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INCEST, CLASS, AND GENDER ON
THE JACOBEAN STAGE.

DISSERTATION

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate
School of The Ohio State University

By

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* * * * *

The Ohio State University
1998

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ABSTRACT

This study questions why, on the early modern stage, there were so many representations of incestuous desire and why those agents of incestuous liaisons are so variously presented. The answer that this study proposes is that incestuous desire was deliberately politicized by the playwrights of this period: incest is shown as the proprietary vice of an elite class whereas the middling sort are presented as either immune to incestuous desire, or, at the very least, resistant to it. Furthermore, when a member of the middling sort appears liable to succumb to incestuous desires, the community is represented as ready, willing, and able to police its own. Consequently, the representation of incest on the early modern stage constitutes a micro-encounter of class conflict, an arena in which the supposed sexual practices of the social elite are vilified and the imagined sexual moderation of the middle class celebrated.
The study concentrates on works by Beaumont and Fletcher, Middleton, and Massinger. For each of these playwrights, the representation of incestuous desire served as a vehicle through which rapidly shifting constructions of self and community could be articulated. By characterizing the elite classes as being particularly susceptible to incestuous desire, and by showing these exclusive communities as being unable to self-regulate their unruly sexual appetites, these playwrights are mutually engaged in a process by which an ideology of middle class sexuality can be constructed. Together, these playwrights suggest that whereas the sexuality of the elite is destructive, predatory, and "unnatural," the sexual practice of the middling sort is presented as salutary, constructive, and, most importantly, "normative."

Furthermore, by responding to and criticizing traditional models of sexual desire predicated upon an elite social status, these playwrights jointly contribute to the larger and perhaps the preeminent function of the early modern stage--the actualization of an autonomous, independent, and powerful middle-class identity.
Dedicated, naturally, to my mother
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In the years during which the study of early modern drama has been my occupation, I have busied myself by identifying hostile disputation, rancorous factionalism, bitter contentiousness, savage antagonism. Art belies life . . . .

To John King, Jim Battersby, Chris Highley, and Deborah Burks, my limitless thanks; they have been patient, supportive, and generous, and they are the reasons I have chosen this profession.

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To my family, few words; language is poor and cannot express the extent of my gratitude.

To Lynnette, my friend and partner, the recognition that without her neither this nor I would be complete.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

This study seeks to explain neither why humans are sometimes incestuous nor why generally they are not; it neither affirms nor denies the proposition that the prohibition of incest is merely a sociopolitical construct generated within a patriarchal hegemony to promote exogamy; it knows not whether the gene is selfish, philanthropic, or simply indifferent, whether our sexual identities are forged in nurture or determined by nature; it does not subscribe unreservedly to the belief that sexuality, and therein incestuous sexuality, is necessarily the primum mobile of human thought and deed, or that incest is the primal taboo and interdiction which we must transgress or to which we must conform.

Instead, this study focuses squarely upon several specific representations of incest during the reign of James I (1603-1625): Beaumont & Fletcher’s A King and No
King (1611) and The Captain (1611); Middleton’s The Revenger’s Tragedy (1607), Women Beware Women (1621), and The Changeling (1622); Massinger’s The Bondman (1623) and The Unnatural Combat (1624-5). I argue that these playwrights are engaging in an active political discourse, that they are giving voice, through the medium of incestuous representation, to a radical politics of class and, in the case of Middleton, gender. In these plays, incestuous desire visits various characters, both male and female, from many ranks of society. Some act upon their incestuous desire; others do not. But, consistently, the members of the aristocratic classes are shown to be particularly susceptible to incestuous desire and incestuous behavior, whereas those of the middling sort, though similarly tempted, choose not to participate in it. Here, then, we find a sexualized process of political propaganda, an act of class dissension located not in the marketplace, the guild hall, the church, or the court, but instead in the theatrical bedroom. Furthermore, in the represented ability of the middling sort to regulate their errant sexual desires, I see a significant contribution to what I would consider to be the primary political process
of this Stuart period—the self-conscious formation of a distinct and self-sufficient class identity for the middling sort.

The expectations of discrete audiences, the class loyalties of diverse playwrights, and the range of punishments enforced make, of incestuous representation, a social, sexual, and political conundrum. I argue, nonetheless, that we can make sense of this incestuous representation if we see it as a conduit through which class tensions flow. The representation of incestuous desire in early modern drama offered the audience an opportunity for a rare level playing field on which clashes of hegemony and identity could be staged; unlike the tropes of romantic love, of honor, of courage, of good government, of law administered with impartiality, of sage judgment, of loyalty—that long parade of virtues associated with the elite—incest confers no home-team advantage. And, although the incest motif acknowledges no particular social allegiance, the responses which it provokes do.

In order "to refigure English Renaissance culture, the writing of literary history must discontinue the canonization of received narratives derived from merely
traditional documentary loci" (Barroll 22). And this is my goal. By concentrating on the nature of some populist English dramas, I hope to characterize representations of incest as both statements of class identity and celebrations of a mechanism of social rehabilitation. I do not wish to overstate my case--the representations of incest do not serve as a gauntlet thrown down to the elite—but, equally, these representations should be viewed seriously as part of the complex processes by which the meaner sort carved for themselves a sense of social and individual identity in the face of otherwise disabling displays of hegemonic control on the part of the elite. These processes are thus collective and collaborative versions of what Frank Whigham has described, when discussing the early modern fascination with individual "moments of self-construction or identification," as "seizures of the will" and as "attempts at self-substantiation" (Seizure 8). Again, I do not pretend to know whether incest troubled the elite more than the lowly—and this is not my concern—but I would suggest, with Greenblatt, that "one of the highest achievements of power is to impose its fictions upon the world" (Renaissance
with regard to incest, the early modern stage offered the middling sort a venue for the display of both that power and those fictions.

incest on the early modern stage has of late attracted considerable critical interest. Intrinsic to many such recent studies, however, has been the tendency to democratize incestuous desire, to perceive incest, writ large, as coherent, stable, and equally significant across all social classes of the early modern period. Incest, however, is capriciously and willfully deployed by playwrights with distinct agendas; it is resistant to such strategies of homogenization. Between James' accession to the throne in 1603 and the closing of the theatres in 1642, incestuous desire can be found in approximately sixty works by diverse playwrights, and, in these plays, the social configuration of the incestuous liaisons is extremely varied: in some, incest is consanguineous, in others affined; in some, incest occurs intra-generationally, in others across generations; in some, incestuous liaisons are consensual, in others, coerced; some characters knowingly engage in incest, others are unaware of the incestuous
nature of the relationship; some incestuous desires are consummated, others are repressed.¹ The various permutations of incestuous configuration are legion.²

To the preceding list, I would append two additional configurations which exhibit a symmetry which is striking in its consistency. First, some of these sixty plays present the incestuous intrigues of the aristocracy, whereas others involve the incestuous desires of the middling sort. Second, some characters are punished capitally for their crimes, whereas others are rehabilitated within their community. With the signal exception of Massinger’s The Unnatural Combat, it is in the plays of aristocratic incest that the characters suffer dire retribution, and, conversely, it is in the plays of lower class incest that the perpetrators are rehabilitated. I focus on this essential distinction between how incest is represented in different classes.³

¹ For a further group—crypto-incestuous desire—see Nevo 94; Stockholder 118; Gohlke 170; Berggren 26; and Taylor (passim).

² Bueler identifies forty-two incest plays; Forker counts no fewer than sixty; McLean finds that between 1560 and 1642 there are at least eighty plays which involve, threaten, or allude to incest.

³ It is to be acknowledged, of course, that such a distinction is partly a function of genre: in tragedies, aristocrats die; in comedies, there is, traditionally, reconciliation. For a further discussion of the politicization of generic constraints, see chapter 2 below.
Curiously, no critic has approached the question of incest from the crucial perspective of class. By so doing, I hope to reveal a narrative of incestuous representation quite distinct from those established narratives of the nobility with which we are perhaps all too familiar--narratives from which the commoner is banished, for a variety of reasons, as an irrelevance or a distraction. Furthermore, my aim is to consolidate and complement a critical movement which denies the panoramic influence of the court in Renaissance drama and which suggests that a consideration of the middle and lower classes enfranchises a section of early modern society which has been, until recently, critically slighted.

Class divisions in the early modern period were not necessarily marked by pikes and pistols, and one cannot easily bisect early modern society into two uneven but discrete segments--the gentry and everyone else. Such taxonomic certainty is impossible, given that status descriptions and other kinds of 'addition' or style of address were sufficiently fluid to cause confusion, while broad classifications were as likely to reflect the ideological perspectives
Social mobility was certainly possible and, consequently, the middle class was not one homogenous group, incorporated by a common ideology and bound by a unifying social identity vis à vis the elite. More than this, there would in each individual and group, of course, be competing affiliations and associations which render a binary construct of rigid class demarcation suspect. Thus, as Keith Wrightson argues:

local patterns of social relations would emerge from a particular accommodation between the forces of social identification—as kinsmen, friends, neighbours, patron and client, co-religionists, fellow countrymen—and the forces of social differentiation—as landlord and

---

"Annabel Patterson, Theodore Leinwand, and Leeds Barroll have done much to challenge the assumption that the dramatists of this period were either the witting or unwitting ventriloquists of a hegemonically secure elite. Alexander Legatt also contends, in noting that the most prominent dramatists of this period came from non-privileged, non-elite families—"Chettle’s father was a dyer; Greene’s a saddler, Kyd’s a scrivener, Marlowe’s a shoemaker, Munday’s a draper, Peele’s a clerk, and Shakespeare’s a glover" (31)—that the ideological sympathies of the playwrights would lie with their own class, the middling sort. For a discussion of the anomalous—and potentially subversive—social positions occupied by the dramatists themselves, see Montrose (Purpose 30-40)."
tenant, master and man, governor and governed, rich and poor. Both dimensions of social relations would be constantly present as everyday realities. The particular balance between them, however, would vary. ("Social" 199)

Nonetheless, I would concur with Annabel Patterson, however, that notwithstanding this fluidity one can establish a relatively coherent image of societal distinction which would have been of primary significance to the people of the time:

the fact remains that there was a clear line drawn conceptually (ideologically) between the gentry and everyone below, whether successful yeomen or merchants, wage laborers, apprentices, or, at the bottom of the scale, the rural poor.

(2)

It is thus a central tenet of my study that despite the various class rivalries that might have smoldered between merchants and landowners, between laborers and artisans, and between urban and rural communities, there remained, in
the crowded theatres at least, the common and shared knowledge that they were not gentry.⁵

This rude categorization, however, does not mean that we should be limited by the dyadic model we so often construct of early modern culture—a model in which "the few who were rich and powerful" ruled, from cathedral or castle, the "overwhelming majority of men and women [who] had next to nothing" (Greenblatt, Negotiations 54).

Stephen Greenblatt's distinction is not without value—the control of commodity can be the root of all conflict—but it is imprudent to imagine, nonetheless, that a lack of visible capital translates readily into a corresponding poverty of social identity or that it blocks the desire to fashion a class identity. Instead, I would argue that the lower and middle class communities that are depicted in plays during this period appear as independent and self-sufficient—communities which, in fact, care little for the

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See also Legatt's argument that, although the audiences at the playhouses included many socio-cultural subdivisions, the "popular" nature of early modern theatre implies, at the very least, a shared cultural taste which served, albeit briefly, to level what was otherwise a "stratified, class-ridden society" (28): "playwright, players, and audience all drew strength from a popular culture whose values they shared" (45).
aegis of their masters and which look more within than without for systems of governance.

In the plays which deal with incest in these lower classes, we see presented tolerant, pragmatic, flexible, and responsive social mechanisms already in place for the reconciliation and rehabilitation of those afflicted by, among other disruptive sexual modes, incestuous desire; these mechanisms, furthermore, draw little of their authority from either church or state. It is to the supposed or actual successes of this recuperative system that these plays serve as testimony, and, ironically, it is the lack of an equivalent mechanism in the elite classes which is exposed. Ultimately, the dramaturgical presentation of these social mechanisms of rehabilitation presupposes a social identity clearly distinct from that of the court. As Louis Montrose has suggested, the monarch and the court did not hold any monopoly on self-fashionings and, in those plays which represent the incestuous desires of the lower classes, we see plebeian communities busied also in the construction of a "civilized self" ("Elizabethan" 329).
The distinct representation of both popular and aristocratic incest, then, should be seen as a site of what Theodore Leinwand terms a "microencounter," a deftly chosen challenge to existing power structures where the defenses, unlike those erected to protect property, are most weak. At such sites, Leinwand argues, "power is itself subject to appropriation" even by those who, generally, are swayed by it ("Negotiation" 479). In perhaps too many of our current models of hegemonic strife, all such conflicts often appear one-sided, to favor, as Leinwand admits "the container, the dominant, the elite, the patriarchy," (478) but here, perhaps, in the representations of incest among the lower classes, we may see a qualified victory by the disenfranchised; in ignoring the edicts and proclamations of both church and state and by privileging local practice over national prescription, the meaner of Stuart England may not exactly be engaged in class war, but there is, nonetheless, a skirmish.

If we are to allow that the representation of incest in the drama of this period constitutes both a middle and lower class repudiation of aristocratic hegemony and, with
that, a self-conscious celebration of community practice negotiated from within "by the informal mechanism of consent" (Williams 464), then we must first attempt to construct a social historiography of this self-congratulatory audience of the lower orders, and, then, identify the audiences for whom the plays were produced and by whom they were watched.

Literary criticism, unfortunately, will be of little initial use because the diversity of class in the representation of incestuous desire during this period has been largely neglected in the criticism it has elicited; certain plays—Hamlet, The Duchess of Malfi—are granted a telling yet unwarranted celebrity in the extant work on incest in this period. All of these studies deal exclusively with the incestuous desires of the aristocratic class, whereas those many more plays which represent the incestuous desires of the middle and lower classes are ignored. We must learn first to acknowledge and then to account for the fact that the social class of those characters who engage in either incestuous desire or deed ranges from the lowest to the highest, from churl to king, from peasant to prince. Criticism which limits itself
almost exclusively to a study of those plays in which incest is practiced by the most socially elite class and in which incest is most explicitly condemned promotes an imbalanced view of early modern use of the motif. No model of culture in Renaissance society can be complete unless both elite and other social groups are given due prominence, and, with reference to incest at least, I hope to show that to ignore these classes is positively debilitating to an understanding of the incestuous figure in early modern drama.

Much recent work in cultural and literary history has questioned and problematized such a myopic concentration on a single social group—the aristocracy. Increasingly, scholars are beginning to doubt the readiness with which we assume that the most visible capacitors of political power in early modern England—the court, the church, the king—were indeed the most significant organs of that power. Consequently, Alvin Kernan's characterization of Renaissance English culture—which reflects the attitudes of many critics—is clearly under attack:

the courts and the aristocracy fostered the arts,
and poetry was defined in ways that suited
ruling-class interests and values . . . . The crown controlled all writing, directly through censorship and patronage, and indirectly through a courtly poetics. (11)

Such a perspective, as Robert Watson recognizes, privileges "the hegemonic institutional power that such criticism generally purports to oppose" (251). More important than this, such criticism also simplifies it.

Furthermore, this concentration upon matters political at the expense of other facets of cultural experience, is, as Mary Beth Rose suggests, also due for reevaluation. Rose, consequently, has broadened the debate by questioning whether political power itself should be the predominant focus of critical discourse. She argues that although political power may well be the most documented node of control in Renaissance culture, it does not hold totalistic sway, and she has offered a wise caution to those who privilege this political power over other important aspects of life in this period. She warns that to assume that political power is more real--more worthy of analysis--than sexual love and marriage is to ignore [and] to overlook the mixed,
complex, and overlapping nature of public and private experience. (11)

And in few matters is the nature of public and private experience more vexingly interconnected than in incest.

It is one thing to identify the perils of concentrating upon the politics of the elite in early modern society; it is quite another to furnish in detail an alternative so conspicuously rewarding scrutiny. The construction of a middle and lower class social historiography is, of course, fraught with difficulties, especially when one is particularly concerned with sexual attitude and behavior; for the most part, we are obliged to rely primarily on records from lower ecclesiastical courts, and, even then, the fact that such cases were heard judicially makes them problematic for my study which insists upon the primacy of local intervention and consensual resolution over legal involvement; it is to the plays that we must turn for that chronicle.

A long-accepted view of Renaissance familial and communal structure—legitimized for the most part by the work of Lawrence Stone—posits, at all social levels, the absolute practice of a father qua despot (Crisis 591),
which in turn was bolstered by a legal and ecclesiastical system sympathetic to his regime. Nevertheless, although most social historians acknowledge that this familial hierarchical structure "may have been the norm in the highest ranks of English society," it is debatable whether such a patriarchal system operated within the households and communities of the lower classes; for many, denied wealth and its concomitant privileges, the fact that "marriage was emphatically an economic partnership" would suggest that high-handed patriarchalism would receive short shrift (Wrightson, *English* 93) or would, at least, have been problematic and perhaps contested.

Fortunately, alternative and more satisfying models of culture are becoming more readily accessible which draw from primary sources far removed from court and church document. One of these, G. R. Quaife's study of sexual practice and malpractice in early seventeenth-century Somerset, provides a welcome reappraisal of middle and lower class social and sexual relations both within and without the family. And, although his study restricts itself to Somerset, the attitudes to which it gives voice cannot be without resonance for a construction of the
metropolitan social structure, especially given the migration from the provinces to the capital during this period. Importantly, it is in mining such local records that the very real social context for the incestuous representations of the "popular" plays can be revealed.

One particular instance of judicial action with relation to incest is, naturally, but exiguous grist to the historiographer's mill, but it can, however, still prove suggestive in any formulation of a middle-lower class response to the incest problem. Quaife documents the case of a certain Thomas Odam who confessed to having lived incestuously with Aucharette White, his wife's daughter (192-93). Significantly, we do not know whether Odam was either informed upon, or whether, stricken by remorse, he confessed, but his penance--or punishment--was typical. Dressed in a white sheet and bearing a white wand, Odam was required, first, to present himself in his parish church of Charlton for two Sundays; on these occasions, the local minister offered a sermon against the crimes of fornication and incest. Odam was then obliged to attend a third

\footnote{As a result of migration from the provinces, the population of London doubled between 1600-1650 (Corfield 39).}
service in his local cathedral church where he was directed to stand upon a bench in front of the pulpit. The schedule of penance reads thus:

Immediately after the end of the sermon, [Odam] shall with an audible voice make this humble acknowledgement . . . . I, Thomas Odam, do here before God acknowledge and confess that I have most grievously offended the divine majesty of almighty God in living, incestuously with . . . my wives daughter, and I do protest that I am right heartily sorry for the same, and I do faithfully promise never from henceforth to offend the like again. And I do desire almighty God to forgive me this my heinous sin and you all here present my evil example to you in this behalf given, and I desire you all to pray with me and for me [. . . .] Next Odam shall come into the cathedral church [. . .] and at the beginning of the sermon shall [go] into the body of the church and there in the manner aforesaid shall during the whole time of the sermon stand upon a form before the pulpit there. (193)
We would like to know more: we do not know whether such religious humbling was accompanied by somewhat more robust punishment by the community at large; we do not know whether Odam, once chastised, was welcomed back to the bosom of the community or whether his stigmatization continued well after the formal clerical proceedings were fulfilled; we do not know whether Odam desisted from his incest or whether Aucharette White was a willing partner to his bed; we do not know whether White herself was punished; we do not even know whether Odam complied with his schedule of penance—many did not—or whether, like one Cutcombe man, Odam returned to his seat "laughing in scorn of that censure" (Quaife 194). Most distressingly, we will never know the minds of either Odam or his fellow parishioners.

The document is not without value, however, even though its social significance is woefully subject to contradictory interpretation. J. A. Sharpe, extrapolating from his analysis of crime during this period, argues that "if we accept that there was a divergence in mores between the established village notables and the marginal poor," this punishment serves as an example of "regulative laws being imposed upon the poorer members of the village
society by the richer" (86)—though again, because we cannot know necessarily to which group Odam belonged, such an argument is moot. Susan McLean would also answer that although the official penance for incest may seem cursory by current standards, this does not necessarily mean that there was not more severe punishment, either economic or physical, enacted by a highly vigilant and easily outraged neighborhood; she contends that "during the Renaissance incest was viewed with strong disapproval and repugnance by the majority of the people" (32). Similarly, Martin Ingram also notes that despite the seeming mildness of the punishment, it is still quite possible that "the offence, once discovered, was regarded as a serious matter in local society" (248).

Alternatively, Quaife suggests that the absence of any rigid legal distinction between incest, adultery, and fornication, would suggest that "[i]ncest did not cause the horror that it did in later centuries" (177) and that such sexual incontinence was a tolerated albeit unwelcome aspect of early modern society. Stone similarly argues that punishments for incest were "surprisingly lenient" and that "sodomy and bestiality were more repugnant to popular
standards of morality than breaking of the laws of incest" (Family 491). George Schore agrees:

The relative frequency of incest cases, the arbitrariness of how they were defined, the light punishment imposed on offenders, and the response of the lower classes suggest that violation of the incest prohibition was not a particularly egregious crime during the English Renaissance.

(29)

Despite the various merits of their arguments—incest was viewed with either intolerance or, conversely, it was quietly ignored—these critics and historians, I would suggest, are missing the point, their interpretations vitiated by the lack of a full context in which court records can be understood. Both positions assume that the legal system reflects axiomatically the views and beliefs of the local community, that the practice of the community

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The legal definitions of incest were particularly fluid during the early modern period as a result of the various changes made by Henry VIII both to legitimize—and then delegitimize—his marriages to Catherine of Aragon and Anne Boleyn (Boehrer 42-85). For a full history of legal definitions of incest throughout this period, including a discussion of the varying prohibited degrees of affinity, see McCabe’s *Incest, Drama, and Nature’s Law 1550-1700*. Incest law was further complicated by the fact that, in early modern culture, there seems to have been little legal or popular distinction between kinship ties defined by blood and those predicated upon marital affinity (Stone, *Family* 138-39; Quaife 177).
inheres directly to the practice of law. If this is not so, and I argue it is not, then we must turn to the community itself as a more sensitive barometer of public opinion than the courts. Although we can perhaps never know what particular classes of Renaissance culture thought about incest, we do know rather more clearly what they did about it.

They did not, apparently, drag sexual miscreants to court with litigious abandon. Almost all historians of the field acknowledge that the arbitration and resolution of conflict was initially attempted at a local level without recourse to the courts and that those instances which received judicial attention are, for this reason, atypical. More than this, even if an allegation of sexual incontinence were heard by the courts, this does not necessarily mean that the severity of the offence itself was the impetus behind the presentment; we cannot rule out the personal vendettas which may lie behind allegations of sexual misconduct. Equally, legal proceedings may be not the product of social values transgressed, but, instead, a reaction to the dangers of financial liability; after a long invective against the failings of one particular
woman's flesh, penned by parishioners of the village of Castle Combe in 1601, the clear financial motive behind the judicial and moral indignation emerges: "her evil example may so greatly corrupt others that great and extraordinary charge for the maintenance of baseborn children may be imposed upon us" (Ingram 261); there are, in fact, relatively few presentments for crimes such as incest, which one might term "victimless." However, even in cases where local pressure proved ineffectual, it is also evidently clear that the law commanded respect only insofar as it enjoyed a "ground swell of local support" (Wrightson, English 155).

While documenting legal presentments at length, Quaife is at pains throughout his study to stress that most sexual "crimes" were resolved locally, either by marriage, in the case of fornication leading to pregnancy, or by the cessation of illicit sexual activity, in the cases of both adultery and incest. And, although many popular correctives--whipping, skimmington, "rough music," and public humiliation--were frowned upon by both secular and ecclesiastical authorities, they appear to have been the preferred forms of reproof and rehabilitation; it is
modulations of such public castigation that are most frequently found in the plays I will discuss. Inscribed in these works we see perhaps not necessarily an accurate record of early modern popular justice, but, nonetheless, "representations [that] had material consequences, shaping as well as being shaped by early modern cultural practices" (Dolan 3).

The suspicion and resentment occasioned by interference by church or state authorities is best captured by the comments of a Bedminster man who declared that the Consistory "was a base court and that they were all knaves that did belong unto it and [he] did not care a fart for it" (Quaife 197). Furthermore, given the absence of any paid or professional police force, the discovery of crimes rested for the most part upon the vigilance of neighbors who were perhaps, in turn, unwilling to have such sharp scrutiny reflected upon their own misdoings; Keith Wrightson suggests that because elected constables were obliged to continue living in close proximity with those whom they presented, they "commonly showed little enthusiasm for the task" (English 158). Instead,
where disputes between neighbours threatened to deteriorate sufficiently to provoke a court case and even when actual crimes were committed, a strong preference existed for informal mediation which might satisfactorily resolve the matter within the bounds of the neighborhood. (157)

If we allow, then, that the primary mode of correction was the court of public opinion and that only the most blatant or unregenerate of offenders ever faced judicial proceedings, the focus of the penance enforced upon Thomas Odam by the clerical courts becomes more comprehensible not for its punitive function but, instead, for its more social and communal significance. It is important to note that Odam was required, first, to do penance in his local parish, and only after that was he compelled to attend the more distant cathedral church. Similarly, not only is Odam required to seek mercy from God, but he must also reaffirm his sexual probity within the community by, first, agreeing to terminate his incestuous liaison and, second, asking the members of his community to pray both for him and with him. Ultimately, the schedule of punishment which Odam received does not tell us very much about what early modern society
thought about incest—and perhaps that is not too important—but it does reveal quite clearly what society did about it; the hegemonic needs being serviced are those of the local community of which Odam is a part and to which, after his penance, he needs must return.

This process of rehabilitation, then, is the mechanism of the "moral community," which, Wrightson argues, "placed a premium upon good neighbourliness and preferred local opinion to the impersonal values of the law" (English 159), and these are values we see reinforced in works such as Beaumont & Fletcher's The Captain—a play in which middle and lower class men and women fall prey to incestuous desire, are detected in the pursuit of an incestuous consummation, and, finally, with perhaps mild discomfort, are reconciled with their communities; neither aristocratic nor divine intervention is required or sought. Conversely, in plays of aristocratic incest—Middleton's Women Beware Women, for example—incest is not mediated through the agency of a community and the result is almost always death. This distinction in how incestuous desire is represented would indicate therefore that this collective structure of rehabilitation was felt to be the especial
preserve of the commonality. As Montrose has written in a slightly different context but one giving voice to the social irony I choose to explore, we see exemplified here "the mysteries of state come up against the intransigent common sense of the peasant" ("Elizabethan" 316).

If we allow that the plays I discuss operate as expressions of a popular social and sexual economy, and if, as I also argue, the dramaturgical reconciliation of those who are incestuous serves as a celebration of communal mechanisms of rehabilitation, then we can, I suggest, also align such attitudes with the class-affiliations and sympathies of those who wrote and those who watched the plays. And here, of course, intuition can prove a capricious advocate: on one side, most of the playwrights of this period were of the middling sort and so perhaps unlikely to scorn the cradle that rocked them; on the other, the economics of patronage seem such that playwrights would be unwilling to bite the hand that fed them. Once again, however, both the argument that the playwrights used the theatre to encourage political and social quietism, and the more recent argument that the
court utilized dramatists and their art as a means of provoking and then containing resistance, are subject to reformulation; to portray Jacobean and Caroline dramatists as operating either parasitically, symbiotically, or collaboratively with the Court still insists that a dependent relationship existed.

It is tempting, of course, to imagine that the court recognized drama as

an important propagandistic medium the appropriation of which becomes crucial to the authorities; theatrical activity is a potential popular expression against the hegemony of the empire and, as such, it must be appropriated in order to contain any subversive efforts by the populace that might be propagated through the drama itself. (Barroll 24)

The recognition of the potential power of drama to unsettle hegemonic stability, however, does not necessarily mean that the court was always successful in its attempts to control it, and, despite the niceness of Philip Finkelpearl's wry formulation of the role of Beaumont and Fletcher—"the Rosencrantz and Guildenstern of Jacobean
drama, 'deferential, glad to be of use' to king and court"
(6)--it would be unwise to assume that all such
relationships between the court and the playwrights were
codependent, with the court addicted to hegemonic
manipulation, the playwrights desperate to service that
need. In such mappings of hegemonic flow, the microhistory
of the renaissance stage slots neatly into the macrohistory
of early modern culture, with the king and court, once
again, at the very center of that grid of power.

This need not be the case, however, and it is perhaps
time that such simplistic models of the relationship
between the court and the stage should be problematized.
Leeds Barroll, for example, arguesconvincingly against
such a cozy relationship. Although he admits that the
court is, of course, a primary site of political and
cultural power--and for those who were sufficiently
privileged to populate it, perhaps the sole one--he also
insists that it is not the only one. Thus, in a
revisionist demystification of the supposed "special
relationship" between The King's Men and King James
himself, Barroll argues that the courts of James and
Charles never enjoyed the hegemonic monopoly over the
theater that our new histories sometimes accord them: "Power," Barroll maintains, "was actually shared with the crown, by the peerage, by the city guilds, and by Parliament," (24) and this power was also shared by the numerically and financially most significant constituency, the heterogeneous playgoers who put food on these playwrights' trestles.

Barroll's evidence in support of this alternative model of court patronage is convincing. Not only, he argues, is there little evidence to portray James as "a lover of plays and a royal sponsor of artistic activity" but, more significantly, there is even less to show that dramatic companies were beholden to the court for financial security (67). Barroll notes that a company was paid as little as ten pounds for a command performance and could only anticipate ten to fifteen performances a year and, then, only during the season when popular demand was also highest--a negligible revenue in comparison to that from public playgoers. Ultimately, even if performances before the court garnered kudos, the truth remains that such prestige was not "edible or useful in keeping the actors warm" (Barroll 69), and, consequently, playwrights were
ever conscious of their primary audience, the middling sort.

It is not my intention, however, to dismiss the role of the elite classes in dramatic production, and, equally, it is not my wish to recast the playwrights whom I discuss as supersubtle crypto-subversives—quite possibly, court appearances were valued as opportunities for guaranteed revenue and, more venially, requisites for social aggrandizement in tavern rivalries. Notwithstanding, it is quite clear that the playwrights of that period fully understood that their principal market was the middling sort, and whatever their particular and local sympathies, it was to the tastes of this market they needed to appeal. Consequently, whatever the politics of the court, the scandals of the courtiers, or the mindset of the king, we cannot assume that these were the sine qua non of dramatic production.

Although more work is needed to reevaluate the agency of the court in the drama of this period, considerable study has already been directed towards the vexing question

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1 James L. Battersby reminds me that this truth of theatrical production was also remarked by Samuel Johnson: "The drama's laws the drama's patrons give, / For we that live to please, must please to live" ("Prologue, Spoken at the Opening of the Theatre in Drury Lane" 53-54).
of the dramatic audience. Currently, there is little in the way of consensus. Ann Jennalie Cook, for example, argues against my construction of the popular classes as the primary audience of the drama. Although she does not necessarily suggest that the plays of this period were produced solely for the benefit of the court, she does make a rigid distinction between a metropolitan social elite and the lower classes. Thus, "while not denying the presence of plebeians among the audiences," Cook contends that the majority of Londoners, benighted by low pay and long hours, attended the theatres "in smaller numbers and with less frequency than has been supposed" (8). The consequent effect that this group would have upon the nature and the production of plays, Cook contests, would be negligible because there would be little incentive, save generous noblesse oblige on the parts of playwrights and their primary consumers, to consider this underclass in any aspect of theatrical production.

This demography of theatre audiences is clearly more satisfactory than Harbage’s conception of an audience enthused with rugged trans-social bonhomie in which pit and balcony touched cap and doffed hat, but, in turn, Cook's
findings have since been questioned by critics who doubt both the economic viability and historical accuracy of this supposed elitist audience. Andrew Gurr, for example, not only questions this social stratification, but also problematizes any putative construction of discrete and partisan audiences. Gurr suggests that rigid categorizations of audiences are fundamentally reductive because, although one can distinguish some theatrical policies associated with some theatres, this is not sufficient evidence to suggest that those theatres were recognized as particularly market-specific at the time. During the eighty years that distance 1567 from 1642, Gurr argues, each and every venue for popular play production probably went through dynamic restructurings of audience as both neighborhoods changed and dramatic tastes altered; in an attempt to attract new generations of playgoers, playwrights would draw audiences not "always in the same proportions, the same positions, or [to] the same playhouses" (Playgoing 5). Gurr aptly calls this a form of "aesthetic Darwinism" (115)—or good business practice—and

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7 See, however, Gurr’s exhaustive analysis of individual dramatic groups in his recent The Shakespearean Playing Companies. See also Sturgess’ analysis of the dramatic practices of the Jacobean private halls.
we should consequently be wary of any ascriptive process which fashions a specific audience for a particular venue, the characteristics of which may well change from season to season, from performance to performance.

In the final stages of his argument, Gurr even challenges the supposedly ready distinction established between the amphitheatres and the private halls. He acknowledges that it may be that the private halls catered to a somewhat more select audience with perhaps a little more disposable income, but even so, this does not necessarily mean that the higher fee implies a better class of customer, a different type of play. We know, for example, that many plays were offered, depending upon the season, at both outdoor and indoor venues and there is little evidence that plays were written exclusively for either amphitheater or private hall. One play in particular, Shirley's *The Doubtful Heir* (1638-40) proves an interesting example and reinforces Gurr's argument that notational divisions between venues are suspect.

It would seem that when Shirley completed *The Doubtful Heir*, he was disappointed that a work which he had intended for Blackfriars was, instead, to see first production at
The Globe. As a result, Shirley voices a fear in the prologue of the play that it may not please his audience because it contains no vulgar sops for the pit. At first glance, this sentiment would seem to support the assumption that there were rigid class distinctions among various audiences and various playhouses, but Gurr argues instead that this prologue suggests that "a good proportion of the Globe audience must be familiars of the Blackfriars" (189) --- the appeal to aesthetic snobbery would make little sense otherwise. More than this, despite any pretensions Shirley entertained as to the appropriate milieu for his work, I would also suggest that those who commissioned *The Doubtful Heir* undoubtedly knew better than Shirley the nature of their audiences and saw no incongruity in switching this play's venue.

Ultimately, the question of audience formation continues to perplex us because the audience demography formulated by either critic or historian can never truly capture the pluralistic social construction of early seventeenth-century London; ever the lament of such enquiry is that we simply do not know enough. To be sure, crude distinctions can be made between the various venues, and
generalizations can be entertained as to the audiences for which such venues catered, but again we cannot be certain whether those who frequented the private halls paid a premium more to protect themselves from the vulgar than to avoid the capriciousness of the English weather. Whatever the case may be, we can be relatively certain that works designed for the playgoers of London catered to a catholic audience about which little uniformity can be ascertained.

The prevalence of the incest motif in Renaissance drama is surprising especially when one considers the extent to which the subject has been critically neglected; only within the last decade has any systematic analysis of dramatic representations of incest emerged which extends beyond a local consideration of a particular incest theme in a specific play. The subject is now attracting critical attention, and, over the past few years, incest upon the stage has been interpreted variously: a metaphor for the growing suspicion that natural law could no longer serve as a justification of ecclesiastic polity (McCabe); a hesitant prognostication of a utopian liberal society in which we are all members of a universal siblinghood (Shell, End); a
projection of regal anxieties of identity which is then mapped onto society writ large (Boehrer); a mode whereby class distinctions and privileges are encoded (Bueler).

Of these critics, only Lois Bueler and Bruce Boehrer have considered incest even tangentially from the perspective of class; instead, most studies have attempted to codify incestuous representation into a broader totalistic scheme. Bueler and Boehrer, however, do at least recognize the fundamental class contradistinction upon which I base my argument, although their conclusions differ greatly from my own if only because their concentration upon the affairs of the elite promulgates, I would argue, a lop-sided view of early modern culture.

Bueler's work most closely mirrors the approach which I have adopted. She suggests that renaissance incest plays are clearly class specific, based upon the sub-genre of incest motif employed--her base distinction rests on incest plays which are "unwitting" and those which are "witting." In unwitting plays--plays in which the incestuous nature of

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38 The works by McCabe and Shell, for example, attempt to position renaissance incestuous discourses within a cultural range beginning with the mythical archetype of Oedipus and ending, in the case of Shell, with the potential ramifications of incest on constructions of the family in the event of contact with extra-terrestrials.
a relationship is not initially known—couples fall in love believing themselves unrelated, only to discover later to their dismay that they indeed are; these, Bueler argues, are the plays designed specifically for the "historically and socially restricted coterie drama of the Caroline period" (123). Alternatively, witting incest plays depict passions which are from the very beginning taboo but which are pursued in spite of the dual constraints of religion and morality; these plays are written for a more general and less elevated audience, although Bueler, facing the same taxonomic difficulties that I have acknowledged above, does not characterize this segment of early modern society with any great precision.

These two modes of incestuous representation, Bueler argues, are socially and culturally specific. In the work of Cavalier dramatists, who "specialized in 'love' and 'honor' plays notable for their elaborate complications of personal relationships and their long-winded exposition of high-minded motives," (123) incest serves as a structure whereby "opportunities for the demonstration of nobility and generosity" are multiplied (124); a brother, for example, on discovering his love to be his sister, may
dutifully abandon his passion because "true love . . . is responsive to the demands of honor" (125). Conversely, in plays which present the wittingly incestuous, incest is about the "evil of an aggravated selfishness" (127). Thus, in Massinger's *The Unnatural Combat*—a play which Bueler considers written for a popular audience—"incest is one of the many corrupt, unnatural, abortive, and doomed sexual transactions of this sexually most mercantile of plays" (137).

Bueler posits two discrete theatres during this period—a theatre for the court (among which she also includes the aspiring elite) and a theatre for the lowly. The difficulties with such an ascriptive practice I have discussed above, but, even were this division plausible, Bueler also readily accepts a system of dramatic production which is court controlled and, for that matter, shamelessly servile. Equally, although Bueler admits that incest is a particularly useful tool for "probing the moral relationship between individual passion and social well-being," she clearly assumes that a "mercantile" (137) audience—by which she must mean the vast majority of Londoners—was incapable of negotiating a drama of its own
and, instead, eagerly absorbed the agenda-enriched fodder which the court provided them; this audience, together with the playwrights, are willing dupes of the hegemonically powerful.

Once again, what is most startling in this argument is the construction of early modern drama predicated upon the needs and desires of the court. If one can compromise, as I hope I have, the internal integrity of this model of dramatic production, Bueler's thesis grows brittle. Thus, although I would admit some strength to her categorization of incest plays which, perhaps, do trade in 'love' and 'honor,' her analysis of the more mercantile plays is distorted. For Bueler, incest in these plays is homogenized and perversely sanitized into a representation of "pervasive evil" (132): "Incest manifests indiscriminate lust [and] accomplished depravity" (129). As we will see in subsequent chapters, however, this is clearly not the case. Incest is certainly perceived as a serious social issue in all of the plays I discuss, but seldom in the plays involving the lower classes are the perpetrators of incest demonized in the way Bueler suggests; instead, more
often it is those of the elite classes who are presented as sexual monsters, as "manifestations of evil" (127).

This insistence of the centrality of the court to early modern drama is also the cornerstone to Bruce Boehrer's work in this field. Boehrer addresses the issue of incest in early modern drama from a preconceived historical perspective, from which, he argues, one can see that the incestuous liaisons and reconfigurations of the Tudor and Stuart dynasties operate as a skeleton key by which the significance of the incestuous intrigues upon the stage can be unlocked. Consequently, Boehrer argues that the various means by which the monarchs of this period, and, in particular, Henry VIII, reconstituted law to enable and disable marriage within affined and consanguineous relationships find themselves first mapped onto the consciousness of the state in general and then inscribed upon the stage which reflects that consciousness; quite simply, "to write or rewrite the [royal] family is to write or rewrite the state" (4).

It is with this conjunction between the psychology of the monarch and the identity of the state that Boehrer asks his reader to make the greatest leap of faith because,
quite fundamentally, there is little to suggest that the playgoers of London were particularly disturbed by or were even concerned with supposed crises of royal identity. Furthermore, Boehrer acknowledges himself the limits of his argument when applied to the middling sort by suggesting that, once removed from courtly circles in which the materials necessary for a construction of an identity are available, the offence of incest "loses much of its symbolic value" (17). Constrained by cramped living conditions, deprived of wealth, position, and authority, the commonality, Boehrer argues, quite literally lack the prerequisites to construct any form of self-hood, if, "by 'self' we mean what scholars . . . have lately been calling the liberal humanist subject" (17). Boehrer focuses exclusively upon the well-appointed "bedrooms of the great" (19).

The limits of Boehrer's thesis become most noticeable in his analysis of the drama. One would perhaps not argue too heatedly with Boehrer when, in his analysis of Hamlet, he finds the protagonist's "simultaneous and confusing preoccupation with the uncle and the mother, the murder and the incest" to be a reflection of "the contradictory
concerns of an Elizabethan political unconscious" (65). Nor would one find much to object to in Boehrer's reading of Massinger's *The Unnatural Combat* which, he suggests, "explores the danger posed to social order by allowing a subject to act like a sovereign . . . to make his immediate family into his own personal kingdom" (118). Most conspicuously absent, however, is a fuller context for these plays. If, as I suggest, these plays are but part of a much broader discourse about incest, a discourse which deliberately emphasizes the aristocracy as unable to keep its own sexual house in order, then rather than seeing enacted here the conflicts of the psyche, we see instead a presentation of class conflict.

Leinwand, exploring the interactions between negotiation and new historicism, argues that too often, in our constructions of "dominant ideologies," in our models of "legitimation, surveillance, domination, appropriation, and control . . . of destabilization, contestation, opposition and autonomy," ("Negotiation" 477) we forget that negotiation itself necessarily involves the possibility of change and restructuring. Chastened by
empirical observation, we acknowledge, of course, that over time the voices and locations of power do shift and modulate, but frequently in our narratives of the arenas in which hegemonic forces clash, we assume that the qualities of the dominant ideology's power is, quite fundamentally, non-negotiable. And so equally do we too often imagine the theatre--the scene of dispute, disruption, and, yes, negotiation--as a playground for the hegemonically secure in which their monopoly of power is self-tested:

subversive doubts are expressed and alien voices are allowed to be momentarily heard; but only so that both may be finally silenced. The result is 'the English form of absolutist theatricality,' or the triumphant celebration, after all the doubts, of monarchical power. (Patterson 24)

It is my argument that the popular voice is neither so impotent nor are its protestations so futile. I would also contend that in the plays which represent incest, discernible and unremitting is "a self-conscious speaking from below" (Patterson 34). To be sure, it is easier to look toward the civil disturbances which frequently beset both London and England generally as vehicles of popular
dissent, but, I would argue, such unrest is possible or viable only when a sense of common identity has begun to establish itself. And perhaps, then, we should regard the early modern stage as a playground of a different sort. In the plays which involve the incest of the aristocracy, the inability of the elite to resolve such socially disruptive practices as incest is vilified. Of course, this may not bear any relation to any specific historical truth—after all, it is the fiction which counts—just as the representations of rehabilitation and neighborly living within the commonality may bear little resemblance to actual practice or lived experience. But central to this drama of incest is, nonetheless, a statement of autonomy and identity, which, when writ large with other documents of dissent, becomes a manifesto of a nascent bourgeois identity.
Jean Howard wisely cautions against monistic readings of early modern drama in which all seeming acts of political subversion are already contained by the incontestable hegemonic sway of a dominant ideology. She argues, instead that there is slippage, that sometimes even a play whose intentions are overtly sympathetic to the interests of the aristocracy may simultaneously "call into being the very bourgeois subjectivity to which it was supposedly opposed" (14). In such instances, Howard maintains, the stage is able "to embody and negotiate among a variety of competing ideological interests, rather than being the captive of one" (12); "the public theatre was something other than an agent of the state [and] of the aristocracy" (18). Recognizing that the "ideological consequences for the audience . . . were in some instances
at odds with the ideological import of the dramatic fables which that theater disseminated," Howard wisely acknowledges the fluid and sometimes contradictory political valences of the stage (7).

Although playwrights such as Shakespeare, Dekker, Ford, Heywood, Middleton, and Jonson figure large in Howard’s critical program as fabricators of texts which ostensibly support yet covertly subvert dominant ideologies, Beaumont and Fletcher are conspicuous in Howard’s work only by their absence; their plays, it seems, do not participate in this ideological back-and-forth. This omission is the result, I suspect, of the reputation of these two playwrights; too frequently, Beaumont and Fletcher are neglected by critics because they are considered to be royal apologists, perceived as playwrights who wrote for and intentionally flattered an elite audience. This critical prejudice is then bolstered by the playwrights’ predilection for tragicomedy, a genre which has been traditionally recognized as the preferred form of those whose sympathy lies with the powerful and the elite. My purpose here, then, is to return Beaumont and Fletcher to the radical fold.
My argument in this chapter is that the general critical perception of Beaumont and Fletcher as puppets of the royalist establishment is in need of reevaluation. Specifically, I argue that Beaumont and Fletcher, rather than pandering to the vanities of the elite, collaboratively present a cautious interrogation of the court’s inability or unwillingness to govern itself sexually. At the same time, I maintain that the two playwrights also portray an enabling narrative of the middling sort and typify this broad and amorphous social group as adept and successful at regulating wayward sexual desire. This social and political agenda is achieved through the representation of incestuous desire. In the two plays that I shall examine—The Captain (1611) and A King and No King (1611)—I contend that Beaumont and Fletcher frame a deliberate social diptych wherein the sexual excesses of the elite are set in contrast to the purported sexual moderation of the middling sort; the result is a form of radical tragicomedy.

In both A King and No King and The Captain, Beaumont and Fletcher test the response of two discrete communities—the middle class and the court—when one of their members
is afflicted with incestuous desire. Naturally, convenient fictions of class abound in both plays, but, in The Captain, rough justice initiated by the community is seen as an effective method of regulating and neutralizing incestuous desire. Rough justice, however, cannot be deployed against a monarch, and in A King and No King, the sexual rehabilitation of Arbaces can be achieved only by first dethroning him and then transforming him, by means of social legerdemain, into a common citizen; the king, by losing his crown and its concomitant privileges, becomes an ideal candidate for sexual rehabilitation. These two plays, cumulatively, propose that sexual transgressions are inherent to the institution of monarchy--and to the elite classes in general--because the privileges of rank divorce a king and his companions from a regulatory framework sufficiently powerful to restrain their excessive sexual license. Conversely, the representation in these plays of an organized, cooperative, and self-regulating middling class, distant from the court and free from its hegemony, reveals the playwrights engaged in one of the most significant projects of this period--the creation of a
middle class subjectivity and, with this, the social centralization of its version of sexuality.

It is necessary first to address two of the most persistent critical commonplaces concerning Beaumont and Fletcher: the playwrights' popularity rested upon the especial favor of the elite audience at private halls; their preferred genre--tragicomedy--is itself a form appropriated by the elite and specifically designed to flatter their social and political prejudices. The two arguments are, of course, self-fulfilling, derived from a model of the early modern stage which, as I have shown in the previous chapter, has recently come under close criticism. Even so, each question warrants attention.

It is a truism that familiarity breeds contempt, but perhaps the popularity and success of Beaumont and Fletcher as successors to Shakespeare has caused them to fall under ideological suspicion; it is one thing to be popular, another to be too popular, and quite another to be too popular as the successors to Shakespeare. Nonetheless, from approximately 1608 to 1625, the year of Fletcher's death, Beaumont and Fletcher were responsible for the production of the core repertoire of the King's men; they
were extremely successful playwrights. It is their early work, however, which has particularly tainted the two with the suspicion of harboring elitist sympathies—The Faithful Shepherdess (1608) and Philaster (1609), for example, represent virtue and chastity as the paramount and exclusive qualities of the nobility.

The perception that Beaumont and Fletcher were cozy with the aristocratic classes is also bolstered by the fact that the playwrights started writing almost exclusively for the King’s Men at the time when the company assumed the lease of Blackfriars, a private hall. R. A. Foakes contends that the lease of this second venue, on the more reputable north bank of the Thames, resulted in a change in dramaturgical emphasis. Foakes argues that, to indulge the relish of “the Blackfriars audience for sophistication and wit” (39), Beaumont and Fletcher—either willingly or cynically—produced plays that appealed to the social and cultural tastes of its more elite audience; the dramatic focus of the King’s Men, this argument goes, changed in the move from the populist amphitheater, the Globe, to the

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1 Beaumont died in 1616, and contributed at most to twelve of the fifty-four plays in the Beaumont and Fletcher canon. The two playwrights remain, however, connected in both the critical and popular imagination. See Jeff Masten, “Beaumont” 337-56.
elitist private hall, Blackfriars. This version of the dramaturgical development of the King’s Men suggests that this company increasingly regarded the Globe as the early modern equivalent of the contemporary dollar theater, a venue from which some remaining pennies could be squeezed after the easy shillings had been taken at Blackfriars. To exploit this business opportunity, The King’s Men consequently attracted and employed playwrights who produced plays that appealed primarily to a coterie audience, but that could, with the addition of some vigorous clowning and a bawdy ad lib, pass muster in the amphitheatres.¹ Beaumont and Fletcher were happy to oblige, and wrote plays which tended to “congratulate their audiences for their sophistication, and distance themselves from the fare provided at the arena playhouses” (Foakes 33).

Given this model of dramatic practice, it is hardly surprising that the belief that Beaumont and Fletcher wrote plays for a coterie audience persists, especially when supported by evidence that the court particularly enjoyed

¹ Such dramatic additions, naturally, would not appear in the subsequent published versions of these plays.
the work of these two dramatists above that of their peers and predecessors. Furthermore, that Beaumont and Fletcher were themselves of relatively distinguished families—the "déclassé son of [a] Bishop and the younger son of [a] Judge"—lends weight to the suggestion that they are both "James's unconscious agents" (Danby 157).

Recent work by Andrew Gurr and Leeds Barroll, among others, questions the sustainability, however, of any theory that rigidly demarcates discrete audiences for particular playhouses. There is little evidence, for example, that the King's Men established different repertoires for their two theaters, and so any critical judgment that is predicated upon the assumed socio-economic identity of a particular audience at a particular playhouse is doubtful. Moreover, Philip Finkelpearl's recent work suggests that Beaumont and Fletcher, rather than being loyal supporters of the crown, were instead directly connected with those in opposition to James. Finkelpearl argues that the playwrights were important contributors to a growing tide of criticism of James, and he maintains that

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1 G. E. Bentley has shown that of the command performances by the King's Men between 1616 and 1642, forty-two "are of plays from the Beaumont and Fletcher folios, compared to 18 performances of plays written by Shakespeare, and 7 performances of plays written by Jonson" (210).
their "dissident" (247) plays show Beaumont and Fletcher to be "professional dramatists whose loyalties and commitments were to their art, to their fellow artists, and to sympathetic friends in both city and country" (55). Consequently, by the time they began writing for the King's Men, neither playwright "had any personal ties of dependency or even of friendship with the great Jacobean courtiers and patrons" (47). Furthermore, to provide a context for the subversive practice of their plays, Finkelpearl questions the assumed political docility of the King's Men during this period, noting that this company was to earn a reputation, while still with Fletcher as its principle dramatist, for producing both radical and topical drama. Unlike many critics before him who were prepared to argue only that these plays reflected some "anxieties aroused by James's insistence on his power" (Turner, "Heroic" 127), Finkelpearl claims no less than that

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' Finkelpearl notes that the families of both Beaumont and Fletcher were severely persecuted by the Tudor and Stuart administrations—the Beaumonts for recusancy, the Fletchers for their father's scandalous and imprudent second marriage. Also, for an argument concerning both Fletcher's failure in securing patronage and subsequent repudiation of courtly ambitions, see McMullan (34).

' Finkelpearl argues that the King's Men deliberately cultivated a radical image by their "willingness to take on daring plays like Fletcher and Massinger's Sir John van Olden Barnavelt (1619) . . . and Middleton's notorious A Game at Chesse (1624)" (247).
"political criticism of court and king was a central urge in the most important plays of Beaumont and Fletcher" (7).

The second charge leveled against Beaumont and Fletcher—that their predilection for tragicomedy rendered their work politically biased in favor of the powerful—is both more interesting and more vexed. Tragicomedy has until recently been too often dismissed and too readily denigrated by critics: it has been judged by critics to be "an inward-turning, decadent form, an exhausted review of a disappearing past" (Rose 181-82); its cheerful conclusions encourage audiences to believe that "the proper view of life is an optimistic one" (Williams 142); it is a "wish-fulfilling exorcism of intractable political difficulties, a fantasy world" (Butler 147). Even when the radical potential of tragicomedy is acknowledged, the genre remains politically inert, serving merely to reify existing structures of power: tragicomedy is "designed less to protest that notion of power than to evoke an

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For a trenchant analysis—via Johnson—for the potential of tragicomedy to explode "the prescribed limitations on diction, character [and] subject matter for each of the [two] genres," see Battersby (Rational 220). For a salutary exhortation to read genres not from a priori theoretical assumptions but rather "in terms of local justification conditions," see also Battersby's chapter in his Reason and the Nature of Texts 127-148.
acknowledgment of it” (Turner, “Responses” 138).

Frequently considered as escapist fantasies, tragicomedies are perceived as dramaturgical whimsies which appeal only to those who need not consider too deeply the more gritty aspects of Jacobean life:

The salt of common sense that meets us on every page of Ben Jonson, and that stayed by the major Jacobean dramatists at all but their wildest moments, has vanished from the fairy-land of Beaumont and Fletcher. (Ellis-Fermor 209)

More recent scholarship, however, has begun to recognize the ambivalent politics of tragicomedy. Although the impression remains that a conservative core resides at the very heart of the genre, Walter Cohen has argued, for example, that tragicomedy promotes reconciliation over antagonism and, consequently, “in so far as reconciliation implies incorporation rather than exclusion . . . one may occasionally hear marginal or oppositional voices” (127). Cohen suggests that tragicomedy is thus a pre-revolutionary form in that it promotes a middle ground, an arena in which

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For the argument, for example, that Beaumont and Fletcher’s tragicomedies dismantled and then reinscribed traditional stereotypes of female chastity, see McLuskie 193-223.
social conflict is negotiated rather than suppressed: in this, the politics of the genre looks toward 1640, when the court faced the uniform opposition of the articulate population of the country, a population that none the less would have been satisfied by compromise and reform rather than by civil war and revolution. (132)

Cohen is certainly correct that tragicomedy promotes incorporation rather than exclusion, that its purpose is less to pronounce victors in an ideological battle than it is to present contenders in a political debate. And Fletcher acknowledges as much himself when, in the elaborate dedicatory apparatus to The Faithful Shepherdess (1609), he includes a short address "To the Reader" in which he stresses exactly this sense of inclusiveness in his preferred form:

A tragie-comedie is not so called in respect of mirth and killing, but in respect it wants deaths, which is inough to make it no tragedie, yet brings some neere it, which is inough to make it no comedie: which must be a representation of familiar people, with such kinde of trouble as no
life be questiond, so that a God is as lawfull in this as in a tragedie, and meane people as in a comedie.

This is more than a mere nod in the direction of the poetics of conciliation. Instead, this address to the reader makes the claim that it is fully appropriate to show both "a God" and "meane people" in one play, that the usual class demarcations predicated upon genre are limiting and reductive.

The purpose of this declaration of lawful inclusiveness is not merely to promote a happy middle ground between tragedy and comedy. Instead, Fletcher deliberately provides a sociological interpretation of genre, suggesting that whereas tragedy traditionally concentrated upon the affairs of the elite and comedy offered the antics of the meaner sort, tragicomedy shows both together. More than this, tragicomedy places both groups on an equal footing, both with equal rights to time upon the stage. And so, rather than the drunken porters, saucy nurses and doltish constables providing merely ironic commentary upon the behavior of their overlords, tragicomedy provides Beaumont and Fletcher a theoretical
framework whereby they can present both lords and commoners, show them cohabiting, and invite comparison and judgment. The meaner sorts in tragicomedy do more than merely contextualize the behavior of their overseers; they are physical presences on the stage who see and judge those above them. Thus tragicomedy addresses class conflict more directly than tragedy or comedy alone. By privileging and insisting upon the class affiliations of his characters above any consideration of the generic "purity" of his plays, Fletcher insists upon making his work inevitably topical and potentially radical.

The genre of tragicomedy, in its insistence upon broad social inclusiveness, is as potentially confrontational as it is reputedly placatory. Tragicomedy, therefore, provided Beaumont and Fletcher with a vehicle for class criticism, and incest was the motif they employed to exploit this potential most effectively; and incest is relatively ubiquitous in their work. In total, there are eight plays in the Beaumont and Fletcher canon which deal explicitly with incest: *Cupid's Revenge* (1611), *A King and No King* (1611), *The Captain* (1611), *Monsieur Thomas* (1612), *Thierry and Theodoret* (1615), *Women Pleased* (1620), *The
Spanish Curate (1622), and The Fair Maid of the Inn (1626). In the good company of other critics who approach this unwieldy canon, I recognize that the two plays I discuss in detail—The Captain and A King and No King—do not contain all that Beaumont and Fletcher had to say about the relationship between incest and class identity. These two plays do, however, best exemplify how Beaumont and Fletcher consistently associate the ruling classes with unregulated sexuality, the meaner sort with sexual restraint.

A King and No King and The Captain enjoy certain important parallels: they are the work of both Beaumont and Fletcher in collaboration; they both saw their first public production in 1611; they both were performed at Blackfriars by the King’s Men; they both were later presented for court performance at Whitehall; in both plays, incestuous desire is realized, developed, and finally resolved as the plays edge carefully away from the province of tragedy—the characters “killing one another”—and finding closure in comedy—people “laughing together” (“To the Reader”). Most important to this study, however, is one essential distinction: A King and No King presents the incestuous
desires of Arbaces, King of Iberia, whereas *The Captain* explores the incestuous intentions of Lelia, a widow of Venice.

*A King and No King* and *The Captain* focus unequivocally upon the social stresses created by incestuous desire, and in both plays, the incestuous desire is ultimately negated by, in *A King and No King*, the disclosure of a concealed parentage or, in *The Captain*, by the robust physical intervention of the community at large. Although not directly interested in the pathology of the incestuous desire itself, both plays equally show how sexual desire, illicit or otherwise, is fundamentally a social act and derives meaning from the social context in which it is actualized; sexual history and intention are, in both plays, very much a matter of public record and, as such, are monitored and policed by the community in which the incest is located. The key difference, of course, is that the communities of these plays--the Iberian court and the middle class of Venice--respond very differently to the challenges that incest presents.
Like so many of the plays of Beaumont and Fletcher's corpus, *The Captain* is intricately plotted; there are two distinct and seemingly discrete threads, neither of which is necessarily subordinate to the other. The play devotes most attention, however, to the plot involving Jacomo, described in the second folio list of persons as "an angry Captain, a Woman-hater." Before the action of the play, a peace has been declared, and Jacomo and his comrade in arms, Fabritio, find themselves without employment, obliged, as they periodically are, to return to the city and live in a civil, and thereby alien, environment. Unbeknownst to Jacomo, he is loved by Franck, sister to Frederick. This plot revolves, quite predictably, around the socialization of Jacomo who must be conditioned to prefer the gentle pleasures of the bedroom over the violent pleasures of the military campaign or the raucous pleasures of the ale-house; the man who despises both peace and women must be weaned from his antisocial habits and assimilated into the commonwealth of his fellows.

The second plot centers upon the widow Leila who is being courted by Julio. Despite being fully aware of Leila's reputed history of sexual license, Julio cannot
extricate himself from the web of the widow’s sexual charms. Lelia is selective about her liaisons, however, and, eager to establish some social and financial security for herself, will grant Julio his desires only if they marry, a condition to which, understandably, Julio is reluctant to agree. Lelia’s mercenary agenda is also highlighted by her treatment of her father, who has fallen upon hard times. Lelia refuses to support the old man because she feels none of the “mad compassion” (1.3.60) of filial affection; this is a failing which will return to haunt her. Thus, after the father disguises himself, having been the beneficiary of Jacomo and Fabritio’s generosity, Lelia finds herself attracted to this supposed stranger and invites him to her house for a tryst. Even when this stranger reveals himself as her father, Lelia’s lust persists, and it is only through the intervention of Julio’s friend, Angilo, together with the ministrations of their social group, that her father is prevented from killing her. Ultimately, Lelia undergoes a (blunderbuss) conversion, finds virtue and chastity, and is married off to one of the cowardly gulls who appear periodically throughout the play.
These two plots are for the most part unrelated, and they are only harmonized in the final marriage scene, but thematically, the two stories are identical—Jacomo and Lelia both live beyond the pale of their society, and both are brought within the fold of social conformity. Moreover, in both plots, the agency employed to achieve this assimilation is the community itself; there is, throughout this play, no appeal to religion, no mention of law, no intervention by the court. The self-defining community of this play is a world unto itself, and the establishment of a peace, before the action of the play, signifies the total effacement of aristocratic power. It is only when the various plots have been resolved, at the very end of the play, that any figure of external authority appears; Frederick is summoned by the Duke who, troubled by foreign affairs, must now prepare once again for war. Clearly, the absence in this play of any formal and sanctioned institutions of social control signifies that although foreign wars are the care of the state, it is the responsibility of the local community to resolve its own domestic broils.
From the very first scene, the tenor of the play is emphatically urban, secular, mercantile, and popular, its inhabitants clearly defined as self-sufficient representatives of the middling sort. In this community, class loyalty and class self-identification are prime and determining values. Thus, again early in the play, Franck recites her class catechism when quizzed by Clora about the quality of man that she would marry. Franck specifies why she would not marry into various social groups. Gentlemen, she claims, must needs first "keepe some land, and fewer whores" (1.2.39) before she would be willing to ally herself with one of their number. Adventurers likewise will not do because Franck would not find herself with "her husband in another Country / Within a moneth after she is married" (1.2.47-48). Franck reserves her most strident criticism, however, for a final group—courtiers; what before had perhaps been little more than light banter with a friend becomes a significant document concerning the middle class view of the court:

This somer fruite, that you call Courtier,
While you continue cold and frosty to him
Hangs fast, and may be sound: but when you fling

66
Too full a heate of your affections
Upon his roote and make him ripe too soone,
You'll find him rotten 'ith handling;
His oathes and affections are all one
With his apparrrell, things to set him off;
He has as many Mistrisses, as Faithes,
And all appocripha; his true believe
Is onely in a private Surgeon,
And for my single selfe, I'de sooner venture
A new conversion of the Indies
Then to make Courtiers able men or honest.

(1.2.69-81)

On one level, such diatribes against the courtier class are not uncommon in early modern drama, and this speech could certainly be seen as a set-piece of the stage serving to substitute real political action for the fictive pleasure of representational revenge. At the same time, however, Franck's reasons for not wishing to wed a courtier are more fully developed than her previous reservations regarding certain suitors, and her aversion to this class of "infidels" (1.2.65) is more pronounced. Given Franck's active preference for the soldier Jacomo, and given the
extent to which this play later condemns the courtly aspirations of Lelia, this speech is of particular significance.

Courtiers, Franck argues, are as sexually promiscuous as they are careless in their serially convenient religious persuasions. Moreover, their sexual incontinence results in the courtiers' need for the ministrations of a physician to cure venereal infection, the disease proving an external indicator of inner corruption. The courtier is moreover perverse and unnatural in his sexual predilections, finding frosty disdain beguiling, yet at the same time being unable to countenance or satisfy the healthy sexuality, the "excellent stomach" (1.2.64), that Franck acknowledges her own. In sum, courtiers are not marriage material because they exhibit, by their speech, their affections, and their clothes, the desire to distinguish themselves from the community at large rather than to operate as integral members of it. Ironically, it is this very desire on the part of the courtier to "set him[self] off" from the community which is echoed by Jacomo in his refusal, in time of peace, to remove his garb of war, to speak with civil tongue, and to turn his thoughts to affection. If,
however, Franck despairs of ever reforming a member of the socially elite—she would rather re-attempt the conversion of the Indies than change a courtier’s character—she does believe that the rehabilitation of Jacomo is quite possible, though it will require the somewhat brusque aid of her friends and family.

Jacomo’s aptitude for socialization, despite his bluff martial manner, is underscored throughout the play. Although he talks of how urban living robs him of his identity, of how peace “makes us appear / Like empty Pictures, onely the faint shadows / Of what we should be” (2.1.7-10), he is generous to a fault. More than this, Jacomo is fully aware of both the military and social camp to which he belongs, and his most strident criticism of Venetian society is that his military valor serves but to benefit those privileged few who remain at home with their “faire women” whilst the honest soldiers,

like Lares

Defend their pleasures: I am angry too,
And often raile at these forgetfull great men
That suffer us to sue for what we ought
To have flung on us, ere we aske. (2.1.252-56)
Moreover, unlike Lelia, the roots of whose social
disconnection stretch downward to more ideological bedrock,
Jacomo’s repudiation of the more gentle rites of communal
and emotional association is, we learn, the result more of
personal insecurity than of a fundamental sense of
alienation. His refusal to socialize with Franck and Clora
is, as Fabritio notes, the product of his “rude
stubbornenesse” (3.5.24), his fear that the women intend to
mock him for lacking the refinements of gracious loving.
Consequently, it is merely Jacomo’s social artlessness in
unfamiliar communal situations that Franck and her
conspirators need to redress. The means by which this
rapprochement is achieved is by a shift in tone from comedy
to fabliaux, a modulation which provides the audience with
perhaps one of the more entertaining examples of folk
justice from this period; it is a punishment well-suited to
Jacomo’s social trespasses.

Seeking refuge from his social inquisitors in a
hostelry—the one environment in which he feels
comfortable—Jacomo becomes violently drunk and, leaving
his fellow revelers under the table, he lurches to Franck’s
house to get even. While he fumes in the street below the
house, Clora lights upon a homespun plan which is the "approv'd receipt to fetch such a fellow" (5.2.43); they will soak him in piss.

Take all the women-kind in this house, betwixt the age of one, and one hundred, and let them take unto them a pott or a bowle containing seven quarts or upwards, and let them never leave, till the above named pott or bowle become full, then let one of them stretch out her arme and power it on his head, and *Probatum est*, it will fetch him . . . . (5.2.43-49)

The soaked Jacomo storms into the house to seek revenge; he is seized, dragged to a chair, and held down. Thus immobilized, Jacomo is forced to listen as Franck spills the contents of her heart. Slowly, Jacomo realizes that Franck is sincere, and his baptism by urine is followed by the more transformative baptism of public tears. Like the courtiers that Franck had early lambasted, Jacomo admits that he has been an "infidell" (5.4.54) by repudiating the values of his community, and, finally, the two lovers kiss. Fabritio reaffirms his friendship by explaining that Jacomo's mistreatment stemmed from an earnest desire that,
by being "beatten to some understanding" (5.4.92), Jacomo would return to the bosom of his community, the occasion solemnized by matrimony.

The punishment inflicted on Jacomo is, of course, deliberately broad and intentionally comic, but behind this slapstick lie some deeply resonant characteristics of folk justice. On one level, the fact that the urine is of mixed vintage palpably indicates that this punishment is administered communally and is the product of no individual malice; personal indemnity is ensured because the corrective measure was the collective action of a group. More than this, the fact that only the women of the household contribute to the pot identifies with specificity the nature of Jacomo's crimes; he has forsworn the company of women and, in so doing, renounced those qualities stereotypically associated with the feminine in society—love, marriage, family. Although Jacomo's valor in battle is indubitable, in times of peace he must be obliged also to embrace the seemingly feminine qualities of the community to which he belongs.

Equally interesting is the use of the term *Probatum est*. By coopting a Latinate register, the de facto
discourse of secular and religious authority in the early modern period, this community is making substantive claims about its own measures of self-regulation and review; quite simply, the citizens of Venice are asserting the supremacy of self-determination and enforcing the jurisdiction of its own common law. Thus, just as earlier in the play community policing, in the form of a good beating, was shown to be more effective than the sermonic pronouncements of the church, here local, albeit rough, justice is seen to be more efficacious than any declaration of the courts.

In this, the play echoes what we know about contemporaneous ministrations of popular justice, and, although there is little evidence that such forms of community punishment were employed against serious offenders, such as felons, incidents of civil vigilantism against infractions of the social norm during the early modern period were common and generally accepted (Kent 70). Ostensibly, their purpose was to impress upon offenders the evils of their ways and to remind other inhabitants of their moral duties; . . . the ultimate goal of such censure, which seems to reflect division and conflict, was
the reestablishment of communal harmony. Once the offenders had shown repentance and promised reform, and the accepted social norms had been reinforced within the local community, the wrongdoers could be accepted into the community again.

(Kent 74)

In the treatment of Jacomo, we see exactly this process at work: Jacomo is rendered the object of civic scorn; he repents his antisocial behavior; he promises to mend his ways; he then openly declares his social regeneration by claiming that he "will not be asham’d of" (5.4.65) his love for Franck. Furthermore, the public attestation of his future relationship with Franck here outweighs the private promises of the two lovers; it is no accident that during the entire play Jacomo and Franck are never alone together because, in The Captain, it is the public arena and not the private domain that is of concern.

Jacomo’s conversion is relatively unproblematic, given that his alienation from the community was more imagined than real; the end of the play suggests that his love for Franck had been latent throughout. His conversion required no baptism of fire. The rehabilitation of Lelia is quite a
different matter, however, her isolation from the community being both imposed upon her and also, in retaliation, self-sustained. She is both a victim of and an accessory to her social alienation.

Lelia understands that the community to which she belonged as a wife now has little room for her as a widow who has been slow to remarry; she is, as her father notes, a "strange example" (1.3.121) for this community in that she lives alone, is financially independent, and refuses to be drawn into any social nexus of "relations" (1.3.116). Furthermore, Lelia also recognizes that her refusal to participate in the sanctioned sexual economies of the community has rendered her a target for gossip. Thus, although Lodowicke and Piso confess that they have no personal evidence of Lelia’s sexual libertinism, they are willing to perpetuate the various ribald tales they have heard from other "mens idle tongues" (1.1.88). These rumors are perhaps not too dangerous in themselves, but even so they do represent a communal attempt to shame Lelia into better behavior; the early and strategic deployment of rumor in a society careful of reputation is perhaps generally sufficient to ensure a hasty return to
conformity. Unfortunately, Lelia is no more chary of her reputation than she is, later, of her body, and although conscious of such slander, Lelia proudly attests that such words "bite me not" (1.3.164). As a woman whose sexual energies are not contained within the sanctioned institution of marriage, and as a woman seemingly impervious to shame, Lelia is considered a social reprobate, fit to make Julio a "happy man" (1.3.176) though scarcely qualified to make him a virtuous one.

Lelia is locked within an insoluble snare at the heart of her erstwhile community's code of sexual norms: on the one hand, she is ostracized because she is considered a sexual reprobate; on the other hand, when she does attempt to conform to the sexually prescribed roles of her community by insisting that Julio marry her before they have sex, her efforts at reintegration are absolutely rebuffed; the instant that Lelia counters her suitor's persuasions with a single mention of marriage, Julio immediately bids her farewell, briefly cured of his "old disease" (3.1.42) that makes him love such a "syren" (3.1.58), this "poysen in a shape of heaven" (3.4.70), this "leprosie" (3.4.199). Franck's observation about the
impossibility of transforming a courtier are strangely echoed in Angilo's declaration that he would rather "venture / Upon a savage Island, then this woman" (3.1.79).

Lelia's response to this social impasse is in many ways admirable. She declares for herself absolute autonomy: "my desires and ends / Are all the kindred that I have, and friends" (1.3.126-7). Lelia adopts and advocates a creed of social isolation within which the profit principle supercedes all ties of community, all natural bonds of family. Thus, she contends, it is fitting for fathers to remove themselves expeditiously when old: "when children / Are able to inherit, let them dye" (1.3.66-67). She instructs her maid that affairs of the heart are in truth little more than matters of the purse, that those who pretend love without provision of money are "snakes to poyson us / With poverty" (1.3.131). She becomes an advocate of a new social law:

wench you must learne a wise rule,
Looke not upon the youthes of men, and making,
How they discend in blood, nor let their tongues
Though they strike sodainly, and sweet as musique,
Corrupt thy fancy: see, and say them faire too,
But ever keep thy selfe without their distance.

(1.3.134-39)

Quite fundamentally, it is the "distance" that Lelia maintains between herself and others that constitutes her very real threat; as a "strange example" to others, she represents a direct challenge to the commonweal. Given that she ignores the passive aggression mediated through gossip, Lelia rightly fears escalation and has much reason to "feare the spight of people" (3.4.202).

I would argue that it is exactly this recalcitrant impulse that Beaumont and Fletcher are attempting to isolate and exemplify in their choice of incest as the metaphor for Lelia's antisocial behavior; indeed, its purpose within the plot can scarcely be explained otherwise, so extraneous is it to so much of the action of the play. Like the will to belong and yet to disassociate oneself from a group, incestuous desire enjoys the stigma of being of all sins the most "unnaturall" (4.4.183) while at the same time, as Lelia remarks, the most natural:

'tis not against nature

For us to lye together; if you have

An arrow of the same tree with your bow,
Is't more unnaturall to shoot it there
Then in another? 'Tis our generall nature
To procreate, as fires is to consume,
And it will trouble you to finde a sticke
The fire will turne from. (4.4.185-92)

Of course, the fundamental unit of this community is the
family, and to deny the bonds and attendant sexual
prohibitions that derive from this central unit is to deny
the community itself. Incestuous desire is thus, for
Lelia, the supreme act of subversion and rebellion.

The incest intrigue of The Captain develops quickly.
Lelia spies her newly disguised father in the street and
believes that he is a stranger in town. She admires his
"toughnesse" in contrast to the "soft melting gristles"
(3.4.5-7) of her suitors, and duly sends her servant with
money to invite him to her house. To this her father
agrees, even though he remains mystified as to her purpose;
he cautiously hopes that she now regrets her former
indifference. Once the man is safe within her chamber,
however, Lelia begins to seduce him. The father,
pretending to be shy, asks Lelia to send the attendants
away, and then reveals his true identity. Lelia is undeterred:

Though I know him now
To be my Father, never let me live
If my lust do abate. I'le take upon me
To have known him all this while. (4.4.156-59)

This declaration spurs her father's intention to kill first her and then himself, a plan which is prevented only by the intervention of Angilo who, having gained admittance to an upper chamber for his own lustful purposes, has witnessed the entire scene.

The pathology of Lelia's incestuous desire is not of prime importance for either this study or for the play itself; the desire later vanishes as quickly as it appeared. More important to Beaumont and Fletcher's political agenda are the class-specific social signifiers by which the incestuous desire is characterized in Lelia. Incestuous desire, in The Captain, is clearly identified as a sin to which the courtier is peculiarly susceptible.

When the father first enters Lelia's chamber, he is greeted by an unfamiliar sight. Before him lies a
sumptuous banquet the likes of which he has heard described only in chivalric romances:

    this is something like
    The entertainment of the adventurous Knights
    Entring enchanted Castles: For the manner
    Though there be nothing dismall to be seen
    Amazes me a little. (4.4.77-79)

Lelia then enters the room, bearing a rich gown and slippers for her lover. She pours wine for them both as an amorous song plays in the background, the lyric foretelling a long night of ardent sexual pleasure. Lelia promises that once warmed by drink they will progress to bed where "both my treasure, body, and my soule / Are your's to be dispos'd of" (4.4.118-19).

Lelia’s father is amazed by this scene not only because his daughter is attempting to seduce him but because this environment and Lelia’s behavior are alien to him; it is the world of "adventurous Knights" and "enchanted castles." Consequently, by rejecting Lelia’s advances, her father is, like Franck before him when enumerating potential suitors, rejecting a fictional world and a register of language that is generically derived from
romance and therein explicitly courtly; the effect of social dissonance here is as great as that produced by the grocer’s apprentice Rafe in Beaumont’s parody of courtly aspirations, *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*. Lelia’s attempt to set herself apart from her community is articulated in her creation of a courtly milieu complete with alluring bower, enticing banquet, and mysterious music. The association of this environment with the perversity of incestuous desire is then the propagandistic addition of the playwrights.

When Angilo first enters the room in order to prevent Lelia’s murder, the widow hopes that with the help of this, her new “champion” (4.4.239), she will be able to accuse her father of attempted rape and save herself. She is, of course, mistaken; Angilo has seen all. Like Jacomo, she is bound and gagged. She is then dragged, scratching and kicking, away from the chamber, the scene of her voluptuous delights, to the “kitchin” (4.4.271). It is most significant, however, that the moment Lelia is forcibly evicted from her courtly environment and her social pretensions are shattered, her incestuous desires dissolve into “a well of living tears” which, as her father demands,
"shall spring out of thine eyes, / And flow all o’re thy body foul’d with sin, / Till it have wash’d it quite without a stain" (4.4.280-84). When next the audience sees Lelia, she has been fully reconstituted within her community; she has a "heart / As pure as any womans," and she means "[t]o keape it so for ever" (5.5.104-5). Her new friends declare a general amnesty: "what is past . . . all that is to come / Shall be without occasions" (5.5.120-21). Piso is duped into marrying her, believing that she is a wise, virtuous, beautiful, and, necessarily, rich widow; the rest is social concord.

Near the end of The Captain, Angilo remarks, referring to the multiple forthcoming nuptials of Franck and Jacomo, Julio and Clora, Lelia and Piso, that if such marriages "should be thus slubberd up in a play, er’e almost any body had taken notice you were in love, the Spectators would take it to be but ridiculous" (5.5.32-35). It is a moment of self-referentiality, a measure during which the play acknowledges its own fictions, and a point at which tragicomedy itself pokes fun at its own conventions. The Captain confesses that although some social malefactors such as Jacomo are easily rehabilitated, others pose more
perplexing problems. At the end of this play, Lelia is a mere shadow of her former self, pleasing and conciliatory. She has signed over her estate to her father, thereby being denied the financial foundation upon which she could rebuild her social autonomy. Because "her youth is prone to fall again" (5.1.14), she is fettered by marriage to a fool. The play tacitly admits that her rehabilitation is cosmetic, that the prejudices, the misogyny, the double standards, and the inherent contradictions in the shared beliefs that operate at the very quick of this community have merely been side-stepped; the fiction is as transparent as it is flattering to this community.

Yet, even in the same breath that the play confesses these convenient slumberings, it also insists that within the community itself lie the very mechanisms necessary to self-regulate; there is no need for external intervention. More than this, the play celebrates this regenerative facility as unique to the middling-sort who, with piss-pots and beatings, in hostelries and kitchens, are able to reverse the innate antisocial tendencies which plague those who benefit from, and who are equally constrained by, a clear sense of group identity and class affiliation. It
remains true that "even in tragicomedy so tilted toward final happiness for all, there lingers a precariousness surrounding the human community and its values" (Bliss, Beaumont 119), but there seems little doubt that, for the spectators, this sense of community values was a very real fiction. It is also a cause for civic pride because it is the absence of such structures that Beaumont and Fletcher regard as the underlying cause for the inability of the ruling classes to keep their sexual houses in order.

If The Captain shows the socially recuperative mechanisms of the middling sort, even when faced with the grand taboo of incest, then A King and No King is a study in royalty and its sexual discontents. More than this, insofar as Fletcherian tragicomedy does suggest a certain human universality with regard to "the motifs of incest, lust, rape, sexual jealousy, and frustration," it also suggests that such urges are more severe and more damaging when divorced from a social community which can regulate and police those desires (Foster, "Sex" 312).

A King and No King deals with no less than three distinct plots: Arbaces' desire for his sister, Panthea;
Spaconia’s quest to win back her unfaithful lover, Tigranes; a comic subplot which centers on the attempts by the cowardly Bessus to appear brave and honorable. The clear focus of the play, however, is the incestuous desire of Arbaces, King of Iberia. The play opens with the aftermath of a single combat in which the valiant Arbaces triumphs over Tigranes, King of Armenia. To cement peace, Arbaces intends to marry the vanquished king to his sister, a mere girl of nine when he left for war but now a woman of unparalleled beauty and virtue. After many years of military action, Arbaces can finally return home.

Once reinstalled in Iberia, however, Arbaces finds himself strangely attracted to his now matured sister, and, to the consternation of his court, he is more than warm in his affections towards her; to prevent the promised marriage, he has both his sister and Tigranes imprisoned. Tortured by a passion he dares not acknowledge, Arbaces finally declares his love to Panthea who, ironically enough, has been seared by similarly urgent desires; they both agree they must not consummate their desire but must only love as is lawful to a brother and sister.

Ultimately, this situation becomes intolerable, and Arbaces
is driven to the point of murdering Gobrius, his counselor, raping his sister, and finally ending his own life. But, even as Arbaces’ sword is raised, it is revealed that he is not the true son of the late king, but is instead the child of Gobrius; Arane, the dowager queen, in a desperate bid to provide her aging husband with an heir, had suborned Gobrius to give her his own child. To her bitter regret, she was delivered of Panthea just a short while after this deception. Arbaces is understandably delighted by such a revelation; although no longer the rightful ruler, he is, however, able to marry his erstwhile sister, Panthea—he is a king and no king.

*King and No King* has attracted considerable critical attention from a range of critics. Most critics agree, nonetheless, that the end of the play is contrived insofar as it fails adequately to resolve the issues surrounding kingship which the rest of the play has foregrounded; the problematic nature of royal authority is quickly forgotten.

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It has been read as a case-study in the sublimation of narcissism into incest, Neill, “Defence” 322; as a representation of political despotism articulated in terms of an irrepressible sexual will, Bushnell 190-91; as a warning against James’ tendency toward absolutism, Finkelpearl 167-82; as an exploration of a new model of “popular” kingship, Flores 174-76; as an expression of the limits of patriarchal—and authorial—absolutism, Masten, Textual 100-01.
in the revelation of the true nature of Arbaces' birth. It is my contention, however, that the conclusion of the play is no mere device, transparent or otherwise, by which the various antagonisms of the play are resolved. Instead, I argue that the conclusion of the play is deliberately constructed with a clearly defined socio-political purpose. It may indeed be serendipitous that Arbaces finds himself no longer related to Panthea, but it is not mere chance that he finds ultimate sexual and social health when he discovers his true identity as both a commoner and a subject who, finally, aspires to be no more.

Just as in The Captain, where Lelia's incestuous desire is associated with her social aspirations, so too in A King and No King is Arbaces' incestuous desire anticipated by his seemingly limitless appetite for self-aggrandizement. This aspect of his character—as if he intuitively senses his illegitimacy as king—is evident from the very start of the play. Victorious over Tigranes, for example, Arbaces greedily claims all credit for the entire campaign as his own and, with an eye to future historians, he attempts to condense the broad panoply of
military history into the history of a single great man. Thus, although we discover that the occasion for single combat only arose when Bessus routed the enemy by accidentally leading his force towards the foe rather than running away from it, Arbaces claims this victory for himself entire:

I could tell the world
How I have laid his kingdom desolote [sic]
With this sole arm propp’d by divinity,
Stripp’d [Tgr.] out of his glories, and have sent
The pride of all his youth to people graves,
And made his virgins languish for their loves,
If I would brag. (1.1.126-133)

Arbaces appropriates glory with the appetite of a glutton. He claims that had even his friend Mardonius sided with Tigranes in combat, he still would have prevailed and emerged from the field victorious. When Mardonius a few lines later reminds his king that such boasting is a “wrong to us / That daily ventur’d lives” (1.1.280-81), Arbaces dismisses the contributions of other soldiers who had fought alongside him; Arbaces fashions himself the prime mover of the entire war:
There I would make you know 'twas this sole arm. I grant you were my instruments and did As I commanded you, but 'twas this arm Mov'd you like wheels; it mov'd you as it pleas'd. (1.1.294-97)

Arbaces is not always thus, however, and when alone with Mardonius, he will countenance some timid criticism if served with a counterbalancing measure of praise. Mardonius, consequently, acknowledges that his lord is brave, valiant, and noble but further suggests that these virtues would shine more brightly were he not also vain, proud, and arrogant. Curiously, Arbaces changes the tenor of his rhetoric immediately; he acknowledges that he sometimes forgets his "natural offices" (1.1.493), conceding that he and his troops together are all "soldiers and all venter [venture] lives, / And where there is no difference in men's worths / Titles are jests" (1.1.328-30). Once more one of the lads and enthused with esprit de corps, Arbaces then engages Mardonius in some sexual banter about a jewel he is wearing, asking whether it is a gift from some wench; the register of discourse shifts from the officers' club to the barracks as Arbaces awkwardly
negotiates his uneasy identities as king and soldier. In matters of pride, it appears, Arbaces can be rebuked and will stand corrected.

This opening scene of the play is far from subtle, nor, I think, is it intended to be. Instead, Beaumont and Fletcher establish from the beginning of the play a paradox and instability at the center of this king's--of any king's--character. On the one hand, as victor in single combat and representative of his whole nation, Arbaces incorporates his subjects, their individual contributions to the war subsumed in his own singular act of bravery. At these times, Arbaces believes himself to be a law unto himself, free from the petty social constraints that serve to limit the behavior of his subjects; modesty only becomes those with reason to be modest. When Arbaces acknowledges his dependence upon the contributions of others, however, and when he recognizes that both general and private are but equal soldiers in the field of battle, then he is prepared to imagine himself as part of a larger community; his jokes with Mardonius about women stem, in part, from the recognition that both subject and king alike are moved by sexual desire. Reminded of this by Mardonius, Arbaces
can still recall the common touch and admit that he is but one wheel within the military machine. But Mardonius is silent—as he is obliged to be concerning Arbaces' incestuous desires—then there is no mechanism by which the king can be reminded that he is, like others, but a man.

*King and No King* exposes precisely these two identities of a king; it reveals the friction between Arbaces' self-construction as a beneficent despot and his eagerness to fashion himself as a populist ruler not above sharing the occasional off-color joke with the rank and file. But, as the play suggests, this is a dangerous line to walk for both king and subject, and nowhere is this more apparent than in the opening scene when Arbaces turns suddenly on his general staff, recasting what had been shared laughter into a moment of potentially treasonous derision:

> Why dost thou laugh?

> By all the world, I'm grown ridiculous

> To my own subjects. Tie me to a chair

> And jest at me! (1.1.241-44)

From *The Captain*, we know—and perhaps the contemporaneous audience remembered—that such a rite of communal mocking
is sometimes salutary; unfortunately for Arbaces, there are few who dare attempt it later in the play.

If Arbaces' repeated attempts to distinguish himself from other soldiers are unhealthy, then his desire to elevate himself above the natural bonds of kinship is clearly malignant, the grossest symptom of which is his incestuous desire for his sister. As the play progresses, and the camaraderie fostered by the battlefield wanes ever more faint, Arbaces becomes increasingly insistent about his privileged identity, asserting with absolute authority the right of royal fiat. Thus, when Panthea is first presented to him and the seeds of incestuous desire germinate, he pretends not to recognize her:

She is no kin to me nor shall she be;
If she were any, I create her none,
And which of you can question this? My power
Is like the sea, that is to be obey'd
And not disputed with. I have decreed her
As far from having part of blood with me
As the nak'd Indians. (3.1.165-71)

And no one dare challenge Arbaces when expressly forbidden:
"Let me not hear you speak again" (3.1.201); "No man here /
Offer to speak for her, for I consider / As much as you can say" (3.1.203-5); “Rule your disorder’d tongue, / Or I will temper it” (3.1.243-45); “I will not hear you speak / . . . Let no man think to speak / for such a creature” (3.1.312-14).

Arbaces’ insistence upon his absolute authority as king removes him from what is, otherwise, a network of rehabilitative structures throughout the play which serve to school other characters who transgress socially accepted norms: Bessus’ pretensions to bravery and nobility, for example, are curbed by the cudgels of Mardonius; Tigranes, similarly, is sent “my own rod to correct me with, / A woman” (4.2.25) in the shape of Spaconia, whose social rank is significantly below his own. Arbaces’ status as king, however, renders him utterly alone, and it is this isolation from social norms and recuperative mechanisms of a community that leads directly to his decision to murder Gobrius and rape his sister. Arbaces cannot even imagine a community the like of which Mardonius describes when refusing to be complicit in the seduction of Panthea:

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⁵ Even Spaconia’s father admits that his daughter is “more fit to be [Tigranes’] whore” (5.2.66) than his queen.
I shall find a dwelling amongst some people
where, though our garments perhaps be coarser, we
shall be richer far within and harbor no such
vices in 'em. (3.3.105-107)

Beaumont and Fletcher, however, enjoy such a socially
fertile imagination, and they generously share it with
Arbaces in the pretty fiction by which the play may close.

It is revealed in the final act that Arbaces' desire
for Panthea is legitimate and lawful; Arbaces is not the
son of Arane and the late king and, thereby, not the
brother of Panthea. The rightful heir to the throne,
Panthea, can be restored, and Arbaces is now free to marry
the queen—a king and no king once more a king. In relief
at finding himself no longer the ruler of Iberia, Arbaces
can joyfully re-embrace his natural community: "I am
Arbaces; we all fellow-subjects" (5.4.291).

A community love-fest ensues. Bessus addresses his
former monarch as his "fellow-subject" (5.4.293), and
Arbaces insists upon sumptuary equality:

Why do you keep your hats off, gentlemen?

Is it to me? I swear it must not be.

Nay, trust me; in good faith, it must not be.
I cannot now command you, but I pray you,  
For the respect you bare me when you took  
Me for you king, each man clap on his hat  
At my desire. (5.4.276-82)  

Tigranes is released, the good news of his marriage to Spaonia delivered, and Panthea agrees to wed Arbaces "more willingly than I would draw this air" (5.4.333). Concord and joy invest this happy company. And, although the play is transparent in the fictions by which the critical issue of incest is resolved—as indeed The Captain is also—the play ends with a chorus in which the Lord is praised for having Arbaces "prov'd no king" (5.3.358). This scene is prefigured by the title page of the first quarto (1619) on which a woodcut reveals a smiling Arbaces. His scepter is cast to the ground, his arms are raised in a gesture of happy acceptance, and his crown is being removed by a hand descending from the heavens.  

The play, however, is deliberately ambivalent about the effect this revelation has had on the erstwhile king. Even though Arbaces exults in his dethroning, clearly the habits of unquestioned authority die hard. Thus, although he no longer enjoys any claim to authority, he dispenses
gifts with regal generosity. Spaconia shall have as a dowry "the kingdom / Sold utterly and put into a toy / Which she shall wear about her carelessly" (323-25). He declares that Tigranes shall return to Armenia without ransom. More than this, Arbaces will have commissioned "chariots easier than air" (314) to translate him to his realm. The messenger, Ligones,

shall ride before him

On a horse cut out of an entire diamond

That shall be made to go with golden wheels,

I know not how yet. (317-20)

The play clearly indicates that although Arbaces is now revealed as a commoner, no different from Bessus in rank or authority, he cannot easily forget the habits of a lifetime, and the extravagance of his vaunted gifts are the corollary of his former arrogant vaunting. His rehabilitation is merely cosmetic and his address to the court simply phatic; Arbaces cannot divest himself of his identity as a king merely by removing his crown. More than this, Arbaces walks bareheaded for only a brief time because, when married to Panthea, the crown will be replaced.
The play ends by both giving and taking away. On the one hand, Arbaces' desire is purged of its incestuous taint when he is prepared to acknowledge that he is but one among his fellow men. On the other hand, the play suggests that, without such a realization of social equality, then there are no mechanisms in place to curb incestuous desire. And few are the kings who would, like Arbaces, welcome the process by which they are rendered but a common subject.
In Middleton's work, the representation of incestuous desire becomes more subtle, more nuanced, and more psychologically complex than in the work of his predecessors, Beaumont and Fletcher. I do not argue, however, in the three plays I will discuss—The Revenger's Tragedy (1607), Women Beware Women (1622), and The Changeling (1622)—that Middleton is necessarily building a coherent and developed oppositional platform akin to that which Margot Heinemann identifies in her Puritanism and Theatre. I do contend, however, that Middleton, in these plays at least, is consciously framing a drama dependent

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1. With most scholars, I assume Middleton to be the author of The Revenger's Tragedy. For textual scholarship on this issue, see Schoenbaum, Jackson, and, most recently, Lake. The forthcoming Collected Works of Thomas Middleton, edited by Gary Taylor, agrees with this attribution.
upon class antagonisms, and that he uses the representation of incest as a means to distinguish between the sexualities of the elite and the middling sort.

In making this claim for Middleton's work, I am aware of the dangers of generalization. Gary Taylor, for example, has warned against fabricating a model of early modern drama based upon "a simple binary choice between conservative support for the regime and progressive opposition to it," and has, along with others, exposed the perils of "presuming the existence of a singular and unified 'opposition'" (285). I do not argue, therefore, that Middleton was the acknowledged dramatist for a distinct and identifiable group of those opposed to the crown. Instead, I suggest that throughout his career Middleton returned, occasionally and opportunistically, to the theme of incest as a means of articulating class dissent.¹

I argue specifically that, whereas for dramatists such as Beaumont and Fletcher, and, in part, Massinger,

¹ For examples of other highly qualified claims concerning Middleton's conflicted or confused ideologies, see Paster, Quomodo 177 (on class affiliation); Leinwand, City 53 (on an emergent capitalist class); Heinemann, Puritanism 76 (on Puritan sympathies); Dawson 318 (on sexuality and violence); Hotz-Davis 37-38 (on Feminist issues); Wigler 199-200 (on biographical questions).
incestuous desire was perceived as the proprietary vice of
the elite and was therefore employed as a vehicle through
which class critique could find voice, for Middleton,
incestuous desire is a signifier of class mediated by
gender. Whereas in The Captain and A King and No King
illicit sexual desire is harbored by both women and men
alike, Middleton’s work acknowledges that elite men are
granted sexual license in their culture and are allowed to
break whatever sexual codes they wish with virtual
immunity. This is not the case, however, for their female
counterparts who, though enjoying certain social
privileges, are as sexually constrained and controlled as
their sisters of the middling sort. This makes, for
Middleton, a political paradox. He recognizes that most
elite women occupy a strange, shadowy, potent yet powerless
territory, that they both benefit from one social mechanism
of control predicated upon class and are oppressed by
another determined by gender. And Middleton realizes that
this complicated political situation poses some interesting
questions of loyalty. Ultimately, Middleton asks, should
elite women form political alignments based upon their
class or, alternatively, in accord with their gender. Do
such women owe allegiance to the male elite who bestow on them some scraps of privilege or with the class with whom they share the experience of oppression? Middleton dramatizes this question in the works discussed below, and the response of these women to incestuous desire serves as a litmus test to establish their political loyalty.

In *The Revenger’s Tragedy* (1607) and *Women Beware Women* (1622), it is the women who most experience incestuous desire, and it is the women, in choosing either to indulge or resist this desire, who also thereby render transparent their decision to support or to undermine a patriarchal system that oppresses them: the Duchess, by sleeping with Spurio—her husband’s illegitimate offspring—gives her support to a capricious system of court justice that has executed her son; Isabella, by having sex with her uncle, becomes a compliant and complacent bedfellow to a system that ultimately regards her as no more than an economic token; Livia, in resisting her incestuous desire for her brother and, instead, by taking the factor Leantio as a sexual partner, declares herself an enemy to a system that no longer regards her as having any value, economic or otherwise. In considering the implications of class and
gender in these plays, I hope to combat the temptation to "reduce the terms of social struggle to a single axis" (Howard 36). Instead, I will explore how, for Middleton, the representation of incest served as a mechanism by which to exhibit the seemingly discrete spheres of class and gender in collision. I intend to show that, for Middleton and his audience, incestuous deed is at heart a political act, a statement of class affiliation and/or a confirmation of gender loyalty. Finally, Middleton suggests that to engage in incestuous acts is, ultimately, to sleep with the enemy.

The representation of incestuous desire is quite common in Middleton’s corpus; it occurs, for the most part fleetingly but sometimes extensively, in nine of his approximately thirty plays. In two of these plays, A Mad World, My Masters (1605) and No Wit, No Help Like a Woman’s (1611), the motif of incest is limited: in Mad World, Follywit, a rake, is punished by the poetic justice of being duped into marrying Gullman, a woman who will clearly remain his uncle’s mistress; in No Wit, Philip Twilight is embarrassed to discover that his new wife is his sister,
only then to discover further, rather fortuitously, that, because of a cradle switch at birth, she is not. In this case, incest is used merely as a temporary blocking device.

Generally, however, Middleton reserves incestuous thought, word, or deed for his manifest villains. For this unsavory group of characters, incest is used as a hideous ornament, a sinful coronet with which to adorn the vices of his most corrupt characters. Thus, in *The Phoenix* (1603), Falso, a judge, not content with merely pillaging his niece’s inheritance, also wants to plunder her body—incest here is a mode of judicial misconduct. Similarly, in *The Witch* (1613), Hecate compounds her devilish practices by soliciting the sexual favors of Firestone, her son—incest here is a mode of demonic sexual reproduction. In *The Mayor of Queenborough* (1620-22), Middleton presents the audience with Horsus, a Saxon interloper, gleefully imagining that his legitimate children may some day breed with those of Roxana, his mistress, thereby generating a new breed of super-villains—incest here is a mode of pagan dynastic ambition. Finally, in the notorious *A Game At Chess* (1624), Middleton slanders Catholics by contending that, among their manifold sins, priests grant easy 104
absolution to the incestuous members of the faith, the fine for fornication being five pence, for sleeping with one's daughter, only three—incest here is a mode of heretical sexual incontinence. These works, however, employ incest merely as a convenient and practical form of demonization; in much the same way, most of Middleton's gallants are monologically defined by libidinous desire, his merchants, by financial greed, and his Anabaptists, in *The Family of Love* (1603), by their admirable zeal in observing the doctrine of free love.

In *The Revenger's Tragedy*, however, incest is more than mere ornament; it is thoroughly incorporated into an environment predicated upon illicit sexual appetites: the Duke and Lussurioso serially deflower their victims and, when sated, have them murdered; the Junior Brother casually rapes Antonio's wife, secure in the knowledge that although he may be arraigned by the justices, he will be privately released by the king because, he affirms with a grim pun, "[m]y fault was sweet sport, which the world approves; / I die for that which every woman loves" (3.4.81-82). Set

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1 In his study of Spenser and early modern iconography, John King notes the ubiquity of this association of religious apostasy with sexual incontinence (101).
prominently in this diadem of corruption is the crowning jewel of the Duchess' incestuous desire for Spurio, her son-in-law. As Vindice observes, these characters indeed inhabit "an accursed palace" (1.1.30).

Albert Tricomi argues that *The Revenger's Tragedy* is a searing economic and social satire on the privileged courtly life [that] depicts from the perspective of the dispossessed the decadence of court luxury and the aristocratic exploitation of the legal system, (102)

and, without question, this is certainly true insofar as Vindice’s motives for revenge are indeed economic (his father died of "discontent" (1.1.127) as a consequence of his failure to find preferment), social (the duke attempts to seduce Vindice’s sister), and legal (the duke, having murdered Gloriana, is apparently immune from prosecution). But such criticism, in its focus on Vindice as the sable-

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1 This relationship is incestuous rather than merely adulterous because, given the cultural constructions of extended kinship in the early modern period, even illicit sexual activity established affinity (McCabe 192). Furthermore, the Duchess herself insists upon her kinship with Bosola in her process of seduction: “Let it stand firm both in thought and mind / That the Duke was thy father” (1.2.145-6).

2 See Paster, “Idea” 62 and Leinwand, “London” 140 for Middleton’s tendency to represent the milieu of middle class London in a positive light.
habited revenger of his family's wrongs, addresses only one aspect of this text, and, in its neglect of female agency, tends to compress and limit the dramatic function of both Castiza and the Duchess. *The Revenger's Tragedy*, I suggest, does more than merely vilify the court. It also explores the roles of female sexuality within the elite and suggests that, through the strategic choice of which sexual partners women accept—if any at all—women participate quite actively in the political economy of their society.

Middleton's interest in female sexuality is evident from the opening scene during which Vindice watches the court in procession. As Vindice bitterly observes the "four excellent characters" (1.1.4) pass across the stage, he holds in his hand the skull of Gloriana, his murdered fiancée; the skull provides its own ironic commentary on what the future holds for the members of the court. The procession over, Vindice directs a soliloquy to this grisly relic of his former lover. On one level, the skull is representative to Vindice of an idealized female virtue; it memorializes the "life and beauty" (1.1.18) of the chaste Gloriana who was murdered precisely because her "purer part would not consent / Unto [the duke's] palsey-lust (1.1.33-
34); this much is conventional enough. But the skull also signifies more than mere chastity to Vindice. It also serves as a symbolic acknowledgement of the power women may enjoy over men by virtue of their sexual desirability. Thus, Vindice comments, his Gloriana, while alive, was able to make even "the uprightest man" sin "with looking after her" (1.1.23-25)--the sexual pun is, I think, intentional. Again, because of her beauty,

she was able to ha' made a usurer's son
Melt all his patrimony in a kiss,
And what his father fifty years told
To have consumed. (1.1.26-29)

Furthermore, in addition to swaying the upright man and making a spendthrift of a usurer's son, Gloriana's beauty had the power to effect even greater changes: it was able to transform old men of "limited performances" (1.1.36) into youths "angry, eager, and violent" (1.1.35) for sexual satisfaction.

Clearly, Vindice recognizes that women, because of their sexuality, have a certain power over men; "were 't not for gold and women" (2.1.257), Vindice affirms, men would be virtuous. The sentiment is misogynistic,
Certainly, but it does acknowledge both a sexual and economic truth in the world of this play; female sexuality is a fungible asset, like gold, and can be used for political advantage. To be sure, this power is very limited—as Gloriana found to her mortal cost in refusing to succumb to the Duke’s attentions—but, nonetheless, it is not negligible. Furthermore, the women of this play know this too, and, as Castiza realizes, it is through the use of this sexual power, either by withholding or granting sexual favors, that women can assure for themselves a degree of autonomy, both sexual and social: if maidens would only deny men sexual access, then “men’s words could have no power” (4.4.151).

Castiza chooses to remain chaste, realizing that although a court mistress may find some brief favor, may even enjoy some short-lived economic gain, she would ultimately be cast aside once the value of her virgin commodity had been depleted. She refuses, consequently, to participate in an economy of exchange which would trade her “country-girl” virtue (2.1.82) for the trappings of an aristocratic lifestyle—the estates, jewels, coaches, and liveried servants that Lussurioso offers through his
supposed procurer, Vindice. More important, by rejecting such class-specific inducements from Lussurioso, Castiza converts sexual power into political agency by affirming her allegiance to her own family and to her own class. The political affiliation of Middleton’s women is to be judged by the company with whom they sleep, or, in this case, with whom they do not sleep.

Castiza is not the only woman in this play who is aware of her potential for political action through sexual choice. The Duchess also recognizes this resource, but whereas Castiza chooses to employ this power through chastity, the Duchess elects to achieve her goals through carnality: prepared to “do with the devil” (1.1.4) if it serves her turn, the Duchess sleeps with Spurio, her husband’s bastard, with the intention of exacting sexual revenge on the Duke for his political refusal to pardon her rapist son—although the duke does not observe the law himself, he is at least aware that, with regard to the most blatant transgressions of others, justice must be seen to be done. The Duchess thus cuckolds her husband because “in his forehead” the “wound is deepest, though it never bleed” (1.2.108-09). With “one incestuous kiss” the Duchess
"picks open hell" (1.2.174). Female sexuality is, again, a weapon to be deployed against men.

In terms of subversiveness at least, the actions of Castiza and the Duchess are equal—in both the women use sexual choice as a means to undermine patriarchal power and authority—and while it would be foolish to imagine that either Middleton or his culture saw chastity and carnality as equal signifiers of female sexual rebellion, the two women do share a common political purpose in opposing a system of male privilege that has injured them. It is significant, however, that the Duchess chooses incestuous sexuality as the means by which this subversion is to be achieved, especially considering that the same could be achieved by a sexual liaison with any male character in the play. So, the important question remains as to why Middleton chose to make the Duchess incestuous rather than merely unfaithful. The answer is that Middleton wishes both to acknowledge the subversive element of the Duchess' choice to cuckold her husband, while, at the same time, strip her rebellion of potency by making her guilty of a

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6 There is no authority for this incestuous relationship in any of the various sources that might have influenced Middleton; see Salinger.
crime which is constructed within the play as a particularly aristocratic transgression. By so doing, Middleton certainly recognizes the potential of female resistance to patriarchal authority, but he also specifically undermines the nature of the Duchess’ subversiveness by showing that the Duchess fully remains loyal and true, in her choice of vice at least, to her social class.

Middleton prepares us early for this association of incest with the aristocracy. When attempting to win the sinecure of unofficial court procurer to Lussurioso, the disguised Vindice catalogs his compendious knowledge of the world’s “strange lust” (1.3.56). Interestingly, considering his audience is the duke’s son, Vindice’s sexual inventory is strangely class specific; he considers only the sexual practices—and their baneful consequences—of those who possess land. He claims to have seen patrimonies washed a-pieces, fruit-fields turned into bastards, and, in a world of acres, not so much dust due to the heir ‘twas left to [sic] as would well gravel a petition. (1.3.51-53)
Such, however, are only the financial costs of illicit sexual activity to the landed aristocracy. More telling still is the manner in which Vindice characterizes the specific nature of the aristocracy's sexual predilections:

Some father dreads not (gone to bed in wine)
To slide from the mother and cling the daughter-in-law;

Some uncles are adulterous with their nieces,
Brothers with brothers' wives. O, hour of incest!
Any kin now, next to the rim o' th' sister,
Is man's meat in these days; (1.3.58-63)

For both Vindice and Middleton, then, incest is a signifier of a specific class, a shorthand by which the various sordid vices of the court can be encapsulated and codified into a single governing idea. And, although the Duchess deliberately chooses to rebel sexually against the male elite that she feels have betrayed her by condemning her son to death, she remains faithful to her aristocratically vicious heritage in her chosen mode of

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It is curious that Vindice seems to suggest that brother-sister incest is beyond the pale of acceptability, especially given that this court is not given to establishing limits on any form of sexual behavior. For the argument that this may hint at Vindice's own incestuous desire for Castiza—and the political implications of this—see Chakravorty, "Court" 76.
sexual transgression. Consequently, if the Duchess' actions are subversive, they are only marginally so, and if Middleton is showing that female resistance to male cultural power is possible, he also here neutralizes it by showing the Duchess still choosing to sleep with the enemy leaving Vindice, the real enemy from below, to go about his revengeful ways.

The Revenger's Tragedy is an early work, and occasionally Middleton is too willing to sacrifice dramatic subtlety for sensational effect. But even so, we see in this play the genesis of what is to become Middleton's most perceptive cultural recognition about the ideological nature of female sexuality. In this play, both Castiza and the Duchess realize that their sexual practice can serve as a weapon by which male privilege can be challenged. As such, the choice of sexual partner becomes, for an elite woman in particular, a political act and a statement of political affiliation. It is with this in mind, and with a more developed sense of the dramatic possibilities of this construct, that Middleton writes Women Beware Women and, during the same period, The Changeling.
I begin with an analysis of The Changeling, a play which proves perversely resistant to any attempts by this critic to identify incestuous desire therein; with profound regret, I acknowledge that there is no incest in The Changeling. At the same time, however, The Changeling and Women Beware Women represent Middleton’s most mature and coherent rendering of the imbrications of class and gender, and both plays are mutually informing in that they share, in their political conclusions, the same ideology. The Changeling, I contend, can been seen thus as a complementary text to Women Beware Women.

Of all Middleton’s work, The Changeling remains among the most entertaining to both critics and audience alike, and its continued prevalence in modern repertoires is probably directly attributable to the audience’s fascination with the troubling relationship between the play’s protagonists, Beatrice-Joanna and De Flores; their relationship is perhaps one of the most psychologically compelling in the entire early modern canon. Beatrice-Joanna initially finds De Flores physically and mentally abhorrent; she can scarcely bear to be in the same room with him, and, at every opportunity, she scorns his
officious attentions and cruelly ridicules his scarred, pock-marked countenance. De Flores is, to Beatrice, a "deadly poison" (1.1.108) and a "basilisk" (1.1.111), the sight of which leaves her "trembling of an hour after" (2.1.91); De Flores makes Beatrice-Joanna's flesh crawl with both apprehension and an indeterminate yet queasy sense of danger. By the play's end, however, the object of disgust has become the subject of desire:

How rare is that man's speed!
How heartily he serves me! His face loathes one,
But look upon his care, who would not love him?
The east is not more beauteous than his service.

(5.1.69-72)

The weight of this quotation falls upon the idea of service. In the second line, Beatrice-Joanna is referring, of course, to De Flores' loyalty, as a servant, in protecting her reputation, but, I argue, in the fourth line, the meaning has shifted, and De Flores has become instead her servant in the lists of love. A natural antipathy has evolved, strangely, into a natural sympathy, a "thing of hate" (5.3.68) into "a man worth loving" (5.1.76). Ultimately, and despite herself, Beatrice-Joanna
finds De Flores to be "a thing that is both lov'd and loath'd" (1.1.121).

This sudden and seemingly inexplicable change in the relationship between Beatrice-Joanna and De Flores has preoccupied commentators; the swift metamorphosis from hate to love, from despite to desire, appears oddly modern and remains central to many of our culturally constructed romantic fictions. Moreover, this passionate love affair between a woman of rank and a household servant also serves to stroke several of the most cherished of modern cultural tenets—the promise of potential class mobility and the supposed transcendent qualities and socially equalizing tendencies of love. Of course, this relationship between Beatrice-Joanna and De Flores is, to many modern critics, terribly contrived. It offers false hopes of class rapprochement, denies the perhaps insurmountable cultural barriers that bedevil meaningful class communication, and, its worst sin, promotes the inexcusably callow notion that love can indeed conquer all.

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1 De Flores' position as household servant is galling to him because he "tumbled into th'world a gentleman" (2.1.49); the play thus acknowledges how easy it is to fall through the ranks, and how hard to reascend them.
Few scholars would wish to associate themselves with such cultural naïveté, and so other explanations have been adduced to explain the malaise that must lie at the heart of this relationship. It has been argued, for example, that Beatrice is an archetype, that she is little more than a "scapegoat or pharmakon," that her role is to have the 'moral degeneration' of an entire social system displaced onto her in order to purify, strengthen, and unify that community.

(Stockton 459)

Alternatively, Beatrice-Joanna is to be understood as constituting a diptych wherein can be seen both "an idealized and degraded femininity" (Eaton 372); she represents to Alsemero "a vaginal pathway back to an edenic world" (374) while being also, for De Flores, "the locus of a societal 'hell' that a cultural psychology has built upon the 'secrets' of the female body (382)." Beatrice-Joanna, as the doubleness of her name implies, is thus reduced to that most facile of cultural constructs, the Madonna/Whore dialectic.

For another more radical psychoanalytic reading that locates incestuous oedipal desire in the play displaced on sibling figures, see Roy 128.
Christina Malcolmson suggests, more convincingly, that the play is better served by the ministrations of the New Historicism. Malcolmson contends that *The Changeling* constitutes a coherent chapter in Middleton’s general distrust of Catholicism and his particular suspicion of its Iberian practitioners. As a precursor to Middleton’s notorious *A Game At Chesse*, *The Changeling* is thus a species of propaganda against Charles’ contemplated marriage to the Spanish Infanta. In this argument, Beatrice is constructed as a terrifying virago, a “man-woman” (338) whose purpose is to compromise male authority and, by implication and association, to enervate the true and sovereign faith of English Protestantism. The play is thus a strident polemic of anti-Spanish political sentiment and, more generally, a heady romp through misogynist cultural ideology.

Other critics have been more willing to accept the play’s embrace of various and plural ideologies. Deborah Burks, for example, argues suasively that *The Changeling* articulates complex and contradictory cultural attitudes about women and female sexual desire. According to Burks, Beatrice-Joanna is a ludic representation of a key early
modern apprehension about the unstable nature of female identity: Beatrice-Joanna is both innocent—she naively and mistakenly assumes that the only "motive that drives [socially inferior] men is desire for property" (775)—and sexually predacious and morally vicious. The play, Burks contends, articulates early modern anxieties about the indeterminacy of female sexual identity: "[t]he danger of women's falseness is its subtlety, its secrecy, its ability to masquerade convincingly as virtue" (773).

No matter the particular argument, however, commentary on The Changeling seems to rest without question upon two principle assumptions. First, there appears to be a general consensus that the relationship between Beatrice-Joanna and De Flores is fundamentally aberrant, that more than being merely illicit, it is psychologically perverse. The antipathy that Beatrice-Joanna feels for De Flores seems to be understood--by both scholars and characters alike--as the normative condition, the natural and implicitly robust state from which she falls as her crimes multiply; it is as if criticism tacitly accepts as a

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16 Marjorie Garber further suggests that the virginity-test signifies male anxiety that women may be faking orgasm (34).
natural and immanent state of affairs that the rich should shun the poor, the beautiful mock the ugly, the mistress exploit the servant. Second, criticism also tends to concentrate on Beatrice-Joanna alone, to privilege her agency in the play over the agencies of others. De Flores, meanwhile, is accorded less attention; he is too often reduced to a mere tool-villain who wears his disfigured soul too patently upon his face. Beatrice-Joanna’s strange and sudden passion for De Flores is thus characterized as a symptom of some socio-cultural malady or as an ancillary response to her thwarted desire for Alsemero. For the most part, scholars focus exclusively on the differences between Beatrice-Joanna and De Flores, on the social and sexual chasms that separate them, rather than discerning that, in many ways, the relationship can be seen as a recognition, on the part of Middleton, that the socially dispossessed and the gender oppressed can share mutual goals and operate in tandem. Consequently, to understand fully the class dynamic that this play enacts it is necessary to see this sudden change in the relationship as a coherent, stable, and thoroughly comprehensible evolution in the nature of Beatrice-Joanna’s desire based upon her realization that,
as a woman victimized by patriarchal structures, she gains more by allying herself with another subject of oppression, De Flores, than by marrying herself to a system that oppresses her. De Flores may be of lower rank than Beatrice-Joanna, but he is more, much more, than merely her bit of rough.

The reasons why this possibility of mutual interest is scarcely acknowledged are manifold, but part of the problem lies in the ways in which criticism tends to stratify itself monologically based upon favorite and particular ideologies. A telling example of this critical tendency can found in Jonathan Dollimore's treatment of the play; not surprisingly, Dollimore's interest lies more with class—De Flores—than it does with gender—Beatrice-Joanna. Dollimore refers, in particular, to the famous scene in which Beatrice-Joanna begins to understand that she will not be able to buy off De Flores with a few costly baubles; De Flores knows that through their mutual crimes, there has been an abrupt and sudden shift in the differentials of class and rank:

Look but into your conscience, read me there;
'Tis a true book; you'll find me there your equal.
Push, fly not to your birth, but settle you
In what the act has made you; y'are no more now.
You must forget your parentage to me;
Y'are the deed's creature; by that name
You lost your first condition, and I challenge you,
As peace and innocency has turn'd you out
And made you one with me. (4.3.133-41)

De Flores' argument in this scene is compelling in its simplicity; he suggests that their mutual complicity in the murder of Piracquo has rendered her his "equal" (3.4.133), that she has become the "deed's creature" (3.4.137) rather than her father's daughter. Dollimore's commentary is trenchant:

[A]n act of transgression and its consequences actually disclose 'blood' and 'birth' to be myths in the service of historical and social forms of power, divested of which Beatrice becomes no more than what 'the act' has made her. (178)

Dollimore's point here is that murder has a specific leveling function, and that when Beatrice-Joanna finds herself a collaborator in crime with De Flores, it will not be long before she also finds herself in his bed, quite

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literally a comrade in arms. Despite attempts to distance herself from the murder, and notwithstanding her effort to ransom moral guilt with economic advantage, Beatrice-Joanna and De Flores both know that once the crime has been committed, all notions of social superiority are moot.

Dollimore recognizes the validity of De Flores’ argument—and he is right in claiming that De Flores strips naked the vested myths of innate class virtue—but Dollimore does not allow for the fact that the original sexual tension and antagonism between De Flores and Beatrice-Joanna is evident before the crime and that it has already done much to sabotage the myths of “blood” and “birth” maintained by the elite of the play. Moreover, Dollimore’s explanation does little to explain why later, after this scene of coercion, Beatrice-Joanna becomes the ready and willing sexual partner of De Flores; although Beatrice-Joanna may initially resent the sexual demands of her blackmailer, it is later quite evident that she finds De Flores to be a satisfying suitor and a man with whom she has sex willingly and freely.

For an analysis of how this pre-existing attraction manifests itself in slippage of discourse registers, see Braunmüller, “Arts” 67-68.
Middleton’s ideological purpose here is more subtle than Dollimore would allow. Middleton is suggesting that whereas violence is perhaps the only possible mode of retaliation available to the socially dispossessed male—De Flores accepts his murderous charge with alacrity and severs Piracquo’s finger as a brutal trophy of his service—sexual and social transgression is the only conceivable response for a woman such as Beatrice-Joanna who, though socially privileged in some ways, is culturally impotent, forced to be the transacted token of an elite male social economy. To be sure, at the beginning of the relationship Beatrice-Joanna and De Flores follow each other only to serve their turns on each other—he to exact class vengeance, she to escape a forced and loveless marriage—but by the end of the play, this relationship has evolved. More than merely demystifying “blood” and “birth,” Middleton shows us how an initial marriage of convenience between two individuals of limited power is transformed into a strategic alliance, a marriage of dispossessed class and oppressed gender. Separately, De Flores and Beatrice-Joanna have their independent goals, but Middleton also
indicates that this alliance constitutes more than a chance meeting of disparate desire with mutual opportunity.

Many critics have been quick to notice that class and gender figure large in The Changeling, but frequently each issue is viewed as seemingly divorced from the other; De Flores is either a class malcontent or an aspiring courtier, Beatrice-Joanna either a psychotic lamia or a victim of gender oppression. Few critics have noticed, however, that for Middleton at least, class and gender are mutually informing. Swapan Chakravorty, however, does recognizes this when he argues that the moral solidarity De Flores claims with his mistress is a powerful reminder of the shared subservience of servant and woman. Gender and class were always mixed in the complex motive for his obsession with Beatrice. (Society 150)

Even so, while recognizing that De Flores' motivation stems from a complex matrix of ideologies, Chakravorty fails to grant Beatrice-Joanna such self-awareness; for him, Beatrice seems scarce worthy of the more subtle terms of critical discourse: "Beatrice is shown as inexperienced, selfish, cruel, and sexually disturbed" (154). And,
although Chakravorty understands that Middleton’s agenda is predicated upon
a committed search into the linked premises and hidden mechanisms which condition the self-understanding of sexual desire, social interest, and political ambition, (15)
he does not provide a specific articulation of how this process operates in The Changeling. This, then, is my work.

In the final scene of The Changeling, the various sins of Beatrice-Joanna and De Flores are laid bare. The catalyst for these revelations is Alsemoro’s accusation that Beatrice-Joanna is a whore; he doubts her honesty because he has noticed that her former object of contempt, De Flores, is now treated with public courtesy:

How comes this tender reconcilement else
‘Twixt you and your despite, your rancorous loathing, De Flores? He that your eye was sore at sight of, He’s now become your arms’ supporter, your lips’ saint. (5.3.49-52)

The obvious reason for this shift in attitude is that Beatrice-Joanna and De Flores are partners in crime, but,
as the scene unfolds, it becomes strikingly evident that it is more than mere fear of exposure and a guilty sympathy that unite the two; this "tender reconcilement" poses a more serious threat to the privileges of this play's male elite.

Beatrice-Joanna and De Flores are locked together in a closet while the nobility flood the stage; Vermandero, Tomazo, Franciscus, and Antonio assemble for the resolution of the play. And, behind them on the stage, hidden, Beatrice-Joanna and De Flores complete their concluding scene together. Although the audience cannot know what is taking place behind the curtain--the significance of the sounds within is unclear--it is evident that a matter of importance is occurring; either Beatrice-Joanna and De Flores are enacting a final moment of sexual passion, or De Flores is murdering his lover, or, more likely, he is doing both. When these "twins of mischief" (5.3.143) come forward, however, Beatrice-Joanna carried in De Flores' arms, there has been a consummation of sorts.

The issue here is not whether sex or death busied the hidden space. Instead, most significant about the scene is that Beatrice-Joanna and De Flores have managed, albeit
briefly, to have their relationship openly acknowledged by those who hold sway over them, to act out publicly their previously hidden because socially forbidden mutual desire. The scene perversely echoes, quite intentionally, the early modern marital ritual in which a bride and groom were escorted to their chamber, the curtains drawn around the bed, and the marriage consummated in a semi-secret public domain.\textsuperscript{12} Despite themselves, and to their horror, the male elite of the play are obliged to serve as formal witnesses to this union and, ironically, to acknowledge its strange legitimacy, its binding power: this espousal of Beatrice-Joanna and De Flores is signaled linguistically--both their final two lines are rhyming couplets--and physically--De Flores carries Beatrice-Joanna over the threshold of death as they kill themselves.\textsuperscript{13} Beatrice-Joanna has now become De Flores' own "broken rib of mankind" (5.3.147) and he

\textsuperscript{12} Their "wedding" has already taken place in 3.4; in this scene, De Flores gives Beatrice-Joanna the ring he has taken from Piracquo and, as De Flores observes, what crime has joined, let no one separate: "Nor is it fit we two engag'd so jointly / Should part and live asunder" (3.4.89-90).

\textsuperscript{13} Traditional commentary here would suggest that De Flores gives Beatrice-Joanna her mortal wound while in the closet, but the text gives no clear authority for this reading. Indeed, the ambiguous "token" (5.3.176) that De Flores offers Beatrice-Joanna could well be understood as the knife that De Flores has just turned upon himself. Furthermore, there are no original stage directions for either suicide.
announces that he "lov'd this woman" (5.3.166). Unlike those who die haphazardly in the final scene of Women Beware Women, De Flores and Beatrice-Joanna are allowed a little space, a little tragic grandeur in their deaths.

It is my attempt neither to romanticize nor to sentimentalize the relationship between Beatrice-Joanna and De Flores; they are villains both, willing to murder the innocent Diaphanta as readily as they slay the hapless Piracquo. Nor would I necessarily argue that, in the relationship between De Flores and Beatrice-Joanna, Middleton is providing a model of an equitable political alliance. This is not by any means a marriage made in heaven and both the risks and the concomitant gains are disproportionate: De Flores had little to lose in this play, and he dies relishing the fact that he, and he alone, has usurped Alsemero’s place in the marital bed; Beatrice-Joanna loses everything, and she dies not in any form of exultation but, instead, by confessing her shame. Nonetheless, I do argue that Middleton shows that there is a natural sympathy between the two and that they face a common enemy. Middleton recognizes that there are mutual interests and goals shared by both aristocratic women and
dispossessed males and that they can only undermine and subvert the dominant male aristocratic ideology by concerted action: by killing Piracquo and sleeping with Beatrice-Joanna, De Flores vanquishes a culture from which he was excluded; by arranging the murder of her fiancé and sleeping with De Flores, Beatrice-Joanna escapes an arranged marriage, a form of culturally prescribed imprisonment.

Beatrice-Joanna and De Flores have, if nothing else, the mutual understanding that their enemy's enemy is their friend, that women and servants are allied in a common adversary. Furthermore, their alliance attacks a basic principle upon which the hegemony of the male ruling class depends, the principle that control is best maintained by the stratification of the powerless along discrete lines of gender and class. And it is exactly this essential distinction that Alsemero desperately attempts to reconstruct at the very end of the play:

Here's beauty chang'd
To ugly whoredom; here servant obedience
To a master sin, imperious murder. (5.3.198-200)
Alsemero's intention here is evidently recuperative. In describing the two deaths, he needs to divide and conquer, to deny the collaborative element of their sedition. Thus, Alsemero attempts to reinforce the cultural stereotype that the axiomatic quality of women is chaste beauty, the defining quality of the servant obedience and duty. Ultimately, to rob the deaths of political torque, Alsemero needs to repudiate any suggestion implicit in this final tableau that the social oppression of both women and servants is in any way parallel. Middleton, however, insists upon this very correspondence.

The Changeling represents Middleton's most mature and subtle reading of this socio-sexual paradigm, and I argue that the play serves as a guide by which the political implications of the incestuous intrigues of Women Beware Women are to be understood. In this play, Middleton presents his audience with a triptych of three women--Bianca, Isabella, and Livia. Each of these women finds herself, as Laura Bromley has noted, in positions of "social, sexual, and psychological insecurity" (312), and, in response to this, "they impulsively seek security in

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alliances" (320): Bianca allies herself with the Duke because he can provide her with the luxuries she so desperately desires; Isabella engages in an incestuous relationship with her uncle, Hippolito, because he can furnish her with the emotional support—and sexual satisfaction—that her husband, the Ward, cannot; Livia forges a strategic alliance with the cuckolded and deserted Leantio because, at thirty-nine and twice widowed, she recognizes that her value within her community is now solely economic, and she resents the prospect of becoming merely a rich source of revenue for an impoverished lord such as the proposed Vincentio. My argument is that Middleton’s purpose in presenting the audience with these three women is consciously and politically programmatic. All three women are victims of aristocratic male privilege, and all three make attempts, by their choice of sexual partner, to escape from this oppression. Ultimately, however, none succeeds. Not all failures are equal, however, and Middleton contends that, of the three choices the women make, Livia’s decision to ally herself with Leantio, a commoner, represents the most coherent,
consistent, and subversive threat to the dominant male ideology.

Interestingly, *Women Beware Women* opens with a utopian scene of class concord. Leantio, a merchant's factor, has returned to Florence with Bianca, his new wife, the daughter of a "rich and noble" (1.1.59) Venetian family; Leantio is both excited and not a little frightened by his audacious "theft" (1.1.37). Despite the reservations of his mother about the wisdom of taking a wife without the means of keeping her in "maintenance fitting her birth and virtues" (1.1.66), Leantio is naively hopeful that he will be able to create a modest nest of domestic bliss. Bianca is to prove, according to Leantio, a model of bourgeois maternal domesticity:

She intends
To take out other works in a new sampler,
And frame the fashion of an honest love,
Which knows no wants but, mocking poverty,
Brings forth more children, to make rich men wonder
At divine Providence, that feeds mouths of infants,
And sends them none to feed, but stuffs their rooms
With fruitful bags, their beds with barren wombs.

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If wealth is the rich man's content, Leantio argues, then, in compensation, God promises marital joy, tranquility, and fruitfulness as the poor man's boon.

Bianca seemingly shares her new husband's enthusiasm for this idyllic household. Not for one moment, Bianca declares, does she regret having left behind "friends, fortunes, and my country" (1.1.131), and she immediately finds her home under Leantio's "plain roof" (1.1.172); joying in a "quiet peace with this man's love," Bianca believes herself "as rich ... as virtue can be poor" (1.1.127-28). The mother greets her new daughter with an embrace, and husband and wife trade playful kisses. It is a glowing scene—a scene worthy of some lesser Victorian novelist—and only the jaundiced eye of criticism could find fault with it. And although there are some quiet alarms that all will not necessarily go well, Middleton is deliberately opening his play with a positive and

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14 I am grateful to Deborah Burks for her suggestion that, in this scene, there may be deliberate echoes of Shakespeare's Desdemona, a woman who is also faced with conflicting loyalties.

15 For Leantio as "the chief exponent of petit bourgeois values" see Dawson 306; for the "insensitivity and vulgarity" of Leantio's love, see Foster 513; for a "decidedly critical representation of the sensual Bianca," see Tricomi 122.
attractive picture of a relationship that defies class boundaries and collapses class distrust into sweet accord. It is through this paradigm, this tantalizing possibility of cross-class harmony, that *Women Beware Women* must be viewed.

After savoring but one night of conjugal bliss, Leantio must go to work the following morning, not to return again for a full week. His departing words are an ironic aubade laced with bitter class resentment; his "rich workmaster" (1.1.158), he complains, may rest,

Grow fat with ease, banquet, and toy and play,

When such as I enter the heat o' th'day. (1.3.32-34)

Unlike the "dull" (1.3.1) and hungover gallants who roll home to sleep after a night's debauch, Leantio must trudge, grudgingly, to the quay despite Bianca's supplications that he stay home; such, Leantio laments, are the toils of the working man. No sooner, however, does Leantio turn the corner than does Bianca spy the duke's procession from her casement; the idyll of class rapprochement shatters when
Bianca and this "goodly gentleman" of "about some fifty-five" years exchange glances (1.3.91-92).16

The duke notices Bianca, employs Guardiano to procure her, who, in turn, solicits Livia to help in the seduction. The Mother is invited to tea, and with her, Bianca. While the Mother and Livia play at chess, Bianca is primed first by the decadent pornographic art of the aristocracy—the "naked pictures" (2.2.404) that Guardiano reveals to her in the gallery—and then by the nobility's finest piece of work, the duke himself, who promises her "captivity pleasant" (2.2.334). The duke's mode of seduction is polished and accomplished, the iron fist in the velvet glove: he reminds Bianca that protestation is futile because, if necessary, he will be ruthless, and, like Browning's more infamous Duke, he too "can command" (2.2.363); he promises wealth, honor, and fortune, reminding Bianca that she has cast away her life "[u]pon necessities, means merely doubtful / To keep you in indifferent health and fashion" (2.2.376-77). This two-

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16 Foster argues that the duke's age is important, especially in light of Isabella and Hippolito's incestuous relationship ("Deed's" 510). Foster notes that, to a post-Freudian audience, the desire for this father-like duke is tinged with incestuous potential. This has resonance for my later argument of political betrayal signaled by incestuous desire.
pronged approach is successful and by the end of the scene Bianca and the Duke "walk together" (2.2.387).

Whether the Duke's actions constitute rape has been hotly debated. Certainly, the duke threatens violence and, early in his seduction, seems to restrain Bianca physically—"Pish, strive not, sweet! / This strength were excellent employed in love, now, / But here 'tis spent amiss" (2.2.328-30)—but at the end of the scene, Bianca is silent and we are not privy to her thoughts. It is probably safe to acknowledge that Bianca is motivated by various factors:

She has sexual desires that her husband left unfulfilled and that Guardiano whetted. Her social position has been depressed by marriage to Leantio; a liaison would elevate it. Finally, with the threat of rape hanging over her, rejection of the duke's offer might prove calamitous. (Levin 382)

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In strictly legal terms, they do; in early modern law, consent of the married woman did not make the act something other than rape—a crime against Leantio's property rights in his wife. For a detailed discussion of this matter with reference to Women Beware Women see Burks 763.

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Whatever the reasons for Bianca’s submission to the duke’s will, however, the political implications of her action are clear. Despite an initial moment of anger directed at Guardiano and Livia, her betrayers, Bianca not only adopts the duke as her lover, but also appropriates his register of discourse, dependent as it is upon concepts of class distinction for its authority. More than merely able therefore to condemn Guardiano as a procurer, she is, as the duke’s lover, also able to harangue him as her social inferior:

sin and I’m acquainted,

No couple greater; and I’m like that great one

Who, making politic use of a base villain,

‘He likes the treason well, but hates the traitor’;

So I have thee, slave. (2.2.441-45, emphasis added)

This new sense of social elevation and natural entitlement grows apace. Once returned to Leantio’s house, Bianca can find no comfort in its modest homeliness; she looks instead to have a “silver-and-gilt casting-bottle” (3.1.21) and a “green silk quilt” (3.1.27). The homespun wisdom of the mother—the “miller’s daughter brings forth as white boys / As she that bathes herself with milk and
bean-flour" (3.1.40-41)—is greeted with scorn as the now captious Bianca enviously remembers her preferential treatment in her father's house. She describes herself as a "gentlewoman" who would entertain "gallants" (3.1.130-31). She will no longer openly kiss her husband because such public displays of marital affection are "grown a fashion for poor gentlewomen" (1.3.162). Within minutes of Leantio's return from work, Bianca has left for the duke's banquet at court; she never returns.

Politically, Middleton both gives and takes away. He briefly offers, in the opening scenes, an idyll of class harmony, mediated through marriage, in which personal affinity reigns supreme, in which love can indeed conquer all. Bianca and Leantio, though perhaps they know it not themselves, attempt to dismantle a model of marriage in which class parity is the determining factor; in so doing, they are subverting a central tenet of an aristocratic ideology—that marriages must be formulated according to rank. Consequently, it is hardly surprising that the dominant culture responds so quickly and so decisively against this assault on its system of perpetuating privilege: the duke seduces Bianca because he both wishes
to show himself and his class as more powerful than Leantio and, furthermore, because he desires to display himself personally as a more potent male than the poor factor.

The brutality of the duke's threatened rape, however, is almost superfluous in the process by which this marriage is dissolved because seldom does the elite order fully need to employ violence to maintain its hegemony; Bianca and Leantio, young and callow, already harbor within themselves the cultural seeds of their separation. Bianca, at sixteen, cannot so easily escape her culturally engrained sense of entitlement, her belief that all good things are her due—even when only two hours old, she boasts to her beleaguered mother-in-law, she could "wrangle / For what [she] wanted" (3.1.57-58). And so, very quickly, Bianca adapts to the morally permissive ambience of the court and plays her role of duke's courtesan with consummate ease. Similarly, Leantio cannot divorce himself from a commodified view of both life in general and Bianca in particular. The cultural climate of his workplace, where the sweat of his brow drips cash directly into his master's pocket, permanently stains his relationship with Bianca and, ultimately, serves to disintegrate it. To Leantio,
Bianca remains ever but a “matchless jewel” (1.1.162) which he has pilfered from his lord and master. She represents for him some exotic and forbidden fruit, and his joy in possessing her is more than matched by his pleasure in denying her to his masters.

Bianca and Leantio are thus powerless against the subtle, complex, and self-internalized ideologies that are deployed against them. Nowhere does the hollowness of their threat reverberate more pitifully than when Leantio’s mother betrays herself, her son, and ultimately her class, for a few candied trinkets:

I’ll first obey the duke,
And taste of a good banquet; I’m of thy mind.
I’ll step but up and fetch two handkerchiefs
To pocket up some sweetmeats, and o’ertake thee.

(3.1.265-68)

The subversive potential of this marital alliance is neutralized by a few crumbs from the duke’s table.

Middleton intends more, however, than merely to wag a sage finger at the naïve presumption of youth. Instead, the Bianca/Leantio narrative should be understood as a prelude to the play proper. In these opening scenes, the
audience sees in microcosm the locus of contention in the play, and the social ramifications and political significance of female sexual choice are made clear; by choosing a sexual partner, Bianca chooses a social and political allegiance. More than this, these opening scenes show both the subtle suasions and brute force that can be brought to bear on those who dare to transgress rigid class boundaries. Finally, Bianca returns to the social ranks of her father's world, and Leantio is bought off by the paltry captainship of Rouen's citadel. Bianca and Leantio, however, do not disappear from the stage, nor is the subversive potential they represent dissipated; it takes root in the more dangerously political actions of Isabella and Livia where, once again, we will see that the representation of incestuous desire is key.

Middleton turns swiftly to his second dramatic focus, the incestuous desire that Isabella and Hippolito, her uncle, share for each other. Prior to the action of the play, this desire has remained unspoken on both sides, and Fabritio, Isabella's father, assumes that the time the two spend together stems from the warmth of familial affection rather than the heat of incestuous desire:
Those two are nev'\textquoteleft r asunder; they've been heard
In argument at midnight, moonshine nights
Are noondays with them; they walk out their sleeps--
Or rather at those hours appear like those
That walk in 'em. (1.2.63-67)

Everyone is confident that in the relationships between
family members "there's no lust, but love" (1.2.71) and so
the closeness between Hippolito and Isabella has occasioned
no especial notice. A problem arises, however, when
Isabella is promised in marriage to the doltish Ward, a
deliberately gross caricature of barbaric insensitivity and
crass stupidity; he does, however, have bushels of money
under which to hide his otherwise glaring inadequacies.

The choice of the Ward as a marriage partner for
Isabella is clearly an egregious example of the "custom"
(1.2.5) by which the elite men of this play "tender"
(1.2.6) to other men the women over whom they exert
patriarchal authority. Fabritio is keen to ally himself
through marriage with Guardiano, a man who is privileged to
serve the duke in some of his more surreptitious sexual
dealings. Supremely uninterested in whether Isabella even
likes her prospective spouse, Fabritio dictates that
Isabella will marry the Ward both because it is her duty and because it is time that she were “a-breeding” (1.2.79) lawful heirs to some eligible bachelor. Were this paternal imperiousness alone insufficient to humiliate Isabella, she is also forced to undergo a minute physical examination, the indignity of which can scarcely be exaggerated. The ward, like a “nice professor” (1.3.39), is anxious to assure himself of Isabella’s “courtly breeding” (3.3.5); he smells her breath, establishes the provenance of her hair, probes her nose, audits her teeth, and investigates under the hoops of her skirt before he is finally satisfied that she is worthy to bear him “some sixteen children, and all boys” (3.3.126).

Isabella thus knows first hand the “infernal torment” of being “bought and sold and turned and pried into” (3.3.35). She is fully aware of the injustice of such marital practices and completely cognizant of the economic subtext that underwrites the marriage transactions factored by men. She further recognizes that an arranged marriage is often a “misery to a woman” (1.2.162). Isabella also understands the more subtle ironies of this marital system; she knows that even when women are allowed to exercise some
choice in the election of a spouse, they frequently do
little more than "buy their thraldoms" (1.2.172); much as
prisoners "bribe the keeper" (1.2.174) for the occasional
kindness, women pay for the privilege of marital servitude.
Consequently, although Isabella acknowledges the potential
of marriage to be "the most blest estate" (1.2.280), she
admits that her community has transformed the institution
of marriage into a mode of specifically female
victimization "most strange to human reason" (1.2.184):
"By'r Lady, no misery surmounts a woman's! / Men buy their
slaves, but women buy their masters" (1.2.178-79).

Isabella sees the power structures of her world with
clarity and precision; she recognizes that when her father
commands she "must of force consent" (2.1.88). She
understands that her society pays only lip service to the
concept of female acquiescence, and that she must, having
been raised in "obedience . . . submit unto a father's
will" (2.1.86-87). And so, pragmatically, Isabella
realizes that, like many before her and many to follow, she
will have to find sexual satisfaction and emotional
reciprocity elsewhere. Consequently, although she seems at
first to be shocked by her uncle's declaration of
incestuous desire, it takes only Livia's transparent and unlikely fabrication about her mistaken parentage for Isabella to accept her uncle as her lover and to agree to marriage with the Ward as a veil over her incestuous sins.

In so doing, Isabella receives the tacit approval of both the duke (3.2.209-10) and Livia (1.2.35-37) who both pragmatically endorse extra-marital relationships.

This play focuses on difficult questions of personal responsibility, and it is possible that Middleton reveals the source of the moral deadness of society in Women Beware Women . . . to be the morally irresponsible pursuit of security, of false peace in the sphere of personal relations, which is ultimately destructive of honor and integrity.

(Bromham 315)

Morality, however, is not really the issue here; there is little room for such nice considerations in the world of

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this play. Instead, Isabella chooses to act upon her incestuous desire because she faces an insufferable marriage in which neither sexual nor emotional satisfaction is to be found. At the same time, however, in allying herself with Hippolito, Isabella undermines her own integrity by endorsing a practice which has traditionally served to contribute to the subjugation of women. Isabella may not fully realize the political implications of her own choice, but Middleton does; he suggests that this is a high price to pay for security.

It is not coincidental in this play that Hippolito proves to be the arch exponent of the particular male ideology that forces Isabella to marry against her will. While most of the other men and women of the play accept this principle of marital trading as, perhaps, an unfortunate cultural given, it is Hippolito who most dearly and actively defends it. Hippolito is, for example, dangerously tender of reputation and "quick / To apprehend a wrong" (4.1.130). It is also Hippolito who bears the

\[^{19}\] Isabella's future happiness in a relationship with Hippolito is itself not assured. Hippolito unquestionably knows throughout that the relationship is incestuous. Furthermore, he chooses the time when Isabella is most vulnerable to announce his illicit passion, despite only a few lines earlier declaring that his passion must remain ever silent.
"reputation of his sister's honour's [sic]/ As dear to him as life-blood to his heart" (4.1.133-34). And it is Hippolito who hopes to augment the "perpetual honour of our house" (4.2.13) by marrying his sister to Vincentio. So, when the duke informs him that Livia is now lover to Leantio, a mere factor, Hippolito sees their affair as a base and impudent attack upon his own person:

Thou took'st advantage of my name in honour
Upon my sister; I nev'r saw the stroke
Come, till I found my reputation bleeding.

(4.2.26-29)

Hippolito's sexual hypocrisy is but the most obvious of his sins. More important is that he sees his sister's body and reputation--at least until she is profitably married--as no more than a convenient moral prosthesis for his own wayward sexual activity; although he may employ his own body in whatever sexual exploits he wishes, his sister's body becomes both the repository of the family reputation, and, because of this, its most fungible asset. Thus, Isabella's choice to engage in an incestuous relationship with her uncle, the staunch defender of this trade in women, signals her willingness to sleep with the enemy and to support a
system that oppresses her. This, then, is the significance of Middleton's representation of female incestuous desire. More than being socially and culturally reprehensible, incestuous desire is to be seen as a synecdoche of a much larger transgression--complicity in a set of cultural practices which serve to tyrannize women.

By the end of the play, Isabella has made peace with her enemies and, perhaps more damningly, peace with herself. She has married the Ward, and is fully committed to her incestuous relationship with Hippolito; indeed, Livia suggests that Isabella is currently carrying his child (4.2.69). Completely acculturated and carefully contained, Isabella knows now that she "can dissemble too" (4.2.181); she has learned to play her part in the court and attains her majority when she conspires to murder Livia.

It is as just such a practiced woman in the ways of the court that Livia is first represented in the play. She is thirty-nine, "an experienced widow" (1.2.27) who is thoroughly acquainted with the more covert operations of court culture; Livia is an epicure in the tastes of the
court. More than simply witty, Livia prides herself on being a grown woman, world-wise and savvy:

A witty! Oh, the bud of commendation,
Fit for a girl of sixteen! I am blown, man!
I should be wise by this time—and, for instance,
I have buried my two husbands in good fashion,
And never mean more to marry. (1.2.47-51)

Livia's intent not to remarry is also significant. From the experience of her first two marriages, we imagine, Livia knows full well the misery of matrimony and is quite content to maintain herself, independently, as a widow. She is consequently honest in her sympathy for Isabella; she knows that the choice of the Ward as Isabella's husband is unfair, and she argues that before marrying, "[m]aids should both see and like" (1.2.32). She is aware, equally, that marriage serves only to reinforce the inequities of gender-based sexual codes. Thus, although both partners perhaps are less than sincere in their marital vows— in Women Beware Women both men and women cheat— Livia knows that whereas women need to hide their sexual indiscretions, men are culturally permitted, even encouraged, to taste "of many sundry dishes" (1.2.40) whereas women must feed only
on "obedience . . . subjection, duty" (1.2.42), patriarchal virtues which, ironically, women have thoroughly internalized. Finally, Livia also publicly questions the right by which fathers wield hegemonic sway over their daughters and she reminds Fabritio of the scope of his paternal jurisdiction in matters of the heart:

You may compel, out of the power of the father,
Things merely harsh to a maid's flesh and blood;
But when you come to love, there the soil alters;
Y'are in another country, where your laws
Are no more set by, than the cacklings of geese
In Rome's great Capitol. (1.2.135-40)

Livia is the most perceptive character in this play, the one woman who fully comprehends the intricate and complex arterial systems that circulate power through her society. Consequently, she knows that women serve as conduits, but almost never as repositories, of power. She understands that women are brokered in a system of male exchange--no doubt, when younger, she had herself been trafficked as a valuable commodity--and she articulates this, the defining truth of her society, with a pragmatic honesty.
Like Isabella, Livia is thus faced with a decision; she must either work within the system, or, alternatively, resist it. And, opposed by what appears to be an immutable and impenetrable system of gender privilege, Livia chooses to cooperate with the dominant ideology rather than fight against it. Furthermore, realizing that her body is no longer a negotiable currency, Livia markets herself to the male nobility by becoming a matchless procurer. She prides herself on her "craft t'undo a maidenhead" (2.1.178), her "subtilty" and "art" (5.2.130), her skilled ability to "minister all cordials" (2.1.48) to the sexual infirmities of her lords and masters. As a fifth columnist in the ranks of women, Livia is a woman whom other women should indeed beware. Not surprisingly, Middleton employs his greatest signifier of political betrayal--incest--to demonize her.

Livia's closeness to her brother is prominent throughout the early scenes of Women Beware Women, and although the play never makes the incestuous desire explicit, it is evident that Livia regards her brother with more than just familial tenderness. For example, when she greets Hippolito she demands a kiss, calling him "[m]y best
and dearest brother" (1.2.146); she would dwell on his lips because "[t]here is not another seat on earth / Where all good parts better express themselves" (1.2.147-48). Later, when Hippolito confesses his incestuous desire for Isabella, Livia assures him that his secret is safe because she keeps "the treasure of that life I love / As dearly as mine own" (2.1.27). Her sympathy and pity for his lovelorn condition is so strong, she claims, that "it even kills me, when I see you faint" (2.1.21).

Livia reserves her most emphatic declarations of incestuous desire, however, for soliloquy. After promising to deliver a willing and eager Isabella to her brother, Livia ponders for a moment the reasons why she is prepared to help him to such an unnatural act. First, Livia acknowledges that she stands to gain little personally from her ministrations, that in helping her brother, she is looking "but slenderly" (2.1.67) to her own interests. Livia also recognizes that in subrogating her own desires to those of her brother, in being "the fondest where I once affect" (2.1.64), she runs the risk of compromising her own reputation for "modesty" (2.1.69)—a facade most necessary
to her trade. Nonetheless, Livia decides to help Hippolito:

This 'tis to grow so liberal—y'have few sisters
That love their brother's ease 'bove their own honesties:

But if you question my affections,
That will be found my fault. (2.1.70-74)

The "fault" here is unspecified, but coupled as it is with "affections," it is likely that Livia is tacitly acknowledging to herself the real reason for her solicitude for her brother; she stops short of defining her fault as incest only because the name itself is not "handsome" (2.1.43). But Livia's fault, however, is much more than incestuous desire alone. At this point in the play, Livia is wholeheartedly committed to a system that values her villainy but despises the villain herself. More than this, the very man that Livia is now greasing into Isabella's arms will later, without a second thought, murder her lover and force her into Vincentio's bed. So, just as Isabella's collaboration with male privilege is telegraphed by her incestuous desire for Hippolito, so too is Livia's.
If nothing else, Livia is honest with herself. She acknowledges a mere scene later that she has indeed become the "damned bawd" (2.2.466) that Bianca accuses her of being. However, she argues in soliloquy that just as Bianca’s acute sense of shame will pass with time, so too is the bile of her own gender treachery rendered more digestible with habitude:

Are you so bitter? ’Tis but want of use;
Her tender modesty is sea-sick a little,
Being not accustomed to the breaking billow
Of woman’s wavering faith, blown with temptations.
’Tis but a qualm of honour, ‘twill away;
A little bitter for the time, but lasts not.

(3.1.471-76)

Bianca’s charge, nonetheless, shakes Livia and forces her to acknowledge for whom she works and to what level she has sunk. And it is to Middleton’s purpose that Livia undergoes a political epiphany because when next she appears, at the banquet scene, she is markedly different. Whereas in earlier scenes Livia was the point of convergence for the various plots of the play, here she becomes suddenly quiet and marginalized; save for one brief
soliloquy in which she admits her sudden love for Leantio, she is silent for over 200 lines. She watches the long, painful, unremitting humiliation of Leantio as the duke parades before the court his shiny new acquisition, Bianca. Finally, she and Leantio are left alone, and she listens with sympathy to his elegy for his lost love.

Leantio, despite his faults, has reason to grieve; he has been publicly degraded and bought off with a commission which, though "a place of credit" (3.2.345), does not even match the income from his factorship. Not surprisingly, he questions "the faith of woman" (3.2.245) in general. At this crucial moment when Leantio wonders whether all women are suspect, Livia interrupts him "in pity to that passion" (3.2.273):

> What would you say now to a creature found As pitiful to you, as it were Ev’n sent on purpose from the whole sex general To requite all that kindness you have shown to’ t? (3.2.296-300)

In constructing herself as the figure of her "whole sex general," Livia is here for the first time seeing herself not as an independent female, obliged to fend for herself
in an oppressive system, but, instead, as a representative of all the women that are victimized by the male nobility.

It would be a mistake to gloss this scene with too much sentiment. Livia is certainly motivated partly by an active libido, and Leantio, equally, to some extent views Livia as an unexpected though welcome source of revenue; as such, Livia and Leantio are "both pleased enough" (3.2.377) with each other, though not necessarily pleased completely. Unlike the fairytale relationship with which this play opened, Leantio and Livia establish an adult understanding, an arrangement between two older and wiser characters who comprehend quite fully the power of the class ideologies they are transgressing; both Leantio and Livia are aware of the contingent nature of their covenant. Even so, Charlotte Spivak is surely right in identifying a marriage of sorts in the conclusion of this scene:

The understanding reached here by these two lonely individuals constitutes a kind of mock marriage. Although in their future relationship Leantio will become in effect Livia's paid lover, the financial bond, although vulgar, is at least real. On her part, the passion too is both real
and intense, and her promises echo the solemnity of the authentic marriage vows.  

Just as in *The Changeling* a mock wedding between Beatrice-Joanna and De Flores served to formalize a political alliance, so too here does this marriage of Livia to Leantio signal, on her part, a political realignment. Most importantly, Livia's incestuous desire dissolves the moment that she establishes a confederacy with the factor and forms this new coalition between two previously discrete though mutually subjugated groups.

This alliance cannot hold, however. Leantio has one brief moment when he victoriously calls Hippolito a "[s]lave" (4.2.35) and then is murdered by him. Livia, likewise, has one opportunity to accuse her brother of being a "villain, as monstrous as a prodigy" (4.2.59-60) before the final masque annihilates the cast of the play and she joins her "sweet, beloved Leantio" (4.2.75) in the grave. Before she dies, however, Livia agrees to play her "old part still" (4.2.212) for one final scene in which she orchestrates her mass revenge.

"Also significant is Livia's condition that Leantio be faithful to her, especially in the light of her former complaints concerning the culturally perceived male prerogative to infidelity: "but to me / Only, sir, wear your heart of constant stuff" (3.2.374-75)."
As part of the class idyll that opened the play, it is only appropriate that Bianca should close it. Having taken a final draught from the poisoned cup she had prepared for the Cardinal, she offers her interpretation of the play's events:

Leantio, now I feel the breach of marriage
At my heart-breaking! Oh the deadly snares
That women set for women—without pity
Either to soul or to honour! Learn by me
To know your foes. In this belief I die:
Like our own sex, we have no enemy. (5.2.208-13)

Bianca is, of course, right to caution women to beware women in this play, but she dies young, and does not realize that this is not necessarily the same thing as knowing one's enemy. Middleton is suggesting that while women may indeed betray each other in a bitter fight to establish some individual degree of security, the true enemy, the real threat, lies in the privileged community of men to whom the women prostitute themselves and each other. Ultimate security, as it is briefly glimpsed in this play, even bedewed as it is by a romantic and unconvincing fantasy of class rapprochement, lies in a coalition with
that other great disenfranchised group, the common man of
the middling sort; in this alliance, Middleton implies, lie
the seeds of true sedition.

Historically, "rulers or ruling groups have pitted
members of a discriminated group against each other so they
may act as betrayers for the exploiter" (Haselkorn, "Sin"
128). Middleton comes to understand in his final two
tragedies that for the women of the nobility to sleep with
the representatives of an elite male ideology is to commit
an act of class treason insofar as it is supplying aid and
comfort to the enemy. Earlier in this play, and in The
Revenger's Tragedy before it, Middleton associates such
behavior with incest, but in the final masque the
connection between gender treachery and incest becomes
explicit.

Portraying a nymph who loves two shepherds equally,
Isabella requests that Juno, played by Livia, should
"design the man" (5.2.94) that she should marry:

Thou sacred goddess,
And queen of nuptials, daughter to great Saturn,
Sister and wife to Jove, imperial Juno!
Pity this passionate conflict in my breast,
This tedious war 'twixt two affections;
Crown me with victory, and my heart's at peace.

(5.2.82-87)

By detailing Juno's lineage, Middleton is deliberately schooling his audience in classical mythology. In particular, he reminds us that Juno is both the sister and wife of Jove, and that, in the ruling elite of Olympus—the highest of all courts—incest was the norm. It is therefore befitting that Livia, who had earlier harbored incestuous desires for her brother, should play this part. But Juno is also, among other things, the goddess who presides over marriage, and as such, it is proper that she should be allowed to pronounce judgment on her niece: Isabella has indeed been torn between "two affections" in this play and has had to decide between complicity with or resistance to the patriarchal ideology of the court. Ultimately, Isabella chooses to make love to the system, to sleep with her uncle, and, in so doing, to perpetuate the incestuous sexual practices of the gods. Livia's judgment, then, is appropriate; for valuing security--"wealth and

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"The more scholarly of the audience would perhaps also have remembered that Jove's previous two wives had been his cousin and his aunt."
golden days" (5.2.113)—above gender solidarity, she is killed in a shower of burning gold.22

This much about the masque is clear. But there is more to say about Livia's adoption of the role of Juno. In classical mythology, Hera--Juno's Greek precursor--was initially tricked into sleeping with Zeus, her brother, when he assumed the form of a cuckoo, and although the two were later married, implicit in the story is the suggestion that Juno was perhaps incestuously raped before consenting to the relationship. Once married to the philandering Zeus, it seems that Hera spent her immortal hours punishing not her husband for his infidelities but, instead, either the often innocent and frequently unwitting victims of his sexual crimes, or, alternatively, the offspring of such hapless unions. Hera, thus, appears to be a somewhat tragic figure, a woman who spent her energies displacing her anger at her husband onto those unfortunate mortals who were, like her, also Zeus' victims. Robert Bell sardonically describes Hera thus:

22 Danae, who was impregnated by Zeus in the form of a shower of gold, was also the subject of incestuous advances, when a pubescent girl, from Proteus, her uncle. This could provide grounds for a more sympathetic reading of Isabella.
In a way, it seems that ancient writers sought to project in Hera a stereotypical shrew, full of insecurities, petty revenges, and even self-elected martyrdom. She represented the battered wife, the coaddictive (sexual addiction in this case), the enabler. She found it perversely satisfying to punish the victims instead of the victimizer. As a supreme ruler she fell miserably short because she failed in the most important responsibility of all, the rule of herself. (235)

And such a woman, Middleton implies, is Livia throughout most of the play. Yet, at the end, in an attempt to revenge her "lover's death" (5.2.152) Livia descends, quite literally, from the heights of the gallery gods to the level of the stage, and Middleton, by this visual movement from high to low, signals her new political position. Like the class idyll represented by the opening scene of the play, so too is Livia's moment of political commitment short lived; she dies in a poisoned fume of incense. But, unlike Isabella, Livia has made it clear that she will not
return to Olympus nor will she any longer participate in its incestuous practices.
CHAPTER 4

"FALSE SHADOWS OF A FATHERS KINDNESSE":
MASSINGER'S THE BONDMAN AND THE UNNATURAL COMBAT

The Bondman and The Unnatural Combat appeared at a pivotal stage of Massinger's career. In the ten years prior to the production of these plays, Massinger had co-written—in various collaborations with Field, Dekker, Beaumont and Fletcher—about twenty other plays for a range of playhouses, but throughout this decade it would seem that Massinger had hoped that this dramatic employment would be passing, that his involvement in the London stage was only an unfortunate though necessary distraction from his avowed vocation as a poet. By the early 1620s, however, Massinger's hopes of aristocratic patronage seem finally to have perished, and by 1625 he appears to have entered into a more formal relationship with the King's

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* For accounts of Massinger's early career and his attempts to win elite patronage, see Edwards 172 and Turner, "Giving" 368.

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Men; from Fletcher's death in 1625 until his own in 1640, Massinger served as this company's chief playwright, producing about two plays a year.

The early years of the 1620's, then, were both busy and formative for Massinger. The author had probably begun to receive direct commissions for plays; *The Bondman* (1623) and *The Unnatural Combat* (1624-5) are among the first examples of Massinger's work as an independent playwright. Thus, for the first time after many years of informal apprenticeship, Massinger was no longer a literary journeyman obliged to shape his writing to the particular and various needs of his more senior collaborators.\(^2\) On the other hand, Massinger had not yet composed that body of mature work for which, later, he would earn the reputation of being a conservative playwright of Caroline sympathies.\(^3\)

*The Bondman* and *The Unnatural Combat* are written,

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\(^2\) On the constraints of collaborative authorship, see Hoy, who notes that Massinger was frequently allotted, and restricted to, "both the opening and closing scenes of a play" (52) with the result that "too often in his collaborative work, [Massinger] was called upon to provide effects while others produced the causes" (78). For a more recent dissenting opinion, see McMullan 143-145 and Masten "Beaumont".

\(^3\) For Massinger as a neo-feudalist, see Venables 167; as a nostalgic for a "vanished or vanishing past," Kiernan 162; as a defender of "birth and blood against the social and economic challenges of the middle class," Leonard 172; as an advocate of "the good society, based upon a number of idealized Penshursts dotted over a landscape," see Barton 229.
therefore, at a decisive moment in Massinger's career, the point at which Massinger is attempting to forge his public identity as the major playwright of the leading company. Like Beaumont, Fletcher, and Middleton before him, Massinger turns to the representation of incest.

Massinger both borrows from and adds to the ways in which his predecessors utilized incest as a mode through which class conflict could be articulated. As we have seen in previous chapters, Beaumont, Fletcher, and Middleton used the representation of incestuous desire as a means of demonizing the elite and championing the popular classes, of characterizing the sexual practices of the nobility as perverse while showing the sexualities of the middling sort, by comparison, as healthy, recuperative, and normative. Massinger's politics, even so, are decidedly more centrist than those of his antecedents and his ideological agenda considerably more accommodating to the sensibilities of the ruling classes. Massinger is neither a political radical in general nor a staunch advocate of the middling sort in particular: time and again in his work, we see representations of
the early Stuart trading class whose hunger for financial power and social prestige is, Massinger feels, endangering the social integrity of the upper class—the aristocracy and mere gentry which form the basis of traditional society.

(Gross 330)

Massinger is certainly cautious and deliberative, more willing to find fault with the corruption of certain members of the nobility than to question the validity of the institution itself. A member of the gentry himself—his father was the confidential agent of the Earl of Pembroke, and, later, a member of parliament—Massinger underwrites his work with a reactionary strain, his voice representative not of the citizenry but instead of an alienated elite, of an aristocracy coming to terms with a rapid and seemingly unstoppable shift in traditional social values:

There is a sharply critical note in many of [Massinger's] plays, as far as the monarchy and its favourites and hangers-on are concerned. But it is the critical view taken not by the middling sort or the lower orders, but rather by the
dissatisfied gentry and nobility: it represents as it were the aristocratic wing of the [opposition] movement. (Heinemann, *Puritanism* 213)

My argument supports the notion that Massinger is the self-conscious voice of exactly this group—the dissatisfied gentry and nobility. At the same time, however, I argue that Massinger, especially early in his career when immediate popular successes were required to establish his tenure with his company, is also a playwright acutely aware of the ideological valences of the time in which he writes and conscious, at the very least, of the political persuasion of much of his audience. Consequently, writing only a year or two after Middleton’s successes with *Women Beware Women* (1621) and *The Changeling* (1622), Massinger deliberately co-opts the use of incestuous representation as a mode of manifesting class antagonism.

Massinger is less broad in his criticism of the elite, however, and more specific about those whom he chooses to vilify with the accusation of incestuous desire. As Chakravorty has observed, Massinger’s primary target is the
court rather than the institution of the nobility itself, and Chakravorty proposes that in this important distinction Massinger prefigures the conflicted politics of the approaching civil war:

In this identification of the Court with a certain unchivalrous section of the nobility and its lackeys, there is an anticipation of the use of the word 'Court' as a more precise political term in the plays Massinger wrote during the rapidly polarizing political environment of the next decade. ("Court" 65)

Chakravorty distinguishes between those members of the nobility that he characterizes as "unchivalrous" and those of the elite classes that were more venerable scions of the realm. Of course, the taxonomies of both Heinemann and Chakravorty's arguments serve specific critical agendas--for Heinemann, the divisions within the nobility are based upon religious persuasion, whereas for Chakravorty the division would based primarily upon the distinction between a proto-whig urban elite (the court) and a proto-tory rural nobility--but nevertheless, incest is a tool that Massinger initially uses as a means to distinguish between those of
the nobility who, in his view, abuse their position and those of elite who use their power both responsibly and beneficently.

It is my argument, then, that in these middle years of his career, Massinger is responding to and influenced by the dramaturgical machinery employed by his mentors, Beaumont and Fletcher, and by his competitor, Middleton. Consequently, in *The Bondman*, incest is squarely the vice of an enervated, corrupt, and decadent aristocracy, a signal example of the sexual perversity of an elite; in this, Massinger’s politicization of incestuous representation is relatively conventional, given its immediate predecessors on the stage. More significant, however, is the manner in which Massinger, in a succeeding play, *The Unnatural Combat*, modulates the theme of incestuous desire to serve a more subtle political purpose. In this play, the incestuous character is not of the elite classes but, instead, a man of the middling sort. Here, the political weight of incestuous desire is co-opted, inverted, and used as a weapon against the middling sort itself and is shown as a symptom of class aspiration, a manifestation of a desire for upward social mobility. In
the process of writing these two discrete representations, Massinger’s political ideology develops. He suggests that incestuous desire may indeed be an infirmity in the more corrupt members of the aristocracy, but it is also a terrible failing in those of the middling sort who aspire to power and prestige. Quite simply, with an adroit political twist, Massinger embraces the argument of his predecessors, concurs with them that the susceptibility to incestuous desire of the corrupt elite is symptomatic of their decadence, but he then inverts this process of political propaganda and turns it against its originators by suggesting that the ambitious of the middling sort, by aspiring to rise socially, emulate and appropriate aristocratic sexual decadence. It is a political repositioning, both ingenious and effective.

*The Bondman* opens to a society in turmoil, an aristocracy in crisis. The patricians of Syracuse find themselves threatened by a predatory Carthage, and, unable to defend themselves as a result of many years of decadence and sloth, they are obliged to turn to Corinth for military aid; the Corinthian general Timoleon assumes absolute
control of the city and its defenses. Timoleon’s proposed reforms of the nobility’s “vicious courses” (1.3.95) are nothing if not sweeping. He condemns the elite for having neglected the “publike good” by proving “factious” (1.3.172-3) among themselves and demands that all private wealth be immediately appropriated by the public treasury for the continuance of the war effort. With little choice, the nobility of Syracuse reluctantly accept Timoleon’s terms, and, disdainful of the use of mercenaries, Timoleon leads the city’s noble youth to battle.

Among those departing for war is Leosthenes, a noble Syracusan enamored of Cleora, the daughter of the Syracusan pretor, Archidamus. Cleora, dutiful Syracusan maid that she is, loves Leosthenes in return, but remains concerned about his dangerously jealous nature—a worry amply warranted by Leosthenes’ almost psychotic fear that she will prove unfaithful during his absence. Nonetheless, to reassure him of her love, Cleora promises to remain blindfolded and mute throughout the campaign as testimony of her faith and honor. She retires to her room to spend her hours in silent mourning, prepared there to die should
he not return; thus will her "chastity triumph over [his] jealousy" (2.1.199).

The masters far distant, the slaves, under the leadership of Marullo, rebel and take control of the city; the political tables are turned, and the remaining nobility--the old, the weak, and the women--are forced into servitude while the former slaves make merry. Throughout this civil chaos, however, the virtue of Cleora is protected by Marullo who treats her with the utmost respect, allowing himself the pleasure only of confessing his honest love for her. Although true to her vow to Leosthenes, Marullo's words of honorable love work their magic, and Cleora begins to feel a strange affection for this unusually civilized slave.

Victorious against the Carthaginians, the nobles of Syracuse return home anticipating a triumphant reception. Instead, they are rudely greeted from the walls by the slaves who, as a condition for their admittance, demand wholesale political reform--a general amnesty, freedom to return to their native countries, an allocation of freehold land to those who remain, and, perhaps most radically, the right to marry into the families of the nobility. The
lords refuse the conditions and, though rebuffed on their initial assault, regain the city by the interesting psychological ploy of dropping their swords and brandishing their whips; cowed by this display of immanent authority, the slaves surrender.

Leosthenes rushes to Cleora’s house, sure that her chastity has been ravished by the rabble. There, he finds the still blindfolded and silent Cleora to be fully intact, her honor preserved. He becomes suspicious, however, when Cleora informs him that her virtue has been closely guarded by Marullo; this doubt is then reinforced when Cleora attempts to save Marullo from torture at the hands of the vengeful patricians. Leosthenes believes Cleora false, her concern for the slave prompted by lust and not gratitude.

In the final scene of the play, Marullo stands trial for leading the rebellion and, in his own defense, reveals his true identity; Marullo is, in fact, Pisander, a nobleman of Thebes. Before the action of the play, Pisander had courted Cleora but, denied permission to marry her by her father and finding life unbearable without her near, had planned his capture and subsequent enslavement in Cleora’s household. Furthermore, we also discover that
Cleora’s maidservant, Timandra, is none other than Pisander’s sister, Statilia, a woman to whom Leosthenes had previously been contracted in marriage but who had been forsaken after Leosthenes switched his affections to Cleora. The play closes, however, with social concord: Leosthenes repents his cruelty and agrees to marry Statilia; Cleora wins the approval of her father for her marriage to Pisander; the slaves—promising future obedience—and the masters—pledging future kindness—are reconciled.

Politically, *The Bondman* equivocates. On the one hand, the play appears quite revolutionary: it provides a graphic representation of a justifiable civil insurrection; it offers a model of cross-class marriage in the union of the noble Olimpia with the slave Poliphron; it proposes, at its most radical, a body politic in which there will be "nothing private" and where all property will be considered "common good" (3.3.120-21). On the other hand, the play counterbalances this radical position in its conclusion where it consciously and deliberately retreats from its most subversive propositions: the question of any further marriages across class lines is quietly dropped by both
slaves and masters; the slaves are neither granted land nor permitted to leave; the status quo is fully restored. The play ends, therefore, not with any structural refigurations of power, but rather with a deft recalibration of some of the necessary machinery of control; the whips are once more hidden, the blows are softened, the punches pulled—a more socially responsive totalitarianism is promoted. Ultimately, the play provides in panorama a view of society predicated upon some dreamy vision of an idealized neo-feudal cooperative hierarchy.

This does not mean, however, that the play is without political import, that it is merely a teasing exercise in ersatz rebellion. Notwithstanding its many strategic qualifications and disingenuous retreats, the play insists that nobility is a quality of mind rather than privilege of birth, that virtue is dependent upon behavior more than it is derived from blood. Pisander makes this particularly clear when inciting the slaves to rebel. He argues, first, that all men are created of the self-same metal, that “[e]quall nature fashion'd us / All in one molde,” and he explains, second, that in nature there is no precedent for such servitude: “The Beare serves not the Beare, / Nor the
Wolfe, the Wolfe" (2.3.32-33). Pisander then explains that the current inequitable system is the byproduct of mere chance, that originally it was but mere "ods of strength" (2.3.35) that allowed certain men to rule over other men. "[T]he cause of things" (2.3.40) made transparent, and with class revealed merely as a function of "outward glosse / And politie forme" (2.3.33-43), the slaves are free to mimic their masters, to seize their own destiny, to claim "Libertie, Libertie" (2.3.114).

Pisander is a consummate provocateur, and although he is not necessarily hypocritical, there is certainly a hollowness at the heart of his egalitarian claims. First, Pisander himself regards the slaves as lesser human beings, referring to them as "thick-skinn'd" (3.1.2) and by nature servile (3.1.10-13). Second, no matter his dexterity in disguise, Pisander's innate and seemingly congenital nobility is a beacon to all but the most socially myopic; Leosthenes and Timagoras, Cleora's brother, are the only characters to evince any surprise whatsoever when Pisander reveals his true identity. Third, and most significantly, Pisander's cynical exploitation of the slaves' rebellion and his appropriation of a discourse of revolutionary zeal
are deconstructed at the end of the play when the slaves cower, like dogs, at the mere sight of their masters' whips. If anything, by the end of the play the power differential between slave and master is more thoroughly institutionalized because the tools of oppression are no longer even required to instill obedience, their significance having become purely totemic. Pisander's coup, such as it is, is already thoroughly co-opted before it begins by the internalized subservience of those he pretends to liberate.

Even so, the play does offer a criticism of an assumed nobility predicated upon birth and The Bondman insists that true nobility is a function of behavior modulated by character. Nowhere is this distinction made more plainly than in Cleora's speech to the senate concerning the use of either slaves or mercenaries in the war against Carthage. Cleora maintains that to employ surrogates in the war would serve to dismantle the very ideological foundations of the Syracusan society and would blur the most necessary distinctions between those fit only for manual labor and those elect few destined to wield "privilege and prerogative":

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Let those of meaner qualitie contend,
Who can indure most labour; plough the earth,
And thinke they are rewarded, when their sweate
Brings home a fruitfull Harvest to their Lords;
Let them prove good Artificiers, and serve you
For use and ornament, but not presume
To touch at what is noble; if you thinke them
Unworthy to taste of those Cates you feed on,
Or weare such costly garments; will you grant them
The priviledge and prerogative of great mindes,
Which you were borne to? Honour, wonne in warre
And to be stiled preservers of their Country,
Are Titles fit for free and generous Spirits,
And not for Bond-men. (1.3.344-57)

To each class its particular labors, Cleora contends, and
just as it would be indecorous for a noble to push the
plough, so too is it unbefitting for a slave to bear the
sword. In Cleora’s socially determined universe, the
necessary divisions of labor are inviolable, the functions
of each estate prescribed by natural law.

Not all the nobility of Syracuse see this paradigm of
employment with quite the same clarity as does Cleora, and
Massinger deliberately creates a fissure in the seemingly seamless echelons of the elite. Cleon, for example, will be damned if he will both fight and pay (1.3.321), and Asotus, his doltish son, excuses himself because he is but a mere "grissell" unable to hold a sword steady in his "spider fingers" (1.3.388); they volunteer to remain within the city walls and "rule the Slaves at home" (1.3.390). Similarly, Olimpia and Corsica also lack the "brave masculine spirit" (1.3.306) of Cleora; these two women advocate the use of slaves in the war simply because, with the nobility absent, the opportunity for sexual escapade is diminished. Like Beaumont, Fletcher, and Middleton before him, it is against these characters that Massinger turns his process of sexualized demonization by association with incest.

In Massinger’s work, moral failings—and particularly the moral failings of women—are almost always characterized by sexual waywardness. In tune with the gender attitudes of his time, Massinger regards the primary quality of his good women to be an irreproachable sexual purity, and Massinger joins chorus with a host of other playwrights in
recognizing ultimate female subordination, in accepting the overriding importance of marriage for all women, and in basing the power of their integrity on the Western sine qua non, chastity in premarital virginity and marital fidelity. (Clark, "Power" 77)

But, as Ira Clark also observes, in Massinger this sexist ideology is amplified into a peculiar and unusual exaltation of female chastity and virtue (Professional 41); Cleora is not alone in the Massinger canon to go to extreme lengths to assure her suitor of her honesty. More than this, Massinger seems to insist that, in this aspect of social discourse, absolutes are demanded. Thus, when Leosthenes believes Cleora to have been unfaithful, she shifts in his mind from being the paragon of all women to being a whore defined by her "loose desires, insatiate as the grave" (5.3.93); there are no compromises here. The audience should not be surprised, therefore, that there are few lengths to which Corsica will not go to satisfy her sexual appetites, and it is here that incest invests the text.
The incestuous intrigue in *The Bondman* involves Corsica, wife to the fat and impotent Cleon, and Asotus, Cleon’s son by a prior marriage. At the opening of the play, we learn that Corsica is a woman very much guided by her sexual appetites. In order to assuage the jealous tendencies of her husband, for example, she claims, for example, that so devastated is she by his absence when on state affairs that she frequently solicits the attentions of a young doctor who “ministers phisicke to her”; the joke for the knowing audience, however, is that she receives such ministrations “on her backe” (1.2.10). Again, throughout the scene in which Timoleon assumes control of the Syracusan state, she provides, with her friend Olimpia, a commentary on the general’s sexual attractiveness. Thus, when instructed by Archidamus to treat the stranger with respect, aflame with patriotic zeal Corsica promises to kiss him “for the honor of [her] country” (1.2.48). Her public-spiritedness knows no bounds, and, should Timoleon

\[1^{\text{st}}\] Although this may not constitute an incestuous relationship by modern standards, throughout the early modern period “incest between stepparents and stepchildren was treated by the ecclesiastical courts as directly comparable to incest between the equivalent blood relatives” (McCabe 81).
lack a roof for his head or a pillow for his bed, she is prepared to make her house his home:

I have a Couch, and a banquetting house in my Orchard,

Where many a man of honor has not scorn'd

To spend an afternoone. (1.3.52-55)

Once the men of the city have left for war, Corsica finds herself hard pressed to find suitable partners; even her physician—a man who could "serve the turne at a pinch" (2.2.36)—has been called to service by the army, and so Corsica, in her hour of need, turns her wandering eye on Asotus, her step-son. Asotus, however, is somewhat slow on the uptake, and Corsica doubts whether she will be able to lure him into her bed. Necessity proving the mother of invention, Corsica offers to school Asotus in his feckless suit to Cleora by pretending to be the object of his desire in a mock-courting scene. She plays a lively coquette, and Asotus, once primed, intends to see his role through to the very end; when Corsica reminds him that she is only playing Cleora's part, Asotus peremptorily insists that "[n]ow that we have begun, let's end the act" (2.2.138). Consummation is averted, first, only by the unexpected return of the
husband/father, and then, more permanently, by the subsequent rebellion of the slaves which denies Corsica and Asotus the opportunity to realize their incestuous union.

This intrigue—if such an honorific this comic matter warrants—is secondary to the main concern of the play, but even so, the manner in which Massinger chooses to denigrate this branch of the decadent nobility is significant. Incest here is constructed quite overtly as a class-specific vice. Corsica admits, for example, that despite her insatiable sexual appetite, she is still quite particular about the quality of man with whom she will consort:

I am so queasie stomack’t,
And from my youth have been so usde to Dainties,
I cannot taste such grosse meate; some that are
hungrie
Draw on their shoemakers, and take a fall
From such as mend Mats in the Galleries;
Or when a Taylor settles a Petticoate on,
Take measure of his Bodkin; fie upon’t,
Tis base; for my part, I could rather lie with
A Gallants breaches, and conceave upon ‘em

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Clearly, the greatest crime for Corsica is not infidelity itself--indeed, adultery would seem quite the fashion among her peers--but instead the contamination of her own aristocratic blood through sexual commerce with those below her in rank. Compared to this, virtually any other form of sexual eclecticism seems preferable:

If this world last
A little longer with us, Ladyes must studie
Some new found Mistery, to coole one another,
Wee shall burne to Cinders else; I have heard there have been
Such Arts in a long vacation; would they were
Revealed to mee.”  (2.2.31-36)

For Massinger and his audience, apparently, it is but one step from lesbianism to incestuous desire.

Corsica knows that Asotus is not an ideal partner--she acknowledges that he is a “foole” (2.2.58) and a “dull thing” (2.2.65)--but, even so, he is at least of blue blood and sartorially bespoke. And so, with little other choice, she begins the seduction of the willing Asotus with, first, an appeal to the privileges of class. When Asotus
cautiously reminds Corsica that she is his mother, she
dismisses his concern because his argument

   [s]mells rancke of the Countrie,
   And shewes course breeding, your true Courtier
   knowes not
   His neece, or Sister from another woman,
   If she be apt and coming. (2.2.54-57)

Asotus, too, ironically appropriates this discourse of
privileged exemption from conventional morality when,
jokingly, he offers to prove the dutiful son by his
readiness to assume his father's obligations, sexual or
otherwise:

   Why, being his Heyre, I am bound,
   Since he can make no satisfaction to you,
   To see his debts payd. (2.2.139-41)

Asotus, by affirming his primogenitary (and genital)
rights, and Corsica, by insisting upon the prerogatives of
class above the constraints of morality, attempt to justify
the unjustifiable by appealing to quasi--or pseudo--moral
“class” standards which suggest that, for the elite, incest
is, at a push, quite acceptable.
As in so many other plays of this period that deal with incest, the desire is here almost immediately encompassed, contained, and disarmed. Now servant to Zanthia, her former maid, Corsica laments her fate, claiming that her woes are all a "punishment for [her] lust and pride" (3.3.16), that there is a "heaven above us, that lookes downe / With the eyes of justice" (3.3.63-64). Asotus, likewise, repents his intention of cuckolding his father and wishes that he had behaved more "[l]ike a man" (3.3.84). Cleon, believing himself not long for this world under the rule of the slaves, forgives both. Pisander provides the moral for this pathetic scene:

So these wretches
Swolne with the false opinion of their worth,
And proud of blessings left them, not acquir'd,
That did beleev they could with Gyant-armes
Fathome the earth, and were above their fates,
These borrow'd helps that did support them,
vanish'd:
Fall of themselves, and by unmanly suffring,
Betray their proper weaknesse, and make knowne
Their boasted greatness was lent, not their owne.

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The political implications of *The Bondman*, then, are evident. Whilst the play does not ultimately interrogate the assumptions upon which a hierarchical class structure is constructed, it does suggest that this social model needs to be adaptive and responsive, that there are responsibilities on both sides of the great divide. Thus, although the slaves reveal themselves as brutish and ignorant, their insurrection is shown to have been not without cause, their behavior the result of abuses of authority. In this sense, the play looks back, nostalgically, to those happy times

> [w]hen Lords were styl'd fathers of Families,  
> And not imperious masters; when they numbred  
> Their servants almost equall with their Sonnes,  
> Or one degree beneath them. (4.2.55-57)

But in another sense, Massinger's play is acutely conscious of its social and dramatic context, aware that the association of the elite with sexual perversity is current and popular. And, dutifully, Massinger, conformist is so much else, accommodates this cultural perception. To be sure, he is not as radical as his predecessors but, in
what is perhaps the final telling argument, it is worthy of note that although the slaves are shown as being prone to "leaping, shouting, drinking, dancing, and whoring" (3.1.41), they are not shown as inclined to other more serious sexual sins; when in control of the city, they do no rape. Their sexuality, though boisterous, is relatively healthy and certainly to be considered as normative. Incest remains the sole preserve of the aristocracy, the vice by which they are to be known.

In *The Bondman*, Massinger echoes his colleagues in the use of incest to excoriate the sexual excesses of certain factions of the nobility. For the most part, however, scholars tend not to take this incestuous representation very seriously; instead, critics concentrate mostly on the main plot, finding there the heart, soul, and mind of Massinger's politics. Critics cannot so easily avoid this issue, however, in *The Unnatural Combat* in which Malefort's incestuous desire for his daughter, Theocrine, looms large and occupies the stage entire. Again, Massinger explores

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1 Poliphron, for example, refuses to mistreat his former lady, establishing instead a relationship with her predicated upon a mutually recognized equality: "having made one another free, we are married" (3.3.45).
fully the political potential of incestuous representation, and, again, uses it as a mode of demonization. The important distinction, however, is that this time, the target has shifted.

The Unnatural Combat opens with Malefort Senior, the admiral of Marseilles, under arrest, charged with complicity in his renegade son's naval blockade of the city. Despite the admiral's protestations of innocence, he is about to be condemned when the governor, Beaufort Senior, receives startling news from the son, Malefort Junior: declaring his intention only “[t]o wreake a private wrong” (1.1.353), Malefort Junior challenges his father to single combat. Malefort is thus freed from any suggestion of treason, although the nature of this "private wrong" is not revealed.

Malefort Senior kills his son in the fight, and returns triumphant to Marseilles, his family no longer in disgrace. Beaufort Junior, the governor's son, then sues for the willing hand of Theocrine, Malefort's daughter—a young woman of great beauty and even greater virtue. Initially, Malefort seems eager to cement this most advantageous of matches, and, despite the reservations of
Beaufort Senior, the courtship is allowed to progress towards marriage. Inexplicably, however, Malefort becomes increasingly—and inappropriately—obsessed by Theocrine: he lavishes praise on her "milke-white paps" (3.2.26); he personally supervises her toilette; he forbids her private discourse with her suitor; he attempts to delay the marriage. Finally, he denies all access to his house.

Malefort reveals the cause of his untoward behavior to his friend and confidant, Montrevile; Malefort has "lookd upon [Theocrine] / More than a father should" and languishes to "[e]njoy her as a husband" (4.1.224-26). In fearful desperation, Malefort gives Montrevile complete custody of Theocrine, insisting that under no circumstances should he be allowed ever to see his daughter again. Malefort quickly discovers, however, that absence does not extinguish the incestuous flames and, determined to have Theocrine no matter the consequences, he demands her release.

Montrevile, however, has other plans. The audience learns that, in his youth, Malefort had murdered his own first wife so as to be free to marry Montrevile's mistress, a woman whose affections he had magically obtained by
"philtres and charmes" (5.2.119); it is the murder of his mother that Malefort Junior had sought to revenge. Moreover, Malefort had once promised Theocrine to Montrevile, but had reneged on this offer when faced with the potential match with the governor’s family. Montrevile decides to even the score. He rapes Theocrine who, having revealed her disgrace to her father, then dies. Haunted by the specters of his first wife and son, the still unrepentant Malefort curses his “cause of being” (5.2.306) and is killed by a flash of lightning. Beaufort Senior pronounces the moral: we should all

make use of

This great example, and learne from it, that

There cannot be a want of power above

To punish murther, and unlawfull love. (5.2.340-43)

Clearly, in this work the representation of incestuous desire is more thoroughly articulated and critics have consequently been less prone to marginalize the significance of incest, to regard it as so much cheap sensationalism. But this shift in critical focus is itself not unproblematic, and, by concentrating on the incestuous aspects of the play, there has been an equal tendency to
depoliticize the mechanics of the incestuous representation, to view the play less as a socio-political discourse and more as a complex and fully realized psychological case-study of incest and violence.°

It is my purpose, conversely, to insist upon and indeed to privilege a politicized reading of the play because, although psychological interpretations of *The Unnatural Combat* may do much to enrich a contemporary audience’s appreciation of the work, it is unlikely, as Heinemann contends, that a contemporaneous audience would have viewed Malefort’s behavior in such a “politically innocuous way” (*Drama* 253). Heinemann argues instead that early modern audiences were schooled to politicize their understandings of their drama, and, in support of this position, she argues suggestively that there seems little deliberate attempt by Massinger to make Malefort’s behavior comprehensible by constructing for the admiral “a coherent psychological ‘character’” (253). Heinemann believes,

° For an Oedipal reading of Malefort’s desire for Theocrine, see Boener 119-20; for an interpretation predicated upon homosocial competition between Malefort, Montrevile, and Malefort Junior, see McLean 151-53; for a commentary on Massinger’s interest in psychologically obsessive male-female dependencies, see Otten 146-55; for the reification of paternal sexual and social rights over daughters in the exogamic ritual of marriage, see Boose 326-27.
therefore, that Malefort's various crimes--his uxoricide, his filicide, his necromancy, his apostasy--operate cumulatively to render Malefort a character specifically designed to capitalize upon "political unease, insecurity, and fear of absolutism in the early 1620s" (249).

Heinemann maintains that Massinger added incest to Malefort's many vices in order to identify Malefort with the unpopular Buckingham, the King's close friend:

Malefort's incestuous passion acts as moral equivalent for the homosexual affection which was widely believed to bind both James and Charles to the favourite. (253)

I wish both to draw upon this argument, and also to redirect its focus. On the one hand, I would agree with Heinemann that a contemporary audience would have been highly receptive to politicized readings of the stage and that they would have been more likely to view Malefort's incestuous desire as a political metaphor rather than to understand it as the sublimation of some other psychological turmoil. On the other hand, I am less convinced that most members of the audience would necessarily associate Malefort's incestuous passion with
the supposed homosexual practices of the monarch and his favorite; both homosexual and incestuous desire may well have been considered unnatural, but that does not mean that they were viewed as interchangeable. Instead, given the popularity of the incest plays that predate *The Unnatural Combat*, the audience would have recognized incestuous desire as an indicator of high rank, and, more specifically, a signifier of aristocratic decadence. The problem here, however, is that, unlike those characters that precede this admiral in experiencing incestuous desire, Malefort is clearly a member of the emergent and numerous middling sort; he is not aristocratic. The political tables have been turned.

To understand Massinger’s purpose in this deft act of cooption, one needs first to unpack the overt political theme of the tangential subplot of *The Unnatural Combat*--a

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The professional career soldiers of this period were drawn from many social levels, ranging from the middling sort to the minor aristocracy (Donagan 67-72); Malefort’s precise social rank, however, is not established with any certainty though Massinger does indicate, by the play on the two names (Malefort/Beaufort), that the two characters are to be understood as paradigmatically opposed. This social ambiguity and indeterminacy concerning the social status of military professionals may have served Massinger’s political purpose. Hattaway argues, for example, that during this period there is a cultural shift from a perception of fighting as a “chivalric sport” to fighting as a “professional occupation,” and he contends that, during the Tudor and Stuart regimes, status divisions were hotly contested in the military (84-85). For a further discussion of popular discontent with aristocratic mismanagement of military affairs, see Highley 155.
task again too frequently neglected by critics of the play. Of Massinger's own creation and entirely absent from his sources, the subplot revolves around the various fortunes of Belgarde, a captain of the army. Lacking both employment and income during times of peace, and without the capital to establish himself in either a "taverne or a vaulting house" (1.1.101), he is obliged to repair each day to the governor's mansion where he is given food. Beaufort Senior's bounty, however, is not without limit, and worried that the rough Belgarde may offend some noble guests, the governor instructs a servant to deny Belgarde admittance under the pretext that such a special banquet demands new clothes; the governor knows full well that Belgarde has only one shirt to his name. Belgarde sees through the ruse, however, and refusing to be outwitted, makes a grand entrance into the banquet, carrying a case of carbines and clad in his battle-hardened armor.

Confident of his right to sit with "princes" and "confederate kings" (3.3.45), Belgarde offers to the finely dressed lords a timely lecture on the economic substructure that makes their life of luxury possible:

Tis we that bring you in the meanes of feasts,
Banquets, and revels, which when you possesse,
With barbarous ingratitude you deny us
To be made sharers in the harvest, which
Our sweat and industrie reap'd, and sow'd for you.
The silks you weare, we with our bloud spin for you;
This massie plate, that with the ponderous waight
Does make your cupboords crack, we

Fetch from the other world. (3.3.85-96)

Like Marullo in The Bondman, Belgarde makes his point
tellingly, reminding the lords that privilege has its
concomitant obligations and responsibilities. Beaufort
Senior acknowledges that he has been remiss, and, thanking
Belgarde for his "wholsome sharpnesse" rather than
"obsequious tameness" (3.3.107-8), assures the captain that
he will receive more than the necessary provision; the
other lords join suit and contribute money to Belgarde's
personal relief fund. In return, Belgarde reaffirms the
covenant between master and servant, ruler and soldier, by
promising them his life when they please to command it.

Whether the lords are more swayed by Belgarde's
eloquence or moved by his pistols is unclear, but even so,
in a fashion so typical of Massinger, we see here an acknowledgement of the reciprocal nature of class relations; both lords and servants assume certain discrete responsibilities within the community and, because of this, from every class its particular duties and to every class its particular dues. But just as in *The Bondman*, where Massinger deliberately neutralizes his more radical claims, so too does he here undermine and qualify the seeming egalitarianism of his politics.

The scene when next we see Belgarde is curiously framed insofar as both main plot and comic subplot are represented as interconnected. It opens to a discussion between Beaufort Junior and various lords; their subject is the increasingly bizarre behavior of Malefort who is now reported to have closed his doors to all visitors. This scene of necessary exposition is then interrupted when Montaigne suggests that they should observe the “malcontent Belgarde, newly rigde up” (4.2.21); the soldier, it seems, has “turnd gallant” (4.2.35). Montaigne promises that the comedy should prove an “object / Worthy of . . . noting (4.2.22-23); it is certainly worthy of ours.
Hounded on all sides by creditors and parasites, Belgarde’s lot is an unhappy one. Having acquired new and expensive clothes, and having paid down a few of his many debts, Belgarde no longer has a penny to his name. And yet, because he is dressed as a courtier, a “glorious” (4.2.26) man of substantial means, he is mobbed by his many and various creditors. Beset on all sides, Belgarde, the soldier who never once flinches in the extremity of battle, is here sorely pressed, and the experience results, for Belgarde, in a political epiphany. He realizes that “a rich suite” is not always preferable to a “buffe jerkin” (4.2.31-32) and that poverty has its privileges too, its certain “immunities” (4.2.76) from the demands of life. He discerns that to dress finely is not necessarily to live well, that happiness is not to be found in sartorial splendor:

Let Courtiers trip like Courtiers, and your Lords
Of dirt and dung hills mete their woods and acres,
In velvets, sattins, tissues, but keepe you
Constant to cloth and shamois. (4.2.78-81)

When finally rescued by Beaufort Senior from the grasping hands of a bawd, her women, and the children these women
claim to be his, Belgarde blames the governor directly for his predicament:

Yes, your pied liverie, and your gold
Draw these vexations on mee, pray you strip me
And let me be as I was: I will not lose
The pleasures and the fredome which I had
In my certain povertie; for all the wealth
Fair France is proud of! (4.2.140-44)

The scene then concludes by returning to the discussion of Malefort. Beaufort Senior now knows the cause of the admiral's strange behavior; he has learned the incestuous secret at the heart of the play and vows that, because Malefort has both contemned the power of his "great master" and the "sacred lawes of God and man prophan'd" (4.2.152-53), punishment will be swift and severe.

The comedy here depends, of course, upon incongruity. The audience laughs at the inappropriateness of the bluff soldier Belgarde fashioning himself as a noble court gallant and mocks his pretentiousness in wearing perfumed ostrich feathers. The sustaining joke of the scene relies, therefore, upon the close juxtaposition of discrete and jarring signifiers from incompatible social paradigms.
Such disjunctions, of course, are not politically inert but are instead predicated quite rigidly upon certain distinct and normative notions of class appropriate behavior and dress. Belgarde, thus, is a source of merriment because, despite all the outward trappings of nobility, his true rank will out and his congenital coarseness will reveal itself. But there is still more at play here. The comedy also serves to remind the audience that no matter how much one may aspire to upward social mobility, class boundaries are fundamentally insurmountable, one’s position within society non-negotiable. Therefore, when Belgarde admits that he was happier as a mere soldier, he is doing more than merely expressing frustration with his current situation; he is, in addition, subscribing to a creed of class determinism which is rigorously enforced and which is endowed with the incontestable authority of religion itself—Montaigne is not the only observer to note that Belgarde’s lament has all the formal qualities of a “penitent homily” (4.2.82). By the end of this scene Belgarde is truly remorseful and seeks absolution for his manifold class transgressions.
In many respects, this representation of the political economy is not much different from that found in *The Bondman*; the play admits that there are some abuses of power and that the elite are occasionally neglectful, and there are dutiful nods in the direction of sensible reform. But, at heart, the ideology of both plays is reactionary in the extreme, its intent being to show that a hierarchical structuring of society is both natural, normative, and right, that an unequal disbursement of privilege and power is simply the way of things. In *The Unnatural Combat*, however, Massinger reveals himself as having learned more about the subtle operations of hegemonic power. Thus, whereas in *The Bondman* the nerveless slaves are shown as being cowed by the rod, in *The Unnatural Combat* the underlings have learned to kiss it. Indeed, so thoroughly and completely has this code of class division been internalized by the lower orders that the servants themselves have become its most ardent advocates. For example, in response to the grumblings of his fellow servants about the hardships of their work, a page reminds them that theirs is, in fact, a better lot than their masters':
You complaine
You serve one Lord, but your Lord serves a thousand
Besides his passions (that are his worst masters).
You must humor him, and he is bound to sooth
Every grimme Sir above him, if he frowne.

(3.2.117-21)

Those who whine, the page maintains, are "fooles, / And ignorant of [their] happinesse" (3.2.105-110) because they do not understand the burdens, troubles, and sorrows of those ranked above them. In a final irony, Massinger shows that the lords themselves do not even have to promulgate this happy fiction because, unlike the stern masters of Syracuse who denied their slaves schooling, they understand the value of a universal system of education grounded upon an ideologically rigorous core curriculum:

Ere I was
Sworne to the pantofle, I have heard my tutor
Prove it by logicke, that a servants life
Was better then his masters. (3.2.107-110)

So much for those who embrace willingly their own oppression. Others, however, are less docile, less quick to learn such ready and easy compliance. Belgarde, for
example, briefly aspires to greater things, and quickly he learns the unhappy fate of those who attempt to cross class boundaries; he gladly returns to his proper station in life and, at the end of the play, bravely leads the assault on Montrevile's stronghold, satisfied in the knowledge that such is his role in the order of things: both the lords and Belgarde together are "content / That [he] shall have precedence" (5.2.318-19) upon the field of battle, but, naturally, nowhere else. Once victorious over Montrevile, he is rewarded for his renewed loyalty to the system by the captainship of a fort, where, secure from his creditors, he has time to ponder upon his political temerity and, with deference, "remember / The thing I wot of" (3.2.330-31).

Belgarde's crime of social aspiration is but venial in this play, and his punishment is suitably moderate; he suffers an afternoon's discomfort and then all is well. But Malefort's transgressions are of an entirely different order, and, as we see at the end of the play, his punishment is commensurately much more severe; already angered by the catalog of Malefort's various crimes--of which incestuous desire is but one among many--a vengeful God is finally compelled to make manifest his grand
displeasure in a quintessentially dramatic manner. On one level--the level at which Beaufort Senior would have us read the play--this punishment is appropriate for a man who violates one of the most fundamental of sexual taboos. But to see no further social significance in this punishment is to be willfully myopic and is to embrace, as unthinkingly as the page, a moral economy which is suspiciously biased in its political and ideological significance. In Malefort's death we should see not only divine wrath but also a representation of incestuous desire as a potent signifier of transgressions less sexual than they are political.

Malefort occupies a singular position in the society of Marseilles. On the one hand, he is, like Belgarde, little more than a hired sword, a man useful for his military prowess. On the other hand, suggestions early in the play indicate that Malefort has become a very prominent and popular man in Marseilles and, as such, constitutes a potential threat to the unquestioned authority of the nobility. Given this possibility, it is not surprising that when Malefort Junior turns renegade, the ruling council is quick both to arraign his father on charges of
complicity and to have him executed without trial; in the minds of the council, even if Malefort is not yet a traitor, he may well prove to be one in the future. Thus, although Beaufort Senior assures Malefort that he is charged not "from any private malice, / Or envie to your person" (1.1.250-51), it is evident that hidden agendas are already at play and that the son’s treason has at least provided a convenient excuse for the removal of a potential political threat. Malefort is already guilty.

Through the efforts of Theocrine and Beaufort Junior, Malefort is allowed a hearing, and, were this not merely a show-trial, Malefort would probably escape conviction through lack of evidence: Malefort argues that he is not omniscient and did not know the guilty mind of his son; he rightly contends that it was not his neglect of duty which allowed the pirates to gain the port but rather the night and fog which obscured their entry; he questions the legal basis upon which a father can be found responsible for the actions of an adult child (1.1.325-35). By contrast, the judges can propose only the flimsy argument that, given his former skill in defense of the city, failure in this case
indicates either complicity or neglect of duty. Malefort should walk free.

But Malefort knows that this trial is not fair and realizes that his son’s rebellion is being used as a pretense by which to condemn him, so he chooses not to foreground his defense with evidence of his innocence. Instead, like Belgarde at the banquet, Malefort begins by reminding the council of his many former services and by declaring that to him the lords owe “their goods, / Their lives, their liberties” (1.1.297-98). Unlike Belgarde, however, who acknowledges a mutually beneficial and reciprocal relationship between master and servant, Malefort directly accuses his masters of being “unthankfull men” (1.1.286), noting that when he returned from war “loaden with spoile” (1.1.243) destined for their villas, he was their favorite. Now, however—and with nothing to lose—Malefort berates those who have cynically “forgotten” (1.1.244) all his former service. Much more so than Belgarde, the embittered Malefort demystifies and desanctifies the nature of the master/servant relationship, pointing out its manifold hypocrisies and its basis in an unequal economy of exchange; the lords, without reciprocal
compensation, derive sole and exclusive benefit from his labors. This blunt honesty when faced with death is proof, as Montrevile realizes, of Malefort's "greatness of his spirit" (1.1.237); it is also the surest way to the scaffold and Malefort is saved from certain death only by the unexpected challenge from his son.

When the triumphant Malefort returns to the city, things have changed, and having once exposed the naked economic truth behind the relationship between master and servant, Malefort's relationship with the council cannot be so easily reclothed in the garb of service. Thus, with the "savour / of arrogance" (2.1.224-25) on his lips, and fully aware he is the sole "patron of [the lords'] libertie" (2.1.268), Malefort finds himself in a position of unprecedented power. The council, now painfully appreciative of Malefort's ability to take what previously he might have begged, preemptively promises rewards, his choice of all that is "rich, or pretious in Marsellis" (3.3.2). But Malefort is not to be bought off with mere trinkets; no longer satisfied with the crumbs from the table, he wants a piece of the pie.
Malefort, conventionally enough, pays lip service to loyalty and casts himself as a mere functionary of the state; he has done nothing but what duty demanded, and to expect compensation would show mercenary and base, virtuous service being its own reward (2.2.16-25). He does have, however, one small request:

If it may not appeare too much presumption,
To seeke to match my lownesse with your height,
I should desire (and if I may obtaine it,
I write Nil ultra to my largest hopes)

She [Theocrine] may in your opinion be thought worthy
To be receiv'd into your family,
And married to your sonne: their yeares are equall
And their desires I thinke too, she is not
Ignoble, nor my state contemptible,
And if you thinke me worthy your alliance,
'Tis all I doe aspire to. (2.3.36-46)

The words are humble; the intention is not. Malefort realizes that his position in Marseilles will never be secure until he has crossed the great class divide and linked himself by marriage with the aristocracy; only then, when equal to his masters, will he enjoy the spoils of his
work and prove immune to malicious prosecution from above. More than this, interlaced with his seeming humility there lurks a quiet threat, a tacit declaration that the occasional token of aristocratic gratitude is no longer enough, a suggestion that if denied this request for marital affiliation he is quite prepared to give greater scope to his "largest hopes." Of this Beaufort Senior is fully aware, and, with the pirate ships still a danger in the port, it would be imprudent for the governor to pour scorn on Malefort’s presumptuousness. Wisely, Beaufort Senior buys time:

Though I dislike not what is motion’d, yet
In what so neere concerns me, it is fit
I should proceed with judgement. (2.3.54-56)

Both personally and politically, Beaufort Senior is in a difficult position. On the one hand, by permitting this marriage to Theocrine he would please his infatuated son, placate his angry admiral, and, we presume, content the volatile citizenry of Marseilles who are eager to see Malefort rewarded. On the other hand, Beaufort has some serious personal reservations about Malefort himself,
recognizing that though his virtues are many, so too are
his vices:

Valiant the world speaks him,

But with that bloody; liberal in his gifts too,
But to maintain his prodigall expence,
A fierce extortioner; an impotent lover
Of women for a flash, but his fires quench'd
Hating as deadly. (3.2.32-38)

Beaufort is consequently not "ambitious of this match"
(3.2.40) but, aware of the explosiveness of the situation,
he chooses the lesser of two evils and allows the match to
proceed--for the time being. However, just as Belgarde's
rags are not the real reason that he is denied access to
the banquet, so too here Malefort's excesses of character
are not the underlying cause for Beaufort's objection to
the marriage. Instead, Beaufort fully comprehends that
Malefort's demand of familial affiliation threatens to
compromise and ultimately dismantle the very social
hierarchy of Marseilles itself, to blur the divide between
those who rule and those who serve. And although it is one
thing to humor Belgarde in his request that the spoils be
more evenly divided, it is quite another to allow the
middling sort, no matter their individual importance, to intermarry with the nobility. This is an aristocracy in crisis.

Luckily enough for Beaufort, Massinger is at hand to save the day by inscribing the political ideology of his subplot onto the play proper; one’s class is determined, inescapable, and will always reaffirm itself no matter how desperately the “foolish crow” Malefort attempts to recast his “blacke brood” as “swans” (3.2.85-86). And so, just as Belgarde proves himself ridiculous by frippery and trim, so too does Malefort show himself as foolish in his attempts to recast his family as aristocratic. He sells all of his property to provide Theocrine with a weighty dower, and purchases for her “a rope of pearl / (The best of France)” (3.2.25-26). Now disdainful of those who serve, he curses the tailor and assaults the shoemaker for wanting art to set off his daughter’s beauty; we learned in The Bondman that the most certain indicator of highest rank is the abuse of one’s servants. It is from this but a short step to further self-aggrandizement, and Malefort comes to believe that “[t]he Dauphine is not worthy” of Theocrine (3.2.151).
All of this, however, serves but to show Malefort as ridiculous; it is again the comedy of incongruity as Malefort, the most fierce of soldiers, becomes the most affected of sartorial fops. But whereas Belgarde was merely foolish in aspiring to higher things, Malefort’s presumption is more fundamentally dangerous and, as such, is to be demonized rather than ridiculed. It is at precisely this point in the play that Malefort’s obsessive relationship with his daughter becomes grounded in incestuous desire; whereas in *The Bondman* incestuous desire was depicted as the infirmity of the elite, here it is shown as inextricably imbricated with class aspiration, the sexual vice and the political sin presented as necessary corollaries to each other.

Nowhere is this association of social presumption with incest more evident than in the banquet scene—the scene which also includes Belgarde’s dramatic entrance in armor. In an aside before the banquet begins, Malefort first acknowledges to himself that in his care for his daughter there is more than paternal solicitude: “I nourish strange thoughts, which I would / Most willingly destroy” (3.3.3–4); Malefort is at least being honest with himself here, if
not with others. But in the following speech—Malefort inappropriately proposes a toast to the unsurpassable beauty of his daughter—we see how closely Massinger links his growing incestuous desire for his daughter with notions of social preeminence:

I will not choose a forraigne Queenes [name],
Nor yet our owne, for that would relish of Tame flattery; nor doe their height of title,
Or absolute power confirme their worth and goodnesse,

These being heavens gifts and frequently confer’d On such as are beneath em; nor will I Name the kings Mistresse howsoever shee In his esteeme carry it; but if I,
As wine gives liberty, may use my freedome, Not swayd this way, or that with confidence, (And I will make it good on any equall) If it must be to her, whose outward forme Is better’d by the beauty of her minde, She lives not that with justice can pretend An interest to this sacred health, But my faire daughter. He that only doubts it,
I doe pronounce a villain. (3.3.9-25)

More than merely praising his daughter, in this speech Malefort also proclaims his social equality, if not his social superiority, to the assembled lords. He uses his "freedome" here to make transparent the fact that he now considers himself a full member of the elite and, growing into his role, declares that anyone who disagrees is a "villain"--a tellingly class specific term. He insists that one's worth is not a factor of birth, and he threatens violence to any in the room not willing to acknowledge his daughter as worthy the toast as any queen. It is then but one small step from this to the realization that he alone is a condign partner for his daughter. Incestuous desire and social aspiration thus become one.

Malefort goes too far and forces Beaufort Senior to show his hand; when Malefort interrupts the private conference of Theocrine and Beaufort Junior, the governor reveals the contempt he holds for Malefort's social presumption: "I'll not court / A grant from you, nor doe I wrong your Daughter, / Though I say my sonne deserves her" (3.4.50-52). Malefort claims the "libertie of a subject," and, with full proprietary privilege, drags Theocrine home:
"in what's my owne I'll use my will, and yeeld no further reason" (3.2.79-80). Beaufort vows that he will use his "authoritie" (3.4.91) to avenge the wrong that Malefort has done to his family. By presuming too far and by demanding too much, Malefort calls down upon himself the full wrath of the elite.

In *The Unnatural Combat*, however, there is no need for authority to reassert itself; both Belgarde and Malefort are self-schooling and although, like Belgarde, Malefort has enough "reason to discerne the better way" of adherence to the established class codes, he decides to "pursue the worse" (4.1.151-52). He seeks the aid of Montrevile, the man that he has himself abused in pursuit of the social status conferred by a "higher match" (5.1.61), and is betrayed in turn. Still unrepentant, however, Malefort commits his final act of social heresy. He remembers his tutoring in mythology:

    Olde Saturne in the golden age embraced
    His Sister Ops and in the same degree
    The thunderer Juno, Neptune Thetis, and
    By their example after the first deluge

    Deucalion Pirrahæ
I will not curbe my freedome
But constantly go on, with this assurance,
I but walke in a path which greater men
Have trod before me. (5.2.23-42)

Unlike the page who had learned his lessons well, Malefort
forgets that these were not men and that incestuous passion
is reserved for the gods and not for admirals.

In a final soliloquy, Malefort recognizes that of all
his crimes, perhaps incest is not the greatest:

And there's something here that tells me
I stand accountable for greater sinnes,
I never checkd at. (5.2.16-18)

On the level of morality, this speech refers to Malefort’s
murder of his first wife and the killing of his son. On
the political level, however, the greater sin is Malefort’s
social ambition, his desire to elevate himself from the
middling sort into the ranks of the elite. In Massinger’s
developing political economy this unnatural social craving
manifests itself as incestuous desire, in a particular
susceptibility to that very vice with which previously the
elite had been demonized.

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In *The Bondman* and *The Unnatural Combat*, therefore, we see in microcosm the political evolution of a propagandistic mechanism. In the earlier play, Massinger learns the potential utility of incest as a means of characterizing class dissent, and although he mutes its effectiveness by reserving it for only the most comic and foolish of the elite, nonetheless in so doing he is aligning himself, ideologically, with the other playwrights of this study. In this later play, however, Massinger is subversive in quite a different manner. He appropriates incest from the dramatic arsenal of class conflict, and then redeployes it, turning it against its own originators. Certainly, Massinger concedes, the corrupt of the aristocracy are indeed sexually perverse. But how much more so those arrivistes who aspire to be their equals?


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