. Similarly, in the twentieth century, working

mothers had limited financial independence yet were still overshadowed by their husbands' earnings. The issue emphasized by Jankowski's analysis and Webster's portrayal of political women matches those presented by de Beauvoir during second-wave feminism. De Beauvoir writes, "The law or mores enjoin marriage, birth control, and abortion are prohibited, divorce is forbidden" (84). De Beauvoir's analysis of female oppression in the twentieth century exposes a political situation for women. Laws and social expectations restrain twentieth-century women and limit their freedom, just as bloodlines, religion, and politics prevent the same for Renaissance women. Webster exposes the systematic oppression de Beauvoir highlights in her work. The Duchess' struggle is one for sexual and sovereign independence.

Despite her slight independence after her husband's death, the Duchess reveals that she loves Antonio and plans to marry him. Her feelings create tension with her public position as Duchess. Though she has feelings of love, her brothers warn her not to marry. The Duchess cannot fairly manage her position and feelings because marriage functions as a transaction more than an act of passion. The Duchess claims, "...Though fights and threat'nings, will assay / this dangerous venture. Let old wives report / I winked and chose a husband" (1.1.348-350). She accepts the dangers of her decision and decides to marry Antonio regardless of her brothers' warnings and the negative implications. She plots a secret marriage in her chamber.

Though marriage outside of the church was criticized, it was considered legal during the Renaissance. Kathryn Jacobs claims, "The Church of England . . . urged that marriages be solemnized in church, by a minister. . . This left the population caught between the well-known law of record, which legalized private marriage contracts, and the very different enforcement policies of the church courts" (115). Marrying in private proves that the Duchess recognizes the negative political implications of remarrying. It also shows that as a woman, she felt compelled

to act against popular marriage tradition. Her difficult position between love and political duty compels her to marry in private. De Gruyter explains, "[her] choice of a husband and getting married in defiance of her brothers undermines the Jacobean construction of women as objects of exchange in the marriage market to increase the symbolic power of men. . . The Duchess of Malfi follows her desires instead of following the constraints imposed by her brothers" (4). Her secret wedding early in the play attempts to split her personal or domestic life and her political or public life. As De Gruyter points out, the Duchess marries out of love and desire. She also maintains her independence and political position by disregarding her brothers. The Duchess attempts to enjoy both aspects of personal and political living, but she is met with tragedy.

The Duchess' unconventional marriage to Antonio highlights the problematic sociopolitical structure based on class and gender. She proposes to Antonio proving her agency and independence as a woman and her strife. She expounds, "The misery of us that are born great! / We are forced to woo, because no one dare woo us" (1.1.443-444). Not only is she oppressed by her brothers, but she is robbed of the opportunity to court in a typical fashion. She must boldly pursue Antonio because he cannot woo her. Society presents an impossible situation for women in the upper classes. They are expected to be chaste and obedient. However, suitors do not pursue them due to their status. Women are expected to marry, but the Duchess explains they are rarely pursued. Her bold proposal takes place in the Duchess' chamber, away from her family and without a priest. The Duchess tells Antonio, "You may discover what a wealthy mine / I make you lord of" (1.1.430-431). She offers her wealth to her husband but maintains her power by reminding him, "I make you lord." The Duchess is establishing an equal partnership. She shares her wealth with the man she loves but remains on equal ground. The wedding is her best attempt to reconcile the imbalance between her personal body and political body.



Shortly after her marriage, the Duchess becomes pregnant with Antonio's child. She attempts to hide the physical changes but is unable to successfully conceal her growing stomach. The physical proof of her marriage and actions with Antonio showcase the uncomfortable tension between personal and political life for women. Bolsa, the spy, observes The Duchess' changes and devises a plan to expose her. Bolsa states, "I observe our duchess / Is sick a-days. She pukes; her stomach seethes" (2.1.64-65). He is aware of her illness and how often she is sick. While he works as a provisor and is often in contact with the Duchess, he is observant of intimate details of her personal life. His knowledge indicates a lack of privacy and an overlap of roles for women in power. Women were monitored frequently in the Renaissance because their chastity and bloodlines held great importance. Bolsa continues his observation, "contrary to our Italian fashion, / [the Duchess] wears a loose-bodied gown. There's somewhat in't" (2.1.68-69). The Duchess' wellness, fashion, and weight are all assessed and treated as public. Bolsa induces labor by offering the Duchess apricots, and she is whisked away to have her child in private, but Bolsa's observations condemn her. The Duchess is not able to keep her pregnancy or birth purely personal. The Duchess and Tamora are both forced to have their children in hiding. Shakespeare and Webster illuminate the plight of women in their representation of male reactions to female desire and sexuality. Jankowski explains, "the mere fact that the woman existed within the world and was a living being capable of disposing of her own body, of polluting her dynastic vessel through unauthorized sexual contact, led to extreme anxiety on the part of her male owners" (228). Just as Elizabeth I's marriage would have produced political implications, the relationships of women in power were largely considered public issues. Other women still faced similar considerations and concerns from family members, but not on the same scale as women in power. The sexual agency Tamora and the Duchess possess has political consequences. De

Beauvoir explains the state of women and affairs, "When a woman becomes man's property, he wants her to be a virgin, and he requires complete fidelity under threats of extreme penalties. It would be the worst of crimes to risk giving inheritance rights to offspring begotten by some stranger" (107). Tamora and the Duchess' offspring are largely important due to their positions. Tamora's children are heirs to Rome. If she were to produce a child with Saturninus after Aaron, a debate about inheritance would ensue. The Duchess, another female in power, is forbidden by her brothers to make her own decisions about marriage and children. The Duchess had one son with her deceased husband. He is the proper heir to her inheritance. However, her affair with Antonio produces several children, and all her offspring have some claim to succeed her. These larger political implications of female sexuality exemplify the patriarchal system and the ways in which personal and political life intersect.

Renaissance society outwardly fears female sexual agency. Tamora, Lavinia, and the Duchess all have value attributed to their chastity. Their sexual encounters become public issues and reveal the sociopolitical oppression of women. Inheritance, marriageability, and honor are all important considerations for each character. Tamora and the Duchess face criticism when they step outside the boundaries of political marriage. The Duchess is called a "lusty widow" and condemned for her sexual activities with Antonio (1.1.341). Helene Cixous asserts in *The Laugh of Medusa*, "We've been turned away from our bodies, shamefully taught to ignore them, to strike them with that stupid sexual modesty; we've been made victims of the old fool's game" (947). She speaks against the modesty that the men in Shakespeare and Webster's plays demand. While Renaissance playwrights illuminated the problem, Cixous' writing openly challenges male dominance over female sexuality. The Duchess' death and the murders of Tamora and Lavinia highlight women's unfair punishment for indulging in their sexual desires.

The pattern Cixous identifies during the second wave of feminism is recognizable in Webster's portrayal of the treatment of sexually independent women. Continuing to show the oppressed position of women, Webster includes a second lustful character, Julia. She pursues multiple men despite being married to a nobleman. She is the wife of Castruchio and mistress to the Duchess' brother, the Cardinal. Due to her promiscuity, she is not well respected by the other characters and is eventually murdered by her lover, the Cardinal. Julia is a victim of the patriarchal structure, judged for her sexual desires. Christina Luckyj writes, "[Julia's words] imply that her decision to commit adultery was a painful one, the result of an ongoing struggle between the demands of sexuality and morality" (271). This fear of female sexual agency and its connection to bloodlines, status, and ownership permeates Webster's text.

The cruel treatment of Julia exemplifies the systematic oppression of women during the Renaissance. The Cardinal is aware of Julia's marriage, yet he engages in an affair with her. Julia weeps in her entrance to the play after a conversation with the Cardinal about love and loyalty. The Cardinal tells her, "You fear / my constancy because you have approved / Those giddy and wild turnings in yourself" (2.4.12-14). He condemns her familiarity with sexual desire and her drive to gain satisfaction outside of marriage. De Beauvoir explains this phenomenon in the introduction to *The Second Sex*. She writes, "A man is in the right in being a man; it is the women who is in the wrong" (15). The Cardinal and Julia have strong sexual desire, but only hers is condemned and insulted. This fear of female sexual agency and its connection to bloodlines, status, and ownership permeates Webster's text. The cruel treatment of Julia exemplifies the systematic oppression of women during the Renaissance. His role within the church dictates that he act with honesty and integrity. Deanna Wendel states, "when Bosola expresses concern about whether the Cardinal will blame him for his dalliance with Julia, she

immediately [re]assures him. . . This points to the Renaissance's societal tendency to have double-standards, accusing women" (Wendel). Julia is prepared to take the blame for the affair and assumes, as a woman, that she should bear the shame associated with infidelity. Julia's sexual agency is punished and holds a negative connotation. In contrast, the Cardinal remains unscathed throughout most of the play. The portrayal of the Cardinal and Julia reveals a double standard upheld by society.

Unlike Julia and the Duchess, Cariola, a servant, attempts to adhere to her subservient role. After the secret marriage that Cariola bears witness to, she states, "Whether the spirit of greatness or of woman / Reign most in her, I know not, but it shows / A fearful madness. I owe her much of pity" (1.1 505-507). Cariola has internalized the systematic oppression present in Renaissance culture. She pities the Duchess because she accepts that disaster will follow her marriage. She cannot discern if the Duchess' actions stem from the greatness of women (sexual passion/agency) or the spirit of greatness (her high position in society). This consideration hinges on the assumption that female agency, whether sexual or political, is madness. De Beauvoir recognizes the same phenomenon addressed in Webster's play. She writes, "In woman. . . there is from the beginning a conflict between her autonomous existence and her objective self. . . she must make herself object; she should therefore renounce her autonomy" (285). Cariola exists in the play as a subservient female. Despite her friendship with the Duchess, she disagrees with her friend's independence and boldness. She is a victim of patriarchal thought and views female agency as a negative attribute. The Duchess' marriage to Antonio worries Cariola.

Once Antonio and the Duchess are discovered, Ferdinand traps the Duchess in her home. The reactions of Cariola and the Duchess show their drastic differences. The Duchess recognizes her imprisonment and claims, "To hear of greater grief would lessen mine. / This is a prison!"

(4.2.10-11). Physically entrapped, the Duchess realizes the tragedy of her life as a woman. She has been imprisoned by her gender and by the patriarchal structure. She was unable to marry openly, viewed as a "lusty widow" and a political object throughout her life (1.1.341).

Imprisoned metaphorically as a woman and physically within her home, the Duchess states, "The robin redbreast and the nightingale / Never live long in cages (4.2.15-16). She determines and accepts her fate, realizing there is no life for a sexually independent and powerful woman. Her realization is shared by women during the second wave of feminism. Hanisch recognized through group meetings among women "how grim. . . life really is as a woman" (Hanisch). The systematic oppression metaphorically imprisoned women in the Renaissance and throughout history.

The Duchess' dignified death reminds audiences that she is the heroine of Webster's play. Despite her sexual agency, the Duchess is presented as a virtuous woman. Ferdinand's spy enters and tells the Duchess that he has been sent to see her execution and make her tomb. She remains composed and reminds Borsa, "I am the Duchess of Malfi still" (4.2.138). The Duchess maintains her integrity throughout the scene and accepts her death without opposition. The Duchess' dignified end proves her to be the heroine of the text. Webster's portrayal of the independent ruler allows sympathy for the oppressed woman. Despite her composure, love for her husband, and political position, the Duchess is still extinguished in the name of the patriarchy.

Cariola, in contrast, is murdered for her alliance with the Duchess. Her murder is less dignified, and her reactions are dramatic. She pleads with Borsa to spare her life and scratches and bites as the executioner takes her away. She claims, "I am not prepared for't. I will not die" (242-243). Unlike the Duchess, Cariola resists and cries for mercy. The Duchess remains strong

and acts as a sovereign even in death, where her servant fulfills the role of a frail woman. Cariola adheres to gender expectations by asking for her life as it belongs to a man. She claims, "I am contracted/ to a young gentleman" (4.2.246-247). Her words mirror Rubin and de Beauvoir's observation that men view women as objects. By murdering Cariola, the executioners are damaging the property of someone else. Her argument might have succeeded if Cariola hadn't been such a close co-conspirator.

Cariola's character highlights the importance of female comradery and the danger it presents to the patriarchy. Women can find strength in their shared experiences, as evidenced by the feminist movement of the 1970s. Cariola is the Duchess' confidant and friend throughout Webster's text. However, Antonio questions the validity of the female relationship once his marriage is discovered. This instance highlights the anxiety of men and the upset of the patriarchal structure that emerges when women collaborate. Immediately after Ferdinand confronts the Duchess, Antonio and Cariola appear. Antonio arrives and states, "We are/ Betrayed. How came he hither? [*To Cariola*] I should turn / This to thee for that." (3.2.146-148). Without any evidence, Antonio threatens Cariola, the closest friend to the Duchess. Her murder and Antonio's quick blame highlight the problem of female friendships. Just as Tamora and Lavinia were unable to maintain a bond, Antonio attempts to break up the sisterhood between Cariola and the Duchess. Shakespeare and Webster's texts highlight the importance of female relationships, and the challenges they face in patriarchal structures. Hanisch and Freidman during the second wave feminist movement advocated for women's groups and conversations about the female experience. Their actions are a continuation of the ideas presented through Renaissance literature.

Though Webster and Shakespeare's plays present women differently, they illuminate oppression and inequality for women. Both Tamora and the Duchess are punished for their boldness. Tamora, a captured Queen, sacrifices her feelings of love for a political marriage. Her position is often neglected as a warrior leader of the Goths and as the Empress of Rome. The Duchess' brothers berate her for her sexual independence. She suffers forced child labor at the hands of a spying man. The men of the play view the Duchess as an object and a body instead of respecting her decisions they concern themselves with her lover, pregnancy, and wealth. In contrast, Lavinia and Cariola attempt to adhere to patriarchal expectations. They are quiet, chaste, and obedient. Both women still suffer at the hands of systematic oppression. Lavinia is raped and later murdered. Cariola's mere association with the Duchess condemns her to death. These tragic characters illuminate the problem of the patriarchy. The issues they face are later addressed during second wave feminism.

Despite their vastly different reactions to male domination, Tamora, Lavinia, and the Duchess are all condemned based on their gender. The challenges presented by Webster and Shakespeare depict common concerns during the Renaissance. As Jankowski explains, "The relatively rapid appearance in mid-sixteenth century Britain of three reigning female monarchs severely taxed existing early modern political theory" (221). Women in power began to expose cracks in a patriarchal social structure that continued to weaken throughout history. The eruption of the feminist movement is a culmination of issues presented and prevalent throughout the Renaissance. Lavinia's abuse parallels the second-wave awareness campaigns against spousal abuse. Tamora's fight against gender-based invisibility mirrors Friedman's accounts of women in *The Feminine Mystique*. Webster and Shakespeare's texts are important contributors to modern feminist work. These writers, whose texts function as a reflection of the social/cultural moment

in which they wrote, preserved the female struggle. The issues they shed light on in their works are the same issues addressed by second-wave feminists as they began to chip away at the long-established structure of male rule.



## Works Cited

- Bevington, David M. "Life in Shakespeare's England ." *The Necessary Shakespeare*, Pearson, Boston, 2017, pp. 3-14.
- Butler, Judith. "Imitation and Gender Insubordination ." *Literary Theory an Anthology*, by Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan, John Wiley & Sons Incorporated, Hoboken, 2017, pp. 955–962.
- Changfoot, Nadine. "The Second Sex's Continued Relevance for Equality and Difference Feminisms." *European Journal of Women's Studies*, vol. 16, no. 1, Feb. 2009, pp. 11–31. *EBSCOhost*, <https://doi-org.ezproxy.snhu.edu/10.1177/1350506808098532>.
- Clark, Ira. "The Marital Double Standard in Tudor and Stuart Lives and Writing: Some Problems." *Medieval and Renaissance Drama in England*, vol. 9, 1997, pp. 34. *ProQuest*, <https://ezproxy.snhu.edu/login?qurl=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fscholarly-journals%2Fmarital-double-standard-tudor-stuart-lives%2Fdocview%2F1306198619%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D3783>.
- De Beauvoir, Simone. *The Second Sex*. Jonathan Cape, 1953.
- Detmer-Goebel, Emily. "The Need for Lavinia's Voice: Titus Andronicus and the Telling of Rape." *Shakespeare Studies*, Jan. 2001, p. 75. *EBSCOhost*, <https://search-ebSCOhost-com.ezproxy.snhu.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=edsglr&ANedsglr.A79826270&site=eds-live&scope=site>.
- Friedan, Betty, et al. *The Feminine Mystique*. W.W. Norton & Company, 2013.
- Hanisch, Carol. "The Personal Is Political The Women's Liberation Movement Classic with a

New Explanatory Introduction ." *Women of the World, Unite! Writings by Carol Hanisch*, <https://www.carolhanisch.org/CHwritings/PIP.html>.

Harris, Barbara J. *English Aristocratic Women, 1450-1550 : Marriage and Family, Property and Careers*. Oxford University Press, 2002. *EBSCOhost*, <https://search-ebSCOhost-com.ezproxy.snhu.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=143693&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

Harris, Bernice. "Sexuality as a Signifier for power relations: using Lavinia, of Shakespeare's 'Titus Andronicus.'" *Criticism*, vol. 38, no. 3, 1996, p. 383+. Gale General OneFile, [https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A18796172/ITOF?u=nhc\\_main&sid=ITOF&xid=8307fb](https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A18796172/ITOF?u=nhc_main&sid=ITOF&xid=8307fb).

Jacobs, Kathryn Elisabeth. *Marriage Contracts From Chaucer to the Renaissance Stage*. University Press of Florida, 2001.

Jankowski, Theodora A. "Defining/Confining the Duchess: Negotiating the Female Body in John Webster's 'The Duchess of Malfi.'" *Studies in Philology*, vol. 87, no. 2, Apr. 1990, pp. 221–45. *EBSCOhost*, <https://search-ebSCOhost-com.ezproxy.snhu.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=edsjsr&AN=edsjsr.4174360&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

Luckyj, Christina. "'Great Women of Pleasure': Main Plot and Subplot in The Duchess of Malfi." *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, vol. 27, no. 2, 1987, pp. 267–83. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/450466>. Accessed 25 Sep. 2022.

Martinez, Pilar Rodriguez. "Feminism and Violence: The Hegemonic Second Wave's Encounter with Rape and Domestic Abuse in USA (1970-1985)." *Cultural Dynamics*, vol. 23, no. 3, Nov. 2011, pp. 147–72. *EBSCOhost*, <https://doi-org.ezproxy.snhu.edu/10.1177/0921374011430566>.

- Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. "Women Workers and Capitalist Scripts ." *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, by Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan, Wiley Blackwell, 2017, pp. 901–924.
- Moore, Honor. *Poems from the Women's Movement*. Library of America, 2009.
- Rivkin, Julie, and Michael Ryan. "New Historicisms Louis Montrose ." *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, by Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan, Wiley Blackwell, 2017, p. 807.
- Rubin, Gayle. "The Traffic in Women ." *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, by Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan, Wiley Blackwell, Chichester, West Sussex, UK, 2017, pp. 901–924.
- Schuster, Julia. "Why the Personal Remained Political: Comparing Second and Third Wave Perspectives on Everyday Feminism." *SOCIAL MOVEMENT STUDIES*, vol. 16, no. 6, Jan. 2017, pp. 647–59. *EBSCOhost*, <https://doi.org.ezproxy.snhu.edu/10.1080/14742837.2017.1285223>.
- Shakespeare, William, et al. *Titus Andronicus*. Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2010.
- Shakespeare, William. "Folger Digital Image Collection." *LUNA*, Folger Shakespeare Library, <https://luna.folger.edu/luna/servlet/FOLGERCM1~6~6>.
- Turk, Katherine. "'To Fulfill an Ambition of [Her] Own': Work, Class, and Identity in The Feminine Mystique." *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, vol. 36, no. 2, Jan. 2015, pp. 25–32. *EBSCOhost*, <https://doi.org.ezproxy.snhu.edu/10.5250/fronjwomestud.36.2.0025>.
- Walters, Margaret. *Feminism: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford University Press, 2005. *ProQuest Ebook Central*, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/snhuebooks/detail.action?docID=422777>. Created from snhu-ebooks on 2022-09-13 15:14:29.
- Webster, John. *English Renaissance Drama: A Norton Anthology*, by David M. Bevington et al., W.W. Norton, New York, 2003, pp. 1775–1830.

Wendel, Deanna. "Gender, Genre and the Grotesque: Literary Subversions of Renaissance Patriarchy." *The Knox College Online Journal of Literary Criticism* 12.1 (2009): 1-22.