



---

Dissertations, Theses, and Masters Projects

Theses, Dissertations, & Master Projects

---

2014

## Temptress of the Stage: Whither the Widow-Woman?

Kathryn Elizabeth Snyder

*College of William & Mary - Arts & Sciences*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wm.edu/etd>

 Part of the [Theatre History Commons](#), and the [United States History Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Snyder, Kathryn Elizabeth, "Temptress of the Stage: Whither the Widow-Woman?" (2014). *Dissertations, Theses, and Masters Projects*. Paper 1539626769.

<https://dx.doi.org/doi:10.21220/s2-1kve-7123>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses, Dissertations, & Master Projects at W&M ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Dissertations, Theses, and Masters Projects by an authorized administrator of W&M ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@wm.edu](mailto:scholarworks@wm.edu).

Tempress of the Stage: Whither the Widow-Woman?

Kathryn Elizabeth Snyder

Sugar Land, Texas

Bachelor of Arts, Texas Tech University, 2009

Master of Arts, Texas Tech University, 2011

A Thesis presented to the Graduate Faculty  
of the College of William and Mary in Candidacy for the Degree of  
Master of Arts

Lyon G. Tyler Department of History

The College of William and Mary  
January, 2014

# APPROVAL PAGE

This Thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of

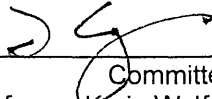
Master of Arts



---

Kathryn Elizabeth Snyder

Approved by the Committee, November, 2013



---

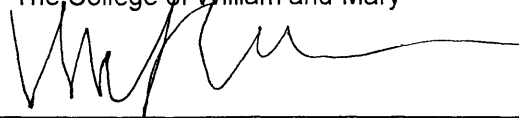
Committee Chair

Professor Karin Wulf, History Department  
The College of William and Mary



---

Professor Nicholas Popper, History Department  
The College of William and Mary



---

Professor Kvetta Benes, History Department  
The College of William and Mary

## ABSTRACT

From the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries, depictions of widows and widowhood in early modern English dramas changed in radical ways. Initially the victims of and the perpetrators in blood tragedies like *The Duchess of Malfi*, widow-characters in popular plays became the objects of comedy and derision. This change, as seen especially in the North American British colonies, has not been studied in its specificity and has simply been linked to more general changes like audience taste for lighter comedic fare—even as a kind of declension in theatrical writing, acting, and watching—instead of a deeper, more complex social and cultural shift(s) in relation to gender, the “deviant” female body, and empire. This thesis seeks the answer to how and why widowhood and visions of widows altered in the early modern British colonies by closely analyzing salient plays performed and read in the period (1550-1800), pamphlets, library and court records, newspaper accounts, paintings, as well as the theater playbills and records of attendance. Because of shifts in the colonial and nascent national American patriarchy, shifts occurred in how the widow—a once threatening legal and sexual conundrum—appeared on stage. Writers, audiences, and theater-goers watched as a new kind of “taming of the shrew” unfolded, even as gender remained an unstable category leading up to and after the American Revolution.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	ii
Dedications	iii
List of Tables	iv
List of Figures	v
Chapter 1. Act I: The Problem of the Widow	1
Chapter 2. Act II: A Play for Blood, the Renaissance Tragedy and Revenge Drama	12
Chapter 3. Act III: Colonial Comedies, the Widow On and Off Stage	21
Chapter 4. Act IV: Donning a New Habit, Widowhood as Prelude to Republican Motherhood	30
Chapter 5. Act V: Malfi's Ghost	38
Appendix	40
Bibliography	43

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I owe a debt of gratitude to my exceptionally patient thesis advisor Dr. Karin Wulf. Not only was she more than willing to put up with my theatrical and literary obsessions with Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*, but she always found time out of her busy schedule to read and read again the drafts, ideas, and prospectuses I sent her. I hope I have not proven too much of a disappointment, and I also hope that my next project will more than make up for my modest efforts in this paper. I would also like to thank Dr. Nick Popper and Dr. Benes for guiding me through this process. Dr. Popper always had a funny remark and Dr. Benes a kind word.

A final note of thanks goes to my graduate school cohort (in no particular order): Hannah Bailey—the bon vivant of the bunch and a source of constant laughter and encouragement; Casey Schmitt—the worldly and wise source of advice who always provided a model of dedication and preparation; Cara Elliot—the practical and friendly source of Trader Joe's snacks; Beth Wood—the caring shoulder to cry on and the ever-ready hostess of both department parties and Monday Night Football gatherings; and Spencer Wells—the token male of the group who takes all of the well-meaning jokes at his expense with good humor and heart.

This Thesis is dedicated to my wonderful mother and sister—my two  
favorite people in whole world...

## LIST OF TABLES

1. Table 1	27-28
2. Table 2	29



## LIST OF FIGURES

1. Figure 1	9
2. Figure 2	21
3. Figure 3	35

## Act I. The Problem of the Widow

To practice historical study is to practice dramatic irony, for the historian claims the privilege of hindsight; to interpret historical events and actors is to construct narrative, for the historian claims the privilege of telling the stories of people she has likely never met in a style and argument she chooses. These key elements of irony and plot linked playwright to reader, actor to audience, theater to society in the early modern period through colonization of British North America and finally to the early Republic. Changes in performances and theatrical productions reflected shifting tastes and cultural resonances from the seventeenth to the early nineteenth centuries. None of these shifts seemed more striking than the depiction on stage of the “widow,” defined here as a woman who had lost her husband/fiancé to death or long absence or a married “fictive widow,” whose husband, “for one reason or another, [was] unwilling or unable to govern [her].”<sup>1</sup> Early modern dramas that featured females of this sort more often than not favored punishing them for subverting patriarchal norms, given their ambiguous role comprising both male and female traits—a cross-dresser of sorts on stage, even if she remained in petticoats. She often pursued her own political, social, and romantic agendas by flouting male scriptures. The popular revenge tragedies performed in the seventeenth century demanded widows’ blood. Once settled and settling the American colonies, English colonials began to esteem more cheerful fare than revenge/slasher dramas with their effusive violence and gleefully gory scenes of mass murder and overwrought suicides. Eighteenth-century theater patrons desired pithy dialogue and comedies with satisfying marriage plots, particularly in British North America. In the most fashionable

---

<sup>1</sup> Mary Beth Norton, *Founding Mothers and Fathers: Gendered Power and the Forming of American Society* (New York: 1997), 16.

plays of the day, widows did not threaten the patriarchy so much as allow social-climbing men a chance to enter the rarified world of political/patriarchal power through marriage to a rich, “buxom” widow. In these plays, widows offered men a chance to ascend socially and economically—a chance to achieve an aristocratic gentility previously denied them. However, with the coming of the Revolution and afterwards, plays came under suspicion as the theatergoer and player began “resembl[ing] some antiquated fair one, who...declares, that they (the common folk) ought not be admitted into *genteel* company...!”<sup>2</sup> The poisoned words of disunion and Britishness, they indignantly cried, oozed from “such...aristocratic, old-fashioned behavior...To be upper-class...was to be unpatriotic. Real Americans were young, male, [and] aggressive.”<sup>3</sup> Plays, then had to transform to changing times and tastes—as did the image of the widow, for in the early national period, she became both a symbol of patriotic sacrifice and an emerging American identity. By the nineteenth century, the widow on stage had transformed from a subversive figure needing to be subjugated to a “republican widow” whose presence bolstered American patriarchy and therefore did not suffer the bloody retribution of plays past. In an ironic, poetic twist, the most threatening female persona of the seventeenth-century stage altered into a “neutered” figure whose character upheld dominant norms of heteronormative American society.

Before their on-stage “neutering,” Widows were an uncomfortable contradiction in the early modern English Atlantic World. At the same time ubiquitous, and therefore viewed as women occupying a natural stage of life in a period where death came swiftly and often, widows and widowhood also seemed somehow sinister and unnatural. Besides

---

<sup>2</sup> *Mississippi Herald and Natchez Gazette*, July 15, 1806.

<sup>3</sup> David Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes: The Making of American Nationalism, 1776-1820* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: 1997), 264.

acting as a constant reminder of imminent and unpredictable mortality, their bodies and legal persons lacked needed male control, affording them unusual independence in matters sexual and juridical.<sup>4</sup> Many managed their estates as *fem sol* and pursued (or chose not to pursue) romance and marriage at their own behest. Perhaps the greatest threat widows in the sixteenth and seventeenth century posed, however was within the intangible realm of male (and many female) minds<sup>5</sup>. The widow was sexually knowing and able to critically assess a man's performance—perhaps to the detriment of his manhood. Combined, these factors produced a feminine body/form in an unnatural state of rebellion against male control—a control often reasserted by making her a ripe target (more so than a married or virginal woman) for violence.

Mary Beth Norton, Kathleen Brown,<sup>6</sup> and Carol Berkin have each discussed this unusual legal limbo widows occupied in colonial America, “[becoming] flashpoints for conflict in a society organized on the basis of Filmerian theory,” or the idea that the head of household (ideally the father-parent) ruled the family as a monarch ruled the state.<sup>7</sup> Without the male “monarch” to lead the household, then, women as legal independents assumed the man's role, acting “simultaneously both female and male...the ambiguity of [her] positioning in a sociopolitical hierarchy...[explaining] why a number of colonial conflicts centered on high-status women, especially widows...whose husbands...were

---

<sup>4</sup>There are many and varied works pertaining to widows and the law; more notable examples include Mary Beth Norton's *Founding Mothers and Fathers* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), Jenny Kermode and Caroline Walker's *Women, Crime and the Courts in Early Modern England* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: The University of North Carolina Press, 1994), and Marylynn Salmon's *Women and the Law of Property in Early America* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: The University of North Carolina Press, 1984).

<sup>5</sup>See *Founding Mothers and Fathers* and Terri L. Snyder's *Brabbling Women: Disorderly Speech and the Law in Early Virginia* (Cornell University Press: 2005).

<sup>6</sup>See Kathleen Brown's *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: The University of North Carolina Press, 1996) for discussions of race, power and the law in seventeenth-century Virginia, particularly how law/tax codes increasingly began to view black slave women as property.

<sup>7</sup>Mary Beth Norton, *Founding Mothers and Fathers* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996): 10.

[obviously] unable to govern them”.<sup>8</sup> Laurel Thatcher Ulrich has even asserted that as “deputy husbands,” widows “under the right conditions not only could double as a husband, she had the responsibility to do so.”<sup>9</sup>

Swept along this vein of reasoning and legal empowerment belonging to widows which “society preferred to reserve to men,” some historians have claimed that in the Chesapeake in particular, where men outnumbered women, added to the fact that in the Chesapeake, seventeenth century Virginia a ‘golden age’<sup>10</sup> for the fair sex.<sup>11</sup> While acknowledging that widows certainly enjoyed legal leeway, the decidedly uncertain social and cultural implications of widowhood caused contemporaries suffering as well, particularly that gnawing feeling that widows could not only take on men in court but could take them on in the bedroom. A popular saying, after all, warned would-be suitors that “ ‘he who wooeth a widow must go stiff before,’ ” ever suspecting that the husband before him might be a ‘hard’ act to follow.<sup>12</sup>

Because the widow made so many appearances in popular dramas, sermons, and treatises in the early modern period, historians have recognized the peculiar obsession seventeenth century Englishmen and colonials had about gender and its somewhat nebulous structure. The study of the widow and her own story in the British Atlantic World began as a simplistic assertion of her power and agency—a “Golden Age” for

---

<sup>8</sup>Norton, 140.

<sup>9</sup>Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *Good Wives: Image and Reality in the Lives of Women in Northern New England, 1650-1750* (New York: Vintage Books, 1980): 38.

<sup>10</sup>See Lois Green Carr and Lorena Walsh’s “The Planter’s Wife” *W&M Quarterly*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Series, Volume 24 (October 1977) for a discussion of early colonial Maryland and the idea of a ‘golden age’ for women there. To see a good example of its refutation, see Mary Beth Norton’s “The Myth of the Golden Age” in Carol Ruth Berkin and Mary Beth Norton, eds., *Women of America: A History* (New York: Houghton Mifflin School, 1979).

<sup>11</sup>Carol Berkin, *First Generations* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1996): 20.

<sup>12</sup>Ulrich, 97.

women in general, in which a lack of firmly entrenched law, unstable values, and skewed sex ratios accorded them more authority than their browbeaten sisters in the haggard Old World of oppressive patriarchies.<sup>13</sup> An ever-evolving field has however ensured that a more nuanced and complex portrait of widowhood in early America has gradually developed, one which expresses both the vulnerabilities as well as the strengths of that status.

In the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century overpopulated English cities and perceived vagrancy distressed a state already stretched thin; besides potentially aggrandizing English coffers with anticipated bullion, New World exploration offered authorities an increasingly attractive solution to its surplus population. Writers and propagandists for such ventures, like Richard Hakluyt, proposed colonization as both a commercial enterprise and a moral experiment, comparing the poor classes to “Bees” who, “[having grown] too many in their own hives at home are wont to bee led out by their captaines abroad and seeke themselves a new dwelling place.”<sup>14</sup> Historians have discussed the formation and development of the Chesapeake region from one resembling a nightmarish deathtrap of starvation, Native conflict, disease, and few chances at anything save an early grave to one of a capitalist-driven, tobacco-fueled society.<sup>15</sup> In each of these narratives, the Chesapeake evolves from an unstable collection of ramshackle settlements to a more firmly hierarchical and complex state whose white male

---

<sup>13</sup>See the early works of Lois Carr and Lorena Walsh.

<sup>14</sup>Richard Hakluyt, *Divers voyages touching the discovery of America and the islands adjacent*, John Winter Jones, ed., London: Hakluyt Society, 1850, 9.

<sup>15</sup>Perhaps the best example of this remains Edmund Morgan’s *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (WW Norton and Co.: 1975).

population exploited land and labor to secure their own liberties. Kathleen Brown's more gender-centric study of Virginia layered this argument further by analyzing law codification, femininity, race, and the rigid social structure which emerged during the latter seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. While these interpretations refute the idea of a "Golden Age," their depiction of widows act more as interesting side notes than as sophisticated discussions of widowhood and its link between the abnormal feminine body and violent dispossession.

Perhaps an even greater volume of literature on New England and women's studies exists than do those gendered examinations of colonial Virginia, much of this centers on the subject of witchcraft. Theories ranging from Puritanical misogyny and hallucinogenic mold to frightening insecurities caused by Indian frontier warfare attempt to explain the bizarre Salem episode, but most historians agree that women seen as existing outside the preferred Filmerian governance or as drains upon the state—and widows could occupy both of these unsavory positions—were more likely to be targeted than their married, middling sisters.<sup>16</sup> Violence against women, conflicts with Natives, and a supposed crisis in English identity correspond in both time and the historiography, resulting in an angry-tangled colonial empire built upon an often bloody assertion of masculine ownership and English exploitation. The ambiguous ways in which widows could occupy the status of both independent and dependent on and off stage, authority figure and target of fiction and reality reveal early modern inconsistencies and

---

<sup>16</sup>For theories on the Salem episode see John Demos's *Entertaining Satan: Witchcraft and the Culture of Early New England* (Oxford: 2004), Carol Karlsen's *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman: Witchcraft in Colonial New England* (WW Norton and Co.: 1998), and Mary Beth Norton's *In the Devil's Snare: The Salem Witchcraft Crisis of 1692* (Vintage: 2003).

insecurities, the widow herself a symbol of the gender confusion of seventeenth century England and early America. Malfi's quandary had become a transatlantic phenomenon. This thesis also touches on the cultural and underlying ideologies of the early British Empire, an imperialism which, as David Armitage has argued, originated in the minds of Englishmen, Welshmen, and Scotsmen in their "composite monarchy" long before its reality as an identifiable Atlantic community, manifesting in tracts written by such notables as Samuel Purchas and David Hakluyt.<sup>17</sup> While he and other "new" imperial and British historians like Kathleen Wilson have focused on the political writings of the time period to illuminate the social and intellectual English character of the early Empire,<sup>18</sup> I delve into literary writings, especially the salient and popular plays of the sixteenth through the early nineteenth centuries which explore fictive and actual widowhood.<sup>19</sup> In these artistic portrayals and treatment of widows lies a key to understanding the imperial endeavors and conquest of colonial America and its inhabitants. Widows, then colonies, then Natives, each viewed as unnatural feminine/effeminate bodies outside the boundaries of normative male English control suffered violent exploitation in similar language and action. In short, the way Englishmen viewed widows, as seen in its most dramatic and telling form on stage, foretold their imperial conquests.

Consider the horrifying case of Anne Elsdon, an elderly widow living in 1620s London. According to sources pieced together from a lengthy trial and several popular

---

<sup>17</sup>David Armitage, *The Ideological Origins of the British Empire* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

<sup>19</sup> One of the most notable examples being Kathleen Wilson's *The Sense of the People* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), gender and cultural history and literature do appear prominently in her *The Island Race* (New York: Routledge, 2002).



ballads made in her “honor,” Elsdon fell under the power of a Mr. Audley, who proceeded to “ke[ep her] wakeinge, and... [in] distempature with wyne and hott waters,” for hours, perhaps days, until he dragged her in a drunken coma to obtain a marriage license, causing “the losse of her estate ... to the great infamy & scandal of ... Anne Elsdon.”<sup>20</sup> One ballad which survives tells its male listeners to “[keep] the widow wakeing [and] lett him that is poore and to wealth would aspire get some old rich widdowe and grow wealthye by her, to the tune of the blazing torch...

And you whoe faine would heare the full  
discourse of this match making,  
The play will teach you at the Bull,  
to keepe the widow wakeing...<sup>21</sup>

Unfortunately, the play(s) to which the lines refer no longer survives, Thomas Dekker’s comedy *The Widow Wakeing* remains lost to history. The actual episode, however seems little different from those trespasses repeated against deviant women in the New World—trespasses considered fodder for comic relief. Several literary critics and historians have noted that “Mrs. Elsdon . . . was not the first widow to be so served and apparently the phrase ‘Keep the widow waking’ was popular at least thirty years before [the lost play],” pointing to an endemic problem in England well before the rampant colonization of the

---

<sup>20</sup>“Bill of Information, Star Chamber Suit Against Audley,” as quoted in Charles Sisson’s “*Keep the Widow Waking: A Lost Play by Dekker*,” *The Library*, 4th Ser., 8.1-2 (1927-28): 234.  
[http://www.lostplays.org/index.php/Late\\_Murder\\_in\\_White\\_Chapel,\\_or\\_Keep\\_the\\_Widow\\_Waking](http://www.lostplays.org/index.php/Late_Murder_in_White_Chapel,_or_Keep_the_Widow_Waking)  
(accessed 5 June 2011).

<sup>21</sup> Anon., as quoted in Charles Sisson’s “*Keep the Widow Waking: A Lost Play by Dekker*,” *The Library*, 4th Ser., 8.1-2 (1927-28): 240  
[http://www.lostplays.org/index.php/Late\\_Murder\\_in\\_White\\_Chapel,\\_or\\_Keep\\_the\\_Widow\\_Waking](http://www.lostplays.org/index.php/Late_Murder_in_White_Chapel,_or_Keep_the_Widow_Waking).

mid seventeenth-century and a practice which continued unabated in North America.<sup>22</sup> Like the wasting of Native bodies and their lands, “Wasting a widow in order to marry her and waste her holdings provided a scenario that...was considered imitable and laughable, not reprehensible and lamentable: the perpetrator provided a model, the widow a butt.”<sup>23</sup> Cruelty and violence toward vulnerable widows had become popular practice and celebrated in popular culture.



Figure 1. Mary Hallam plays the cross-dressing role of Fidele in *Cymbeline*; herself widowed, Hallam traveled with a professional troupe of players throughout British America, including stops at the Hallam House in Williamsburg, Virginia. (1771)

---

<sup>22</sup> G. B. Harrison, “Keep the Widow Waking,” *The Library* 4th Ser., 11.1 (1930): 97  
[http://www.lostplays.org/index.php/Late\\_Murder\\_in\\_White\\_Chapel,\\_or\\_Keep\\_the\\_Widow\\_Waking](http://www.lostplays.org/index.php/Late_Murder_in_White_Chapel,_or_Keep_the_Widow_Waking) .

<sup>23</sup> Ira Clark., “The Widow Hunt on the Tudor-Stuart Stage” *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 41.2 (2001): 402  
[http://www.lostplays.org/index.php/Late\\_Murder\\_in\\_White\\_Chapel,\\_or\\_Keep\\_the\\_Widow\\_Waking](http://www.lostplays.org/index.php/Late_Murder_in_White_Chapel,_or_Keep_the_Widow_Waking).

Of course widowhood, especially in the early modern period, was a “natural” stage of female life, for the chances of a woman outliving at least one husband was high. Some may point to the proliferation of Italian and Spanish settings for these dramas, suggesting that the debauchery and decadence condemned in the plays owed more to a general Italian/Catholic identity than to the specific identity of widowhood. Certainly popery and Italy, in particular, evoked for Englishmen of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries all that was immoral, corrupt, and rotten. One need only read plays without widows as prominent characters, such as Christopher Marlowe’s *Volpone*, in order to gauge the sense of perceived Italian dissipation. However, the very fact that English authors and playwrights many times chose to make their widows Catholic and Italian reveals just as much, if not more, about how their societies viewed widows as it did about their views of southern Europe; by making these widows foreign, it emphasized the alien, abnormally un-English nature of their persons (and the English were quite a xenophobic lot). It automatically magnified an already underlying suspicion regarding their scandalous licentiousness. In short, authors made widows Italian in order to amplify their unnatural qualities rather than to simply comment on papists in general or to have an exotic setting in which to act out delicious scenes of blood, lust, and revenge. Even those stories and literatures written about societies and peoples long ago or far abroad often reveal more about the societies and peoples much closer to home. As the emphasis on creating a separate “American” brand of theater grew increasingly important to playwrights after the Revolution and during the early Republic, even this sense of alien foreignness disappeared, for widows and fictive widows inhabited distinctive American landscapes

which sought to use these feminine characters as figures of familiar, almost comforting images and which fostered a sense of collective identity around their satirical stories—rather than fomenting anxiety around a sense of dangerous exoticism around tragedies of blood.

## Act II. A Play for Blood, Renaissance Tragedy and Revenge Drama

In order to chart the transformation of the widow-character, a close analysis of several popular plays in the early modern period is called for. Performed in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, each of these plays (*The Duchess of Malfi*, *The Spanish Tragedy*, and *The Changeling*) figured women who had either married and lost their spouses or were soon to be married and lost their fiancés—usually to violence. In these plays the “widows” confronted male hegemony and threatened the Filmerian patriarchal ideal, or father as the head-of-household, not only by exercising undue power because of their single status as *femes sol*, but also because of their active participation in pursuit of a new mate, one weaker both in terms of social rank and character. Not only were widows in these plays seen as dangerous politically for their independence, but they also menaced (and intrigued) early modern notions of sexuality, for they had already had carnal knowledge, and could therefore judge a male’s performance and perhaps find him wanting—a terrifying prospect for any insecure man. Metaphorically, widows’ sexuality seemed ambiguous since they could perform both female and traditionally male roles in society, just as a cross-dressing actress could perform them on stage.

John Webster’s *Duchess of Malfi*. *The Duchess of Malfi* was one of the darkest Renaissance dramas published-- a bold claim, since Early Modern dramatists of all stripes loved to include lurid scenes of over-the-top gore and excessive cruelty; anyone familiar with Shakespeare would know that few Elizabethan plays failed to capitalize on gruesome death or the threat of its occurrence. Besides containing an extraordinary

amount of gore, however, *The Duchess of Malfi* also took the audience on a disturbing psychological journey of horror, insanity, and more than a few hints of incest. T. S. Eliot once made the comment that “Webster was much possessed by death and saw the skull beneath the skin.”<sup>24</sup> So, to go beneath the skin of Webster’s story in order to uncover the horror within, one must begin with some unnatural crimes. The young widowed Duchess defied her two brothers, the nobleman Ferdinand and the Cardinal, by remarrying a man of her own choosing—Antonio, a mere groomsman. Not only did she disobey her siblings and flout rank and social class, but she also typified the “lewd,” “froward,” and licentious widow by proposing to Antonio herself. For these perversions of patriarchal norms, her vengeful brothers decided that the Duchess must die, beginning a systematic attack on her mind and body. In one of the closing acts, she succumbed slowly to psychological torture, her body also targeted through starvation and negligence; at one point she even went mad. Finally, her twin brother Ferdinand, in a fit of rage brought on by his threatened manhood and his incestuous jealousy, ordered her execution—by way of strangulation, a brutal and final aggression against her deviantly feminine body. After her macabre death, Ferdinand spoke the words, “Cover her face. Mine eyes dazzle. She died young.”<sup>25</sup> Even in death her beauty and body still held a dangerous hypnotic power over him, and he could not stand to look at her—his disquiet evident in the curt, tri-syllabic sentences he uttered.

Often compared with *The Duchess of Malfi*, chronologically the first of these Renaissance dramas, and perhaps the most widely performed, Thomas Kyd’s *The Spanish Tragedy* ushered onto the early modern stage a succession of revenge plays in

---

<sup>24</sup>T. S. Eliot, “Whispers of Immortality” 1920 < <http://www.bartleby.com/199/22.html> >.

<sup>25</sup> John Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi* in *The Duchess of Malfi* in *Drama of the English Renaissance II: The Stuart Period*, Eds. Russell A. Frazer and Norman Rabkin, New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1976, 503.

which social satire and widows' demise (along with nearly everyone else by the closing scene) figured prominently. The heroine in this play, Bel-Imperia, a Spanish princess, had lost her fiancé Don Andrea in a war between "Portingale" and Spain, killed ignobly in the back by the Portuguese prince Don Balthazar. Predictably, Don Balthazar unsuccessfully sought to replace Bel-Imperia's dead fiancé and win her affections—and her status. She, however became infatuated with Horatio, Andrea's friend who also returned home from the war. Unfortunately, the young woman then proceeded to lose not only Andrea, but her second fiancé Horatio, due to similar aspects of their socially stratified romance. The horrific scene where she witnessed Horatio's hanging resulted in her role as a principal revenger in *The Spanish Tragedy*, but Bel-Imperia's sex placed before her obstacles which impeded her vindication. She had to elude both imprisonment through pretense as well as her calculating brother Lorenzo through a desperate note to Heironimo, Horatio's father, written in blood "for want of ink."<sup>26</sup> Refusing at last to remain either in a world without social freedom or her beloved, she took her revenge and her own life in the same moment, frustrating the patriarchal system Kyd's work questioned by way of her determined, but decidedly unfeminine actions. Unlike the other women in dramas discussed here, Bel-Imperia, perhaps seeking to win the male game of violence by enacting the male role of avenger, wrought a final act of aggression upon her body before others could do so (whether through sexual or other means of violation). In the end, however, the denouement remained the same: another "widow" dead for her sins against society.

---

<sup>26</sup> Thomas Kyd, *The Spanish Tragedy in Drama of the English Renaissance II: The Stuart Period*, Eds. Russell A. Frazer and Norman Rabkin, New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1976: 182.

About her choice to pursue Horatio regardless of the consequences, Bel-Imperia declares, “I’ll love Horatio, my Andrea’s friend, /The more to spite the prince that wrought his end. /And where Don Balthazar that slew my love, /Himself now pleads for favor at my hands, /He shall...Reap long repentance for his murd’rous deed.”<sup>27</sup> To early modern audiences, Bel-Imperia’s impassioned cry for bloody vengeance and steely determination, which exceeded even that of Heironimo, the male avenger, made her seem extraordinarily masculine, her resolve bordering on a threatening hysteria. Not only had she attempted to subvert social rank, commit “rebellious sexual raids,” and marry a man of inferior birth (twice), but she insisted on trespassing into the male domain of honor and revenge—the wages of which she paid dearly.<sup>28</sup>

Noting her rigid will and resentment toward him with surprise, Don Balthazar lamented, “No, she is wilder, and more hard withal, /Than beast, or bird, or tree, or stony wall.” By comparing Bel-Imperia and her “disdain” for him as more pitiless than nature, her attitude toward his proposal revealing a “wild hardness” not ordinary in even the untamed beasts or immovable oaks of the field, let alone in the yielding softness typical of femininity, Don Balthazar made her an unnatural force, one which would, his friend assured ominously, “...in time [cause her to] fall from her disdain, /And rue the sufferance of your (Don Balthazar’s) friendly pain.” This pain came sooner than Bel-Imperia expected when she found herself forced into a desperate plea. Without a pen and “ ‘For want of ink,” she sends a “bloody writ. /Me hath my hapless brother hid from thee. /Revenge thyself on Balthazar and him...And better fare than Bel-Imperia doth...”<sup>29</sup>

---

<sup>27</sup>Kyd, 174.

<sup>28</sup>Frank Whigham, *Seizures of the Will in Early Modern English Drama* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996): 188.

<sup>29</sup>Kyd, 175, 182.



After her brother and would-be lover lock her forcibly away, dragging her bodily into a one-windowed cell, Bel-Imperia fashioned a painful way to contact Heironimo. As if attempting to one-up the male characters targeting her feminine body with violence and imprisonment, she engaged in masochism by cutting her own hand in order to write a hasty note in blood. Not only has frustrating the patriarchal system made her the victim of her brother's cruelty, but it has driven her to self-mutilation and punishment for her own inability to fit neatly within society.

Frustrated indeed with events and the machinations of her brother, she cried, "Thou art no brother, but an enemy; /Else wouldst thou not have used thy sister so: /First to affright me with thy weapons drawn, /And with extremes abuse my company; /And then to hurry me, like a whirlwind's rage... And clap me up where none might come at me..."<sup>30</sup> Bel-Imperia admonished her brother Lorenzo, heir to the Spanish kingdom, for attacking her person, unprovoked, with "maddening fury." Unfortunately for Bel-Imperia, Lorenzo's "fury" was indeed provoked by her constant flouting of early modern normalcy, justifying within his mind, the necessity of controlling and containing her body with the threat of violence and captivity.

The final play discussed here is "one of thirty lurid and moralistic stories in John Reynolds's *The Triumphs of God's Revenge against the Crying and Execrable Sin of Willful and Premeditated Murder* (1621)" which concerned itself with regulating behavior as well as entertaining its audience.<sup>31</sup> As such, *The Changeling* was a tragicomedy more driven by character than plot, especially the character of Beatrice-Joanna—an anti-heroine reminiscent of and perhaps more ruthless than Lady Macbeth.

---

<sup>30</sup>Kyd, 188.

<sup>31</sup>Russel A. Fraser and Norman Rabkin, eds. "The Changeling," in *Drama of the English Renaissance II: The Stuart Period*, Eds. Russell A. Frazer and Norman Rabkin, New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1976: 399.

Unlike the other “widows” in the Renaissance dramas discussed in this paper, Beatrice-Joanna had few sympathetic qualities, and her “blackest villainy is” veiled, “even to herself, by a delicate concern for her ‘honor.’”<sup>32</sup> Like Bel-Imperia and the Duchess, she attempted to subvert the patriarchal authority of her family and to marry the man of her choosing. Unlike those widows before her, however, she chose murder over the Duchess’s subterfuge and Bel-Imperia’s candor. Manipulating Deflores, a disfigured, lower-class man of the gentry, she convinced him to kill her betrothed so she could marry Alsemero instead. Deflores, (whose name looks suspiciously like ‘deflowers’) in love with Beatrice-Joanna despite her obvious disdain for his ugly face and lower rank, agreed. By making herself “a woman dipped in blood” and committing the unnatural sin of murder along with her co-conspirator Deflores, Beatrice-Joanna removed “the distance that creation/ Set ‘twixt [her] blood and [Deflores’s]...[finding him] there [her] equal...In what the act has made [her].”<sup>33</sup> Defying the laws of God and man by essentially making herself into a widow through an act of murder, Beatrice-Joanna left herself vulnerable to Deflores’s violent declarations of love and his violent rape.

From the beginning, it seemed unlikely that Beatrice-Joanna would have much to do with the grotesque Deflores, he himself acknowledging that “She had rather wear my pelt tanned in a pair, /Of dancing pumps (gloves), than I should thrust my fingers /Into her sockets here, I know she hates me, /Yet cannot choose but love her. /No matter, if but to vex her, I’ll haunt her still; /Though I get nothing else, I’ll have my will.” Besides the obvious double entendre, his brief apostrophe here foreshadowed that he will eventually “thrust...[himself] into her sockets” against her wishes--violently, if necessary. Indeed,

---

<sup>32</sup>Frazer and Rabkin, 399.

<sup>33</sup>Thomas Middleton and William Rowley, *The Changeling in Drama of the English Renaissance II: The Stuart Period*, Eds. Russell A. Frazer and Norman Rabkin, New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1976: 416.

Beatrice-Joanna felt trepidation when she admitted half fearfully, “I never see this fellow, but I think /of some harm towards me; danger’s in my mind...”<sup>34</sup> Even before Beatrice-Joanna involved herself in bloody intrigue with Deflores, she sensed the foreshadowing of blood. Indeed, she was right to worry, for Deflores would eventually act as both her rapist and killer.

After she convinced the willing Deflores to murder her unwanted fiancé, she attempted to repay his service and buy his silence with a bag of gold florins—which he refused, for he then had her where he wanted all along: at his mercy. When she feigned innocence and tried to reassert their previous, socially distant relationship, he admonished, “Why, are you not as guilty in, I’m sure, /As deep as I...I have eased you of your trouble/ Think on’t, I’m in pain /And must be eased of you; ‘tis a charity. /Justice invites your blood to understand me.” As Beatrice-Joanna realized she could not escape Deflores’s advances and his incessant demands to “understand” him carnally, she submitted her body to his loathsome embrace. Murderess, he taunted Beatrice-Joanna, “...by that name /You lost your first condition, and I challenge you, /As peace and innocency has turned you out /And made you one with me.”<sup>35</sup> In a line which neatly summed up the widow’s plight in early modern society, Deflores cornered Beatrice-Joanna with blackmail; submit her body to his sexual advances, or he would tell all. Widows, having lost their virginity and male spouse/authority figure—their “first condition”—could then be subject to harm directed at their bodies as well.

After her hands had been stained with blood, her honor tarnished with rape, and her marriage made a sham, Beatrice-Joanna confronted Deflores and suffered a final

---

<sup>34</sup>Middleton and Rowley, 404, 408.

<sup>35</sup>Middleton and Rowley, 416.

indignation from him—a knife in the side. She appeared, in the last scene to acquiesce to her demise, for “ ‘Tis time to die, when ‘tis a shame to live.”<sup>36</sup> Like the Duchess and Bel-Imperia before her, Beatrice-Joanna was not seen fit to live as a widow safely in society, having crossed the bounds of normalcy into the unsafe and threatening territory beyond male control. Complicit in murder, whoredom, and disobedience to her father’s patriarchal authority, she had since “[given] up her first condition” which nature ad birth accorded her; instead, she has assumed the unnatural guise of the “lewd, idle, froward, and unconstant” widow. Violence upon her body and her eventual death by way of a knife already rusty with the blood of her murdered fiancé was therefore justified.

*“You are a widow. You know already what man is... You live in a rank pasture here, i’t’h court/... ’Twill poison your fame; look to’t; be not cunning,/ For they whose faces belie their hearts/ Are witches ere they arrive at twenty years,/ Ay, and give the devil suck.”*<sup>37</sup>

Ferdinand’s admonition to his sister the Duchess and his parting jab, “Farewell, lusty widow!” left audiences with little doubt about the character’s assumptions concerning widowed young women. He, like many of his male viewers, would have agreed with George Chapman, sometime poet, dramatist, and full-time moralizer when he condemned second marriages as “but a kind of adultery, like usury permitted by the law, not approved.”<sup>38</sup> Mirroring these plays were misogynistic pamphlets like those of Joseph Swetnam, entitled *The Arraignment of Women*, which condemned the entire female sex

---

<sup>36</sup>Middleton and Rowley, 428.

<sup>37</sup> John Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi*, 481.

<sup>38</sup> George Chapman, *The Widow’s Tears*, in *The Works of George Chapman*, Ed. Richard Herne Shepherd (London: Chatto and Windus, 1874): 318.

for its propensity for exhibiting “lewd, idle, froward, and unconstant” qualities, reserving an especially bitter chapter aimed at warning away unsuspecting male victims from the widow’s poisoned web of “a thousand woes,” the manful task of “[making] her forget her former corrupt and disordered behaviour” as conceivable as “[undertaking] to wash a blackamoor white.”<sup>39</sup> The widow’s supposed face of unnatural sexual deviance aroused vitriol, obsession, and insecurity on and off stage in equal measure, for as unattached females without the maiden’s virginal blush, widows were “in the position of ‘judging’ the sexual performance of other men against the standard of [their] first husband[s] and finding [them] lacking.”<sup>40</sup> This presented a terrible prospect to the Filmerian patriarchal society which relied upon the knowing dominance of the male father figure. At least on stage, male actors and playwrights could silence her and the ambiguously threatening specter she presented to the patriarchal order through bloody plotlines and horrific endings. These blood-tragedies, however popular and however much they were performed and collected, never gained in the American colonies the traction they had received in England, and the character of the widow underwent a transformation discussed below.

---

<sup>39</sup> Joseph Swetnam, “The Araigment of Lewde, Idle, Froward and Unconstant Women,” in *Defining Gender*, <http://www.gender.amdigital.co.uk> (accessed February 26, 2010).

<sup>40</sup> Theodora Jankowski, *Women in Power in the Renaissance Drama* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 168.



Figure 2. Anon., “The Brideling, Sadling, and Ryding, of a Rich Churl in Hampshire, 1595,” The Huntington Library.

This “act,” detailing widows in colonial, rather than English theater, begins with a seventeenth-century engraving of an unnatural arrangement and the world turned upside down—a woman riding a man, who is an ass in more ways than one.<sup>41</sup> Instead of a man’s virility driving the plow into the land, the woman uses his subjugated body to till the soil—a nightmarish topsy-turvy subversion of nature which men, on and off stage, sought to avoid at all costs. This image perfectly blended the themes of colonization, gender, and widowhood, for the woman in the woodcut, like many widows, wielded

<sup>41</sup> Anon., “The Brideling, Sadling, and Ryding, of a Rich Churl in Hampshire, 1595,” The Huntington Library.

unusual power over their estates and sometimes over men in the colonies. The possibility that the feminine bodies of widows and a feminized “New World” lay beyond and apart from normal male control—or worse, perhaps controlled males—rankled. The untamed wildness of the colonies and the untamed, shrewish widow required forceful subjugation by masculine hands in order to make both more naturally English—else this unnerving and impotent fate awaited. While it appears that the woman driving her hapless ox-man into the dirt holds a purse in her hand, it bears a passing resemblance to a scrotum being squeezed.

The English experience in North America sometimes seemed like a love affair gone horribly awry. The enchanting America had appeared so alluring from a distance. Up close she suffered from pockmarked features and a rotten personality. In fact, the English experience with their new territories bore a striking resemblance to marriage with a widow, England cast as “that unfortunate man that matcheth himself” with her. The backbreaking and futile work of improving the land, reaping its benefits, and enjoying its “body” seemed like the unenviable task of “unlearn[ing a] widow and mak[ing] her forget her former corrupt and disordered behavior.”<sup>42</sup> The disappointment (at least initially) which was Virginia proved enough to tempt the strongest men with “such-like valor...[to] hang and drown” themselves...if Virginia failed to finish the job first. The idea of reforming, recreating, and forcing North America into an acceptable image of England and a controlled environment which seemed “natural” to Englishmen paralleled polemical ideas calling for the reform of wayward widows. Such desperate procedures called for measures cruel but not unusual. Violent exploitation used in the name of

---

<sup>42</sup> Joseph Swetnam, “The Arraignment of lewd, idle, forward, and unconstant women, 1615,” in *Half Humankind* (Urbana, IL: The University of Illinois Press, 1985): 214.

regaining patriarchal control and the natural English order of things (ironically a man-made order) was the norm in Renaissance dramas about widows, actual treatment of widows, and the encounters with the “widowed” lands of the New World. In much the same manner that Ferdinand strangled the Duchess into final submission and a husband, having married a scolding widow, “took her and cut the tongue out of her head,” a physical dismemberment of the land in order to force the conformity of America’s body would follow from English colonialism. After the tumult of “settling” and settling down with North America, colonists and their colonial plays began to view widows in a more benevolent light. A more established white, European presence and the formation of state power within the colonies provided impetus to patronize genteel activities like theater-going. It also provided impetus to seek marriage to a wealthy widow in order to achieve such gentility—a well-used and well-worn plot device in two of the most popular comedies of early American theater: George Farquar’s (1677-1707) *The Beaux-Stratagem* and John Gay’s (1685-1732) *The Beggar’s Opera*. In these renditions, the widow does not drive the male ass into the dirt, but elevates her male mate to new heights within the patriarchy.

*The Beaux-Stratagem* emerged as one of the final Restoration comedies of the seventeenth century but remained popular in both England and its colonies during the eighteenth century. In 1732 it played in both New York and Williamsburg at the College of William Mary with thirty-four documented showings that same year, making it second only to Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* in terms of colonial popularity. Its plot revolved around two widows—one fictive and both fabulously rich—and two handsome but impoverished young men looking to “wive it wealthily” and thus preserve their social



status in London. The elder widow, Lady Bountiful, stood to leave a large inheritance to her beautiful daughter, for her “last husband, Sir Charles Bountiful, left her worth a thousand pound [sic] a year.” Though she operated, it seems, with relative impunity given her social and economic independence, Lady Bountiful did not threaten patriarchal authority—even if her comic fascination with amateur medicine often threatened her neighbors with real sickness. One character joked that “she [had] cured more people in and about Litchfield within ten years, than the doctors [had] killed in twenty, and that’s a bold word.” Her “uses,” beside the “cures of rheumatisms, ruptures, and broken shins in men; green-sickness, obstructions, and fits of the mother in women,” included “a daughter by Sir Charles, the finest woman in all [their] county.” Preserving the health of her friends and the virtue of her daughter comprised the extent of Lady Bountiful’s character motives—desires firmly rooted in respectable female behavior. In the end, she served to further the amorous attachment of Aimwell, the likable rogue, and Dorinda, her chaste and lovely daughter.

A second widow—a fictive widow—had recently married Lady Bountiful’s son “by her first husband, Squire Sullen,” and quickly found herself unhappy with his vapid interests in gaming and sport, “for he [said] little and [thought] less, and [did]—nothing at all...a man of great estate who value[d] no body.” Forced into the role of deputy husband while her spouse cavorted about the countryside, Lady Sullen became a fictive widow when she decided to actively pursue, in the manner of a *Bel-Imperia* or *Malfi*, a romance with Aimwell’s companion, Archer. In one scene with her sister-in-law Dorinda she exclaimed unhappily, “...heaven alone can help me: but I think, Dorinda, there is no

prayer in the liturgy against bad husbands.”<sup>43</sup> Taking matters out of God’s hands and into her own, Lady Sullen convinced the ineffectual and perpetually hung-over Lord Sullen to dissolve their marriage so that she and Archer could legally consummate their love; by a *deus ex machina* the two lovers also deprived Lord Sullen of his fortune, thus resolving all obstacles in Archer and Aimwell’s way to reclaiming their social perch in high society. Although both of these widows may have acted in similar ways to Webster’s Duchess and Kyd’s *Bel-Imperia*, they advanced heteronormative marriage plots and male inclusion within English patriarchal structures, rather than questioning or subverting male efficacy.

An altogether different form of play than *The Beaux-Stratagem*, *The Beggar’s Opera* (performed thirty two and thirty four known times in the colonies after 1730) used a mock-ballad format to satirize Italian opera and its pretentious patrons, while telling a farcical story in which the subject of widowhood and wealth drove the motives of its principal characters, the unscrupulous Peachums.<sup>44</sup> Together they designed to murder their daughter’s wealthy, ex-highwayman fiancé. Attempting to convince his daughter of the benefits of widowhood, Mr. Peachum asked her innocently, “had you not the common views of a gentlewoman in your marriage, Polly?...of a jointure and of being a widow?” Confused and upset, Polly denied ever wanting to part with her beloved. Undeterred, Peachum explained patiently that “parting with him...is the whole scheme and intention of marriage articles. The comfortable estate of widowhood is the only hope that keeps up a wife’s spirits. Where is the woman who would scruple to be a wife, if she had it in her power to be a widow whenever she pleased?” Before the end of the play, Polly’s roguish

---

<sup>43</sup>George Farquar, *The Beaux-Stratagem*, H. Macaulay Fitzgibbons, ed. (London: 1898), 8-9, 22.

<sup>44</sup>See Appendix

fiancé, Macheath had five women claim him as their betrothed, and he faced the gallows for past crimes dredged up by the Peachums. However, since both players and the on-stage audience watching the executioner lead him to a just hanging knew the story to be a comedy, all cried out against a “downright deep tragedy. The catastrophe is manifestly wrong, for an opera must end happily.” Indeed, the punishment of deviants like widows in drama and the “catastrophes” of bloody endings so favored in earlier plays had gone, to be replaced by ironic, self-mocking satire, which “in this kind of drama ‘tis no matter how absurdly things are brought about,” so long as it “[complies] with the taste of the town.” Capitulating to an inevitable comedic plot and popular “tastes,” the narrator admitted that “had the play remained as I at first intended, it would have carried a most excellent moral,” and that those of lower vices would suffer “punish[ment] for them.”<sup>45</sup> Instead of staging a last scene of destruction and violent mayhem, the final scene staged a dance celebrating Polly’s marriage to her rich, convict fiancé. In this tongue-in-cheek tale, widowhood was not viewed as a threatening female persona, but a device meant to elicit laughter and facilitate a outlandish finale in which the conventional rules of marriage and contemporary drama remain intact. The widow character had gone from the ominous to the ridiculous.

Though *Beaux Stratagem* and *Beggar’s Opera* are two of the most popular widow-featured plays performed in the colonies, they certainly were not the only ones. Others such as *The Provoked Husband*, *The Fair Penitent*, *Hamlet*, *Cymbeline*, and *Macbeth* each had explicit widow characters or fictive widow characters occupying prominent roles. The number of known performances beginning in the 1730s (the decade in which any accurate accounting can be found), exceeds twenty in all of the above-

---

<sup>45</sup>John Gay, *The Beggar’s Opera*, G. Hamilton Macleod, ed. (London: 1898), 115.

mentioned plays save those of *Cymbeline* and *Macbeth*, whose numbers reached thirteen and twelve, respectively. One must keep in mind, however, that these statistics remain spotty and likely each was performed both formally and informally many more times than records indicate.<sup>46</sup>

As the following charts demonstrate, beginning from the 1750s on (a period in which actually finding plays performed on the colonial stage becomes more possible and meaningful in the historical record), both *The Beggar's Opera* and *The Beaux' Stratagem* declined in popularity--most significantly during the 1760s.<sup>47</sup> While *The Beggar's Opera* experienced a brief resurgence in the 1770s, both disappeared during the Revolution (most professional theater groups were banned), and they never recovered their former esteem. By the early national period, both of these productions had all but vanished from the American stage. The plots seemed too European, the characters too lewd, and the widows depicted, too lewdly European.

	1750s	1760s	1770s	1820
Beggar's Opera	13 known performances	2	11	0
Beaux' Stratagem	9 known performances	9	7	0

---

<sup>46</sup>See appendix

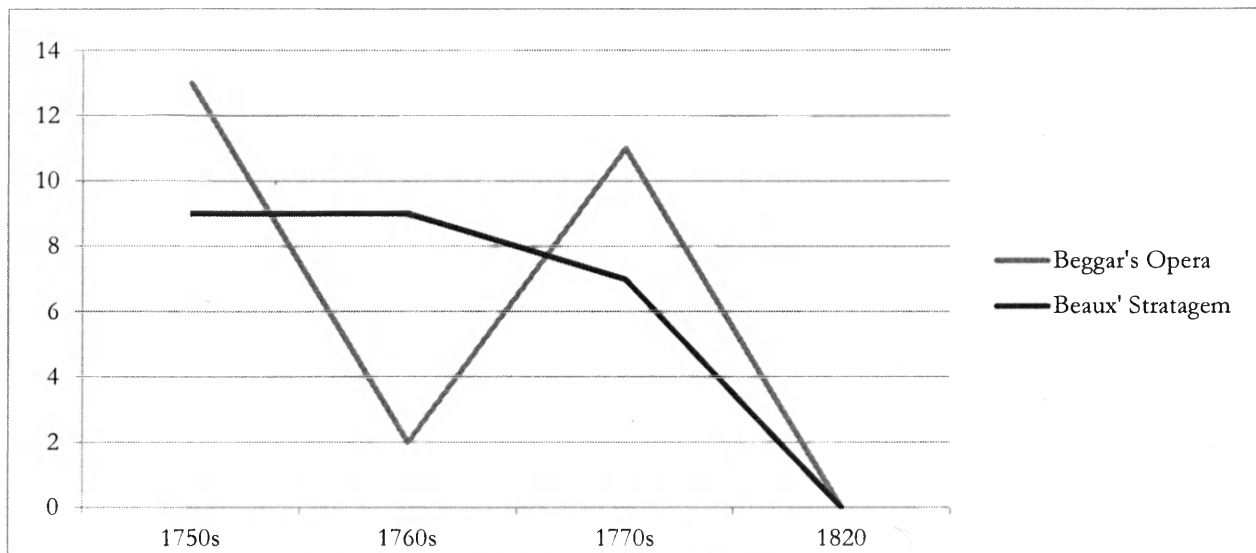


Table 1

Perhaps viewing only two of the most popular plays does not present enough proof of the changing views of widowhood, but nearly all of the most popular and enduring of the colonial plays featuring widows experienced a similar decline during those same years (see figures below). While the performance of *Beggar's Opera* from 1750-1770 had decreased more than 15%, *The Beaux's Stratagem* had decreased by more than 22%. *The Fair Penitent* lost 50% of its showings, *The Recruiting Officer* more than 45%, and *The London Merchant* by 60%. By the early years of the nineteenth century, virtually all of these performances had declined by nearly 100%. For all their “staying power” over the course of many generations, it is telling that they petered out after only a single generation following the Revolution. By the so-called “Era of Good Feelings,” public “feeling” had turned decidedly against them. The trend line taking into account each of these plays ( $y = -3X + 14$ ) expresses the indisputable Shakespearian-like downfall of widow-obsessed plays throughout the years 1750-1820.

	1750s	1760s	1770s	1820
Beggar's Opera	13	2	11	0
Beaux' Stratagem	9	9	7	0
The Provoked Husband	6	15	8	0
The Fair Penitent	10	12	5	0
The Recruiting Officer	11	5	6	0
The London Merchant	10	10	4	0
The Gamester	4	12	6	0
The Irish Widow	n/a	n/a	8	1



Table 2

The question remains why? Widows had predominated in plays for centuries-- from 1500s through the late 1700s. Suddenly, American audiences found them less compelling—when their characters were rendered both tragically and comically. Tragedies of blood and bawdy satires featuring them in prominent roles had ceased to threaten, elicit pity, or to entertain. Had widows and the plays featuring them all but vanished or had they merely shrugged their familiar guise for an alternate *disguise*?

#### Act IV. Donning a New Habit, Widowhood as Prelude to “Republican Motherhood”

In the last quarter of the eighteenth-century, Revolutionary Americans broke with convention by seceding from the British Empire and asserting their own American identity. Often, this involved decrying customs and mores associated with Britain and aristocratic pretensions—including and especially, the theater. As early as October 1774, the First Continental Congress sent out documents to neighboring British territories like Jamaica with high-minded writings “...discountenance[ing] and discourage[ing] every species of extravagance and dissipation, especially all horse racing, and all kinds of gaming, cock-fighting, exhibitions of shews, plays, and other...diversions and entertainments.”<sup>48</sup> Meanwhile, the Congress warned the Quebecois that “the Crown and its ministers shall be as absolute throughout your extended province, as the despots of Asia or Africa.”<sup>49</sup> Indeed, dire comparisons between Britain’s acquisition of “the East Indies, where the effeminacy of the inhabitants promised an easy conquest” and its behavior in America were continuously made. There [in India], “they [the British] thought it unnecessary to veil their tyrannic principles...In Britain, where the maxims of freedom were still known, but where *luxury and dissipation* had diminished the wanton reverence for them, the attack had been carried on in a more secret and indirect manner.” The document then thundered that “the Americans are not *enervated by effeminacy*, like the inhabitants of India, nor debauched by luxury, like those of Great-Britain.”<sup>50</sup> Neatly, the British, Native Americans, and all those who professed loyalty to Britain were grouped as “others,” lacking masculinity and possessed of debauched femininity—the

---

<sup>48</sup>John Adams, *The Papers of John Adams, Volume 2* <

<http://www.masshist.org/publications/apde/portia.php?mode=p&id=PJA02p395>>.

<sup>49</sup> Quoted from David Armitage, *The Declaration of Independence: A Global History*. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007): 91, 51.

<sup>50</sup> Armitage, 51.

worst traits of widowhood. Americans, the Congress proclaimed, would not be castrated by tyranny in the form of Parliamentary governance, nor would it succumb to the British luxuries of the feminized theater which had aided in the gradual ‘dissipation’ of the mother country. Again, in 1778 the Second Congress professed like a sermonizing old minister that “...frequenting the play houses and theatrical entertainments, has a fatal tendency to divert the minds of the people from a due attention to the means necessary for the defense of their country and the preservation of their liberties...any person...who shall act, promote, encourage, or attend such plays, shall be deemed unworthy to hold...office, and shall accordingly be dismissed.”<sup>51</sup> Public spectacle, then, would have political repercussions. The vision of America for the new Continentals had no place for the ‘wanton’ extravagances of the garish stage. As theatre suffered rebuke and association with the evils of the effeminate British, out-of-doors actions, in the tradition of carnival, charivari, and old-fashioned English riot became a manful means of social control and social protest. The Tea Party, burning effigies, and even the staging of punishment such as the parading of a tarred and feathered tax collector replaced, during the Revolutionary period, the frivolities of the theater. These out-of-doors “rituals vent[ed] the passions in an attempt to restore the colonies to health...groups like the Sons of Liberty [were] conscious of the need for both release and for some control over ritual protest...the Sons literally and figuratively elevate[d] the enterprise from mere mob action to a socially productive act.”<sup>52</sup> Spectacle had thus begun to acquire a distinctly masculine tint.

---

<sup>51</sup> Armitage, 92.

<sup>52</sup> Jefferey H. Richards, *Theater Enough: American Culture and the Metaphor of the World Stage, 1607-1789* (London: Duke University Press, 1991): 210.



Along with political and social change, revolutions, in order to truly transform societies, must effect a cultural coup as well. The newly independent colonists needed to answer "...the questions of how to use culture in the making of radical political" metamorphosis, for "the culture...of the new citizens' everyday lives had to be remade." They realized that "in order to...create a nation changes were necessary...,[and] in an effort to make a culture appropriate to their vision of the polity, they melded repertoires they inherited from the world they were trying to leave with their new visions of what they hoped to create."<sup>53</sup> So, for a time, "American patriots rejected...English culture, rituals, and practices," including theatre, "but they also started the long and complicated process of creating and disseminating new ones"<sup>54</sup> The reborn theater at this critical juncture of the emergent American nation, as in earlier stages of colonial development, shows the emergence of culture alongside gendered constructions of language and society. The new republic's theater was a stage from which to reenact past bloody glories and to fantasize about future triumphs. This masculine rhetoric provided the unequivocal endorsement of "truth," "rationality," "patriotism," etc. With all these the theater was thus endowed, the tool of the new republic meant to represent the ideals of a virtuous country and the model of a new society. "For several years" after the Revolution "the 'bloody tragedy' would be nominally reenacted through the rhetoric of anniversary writers and speakers...the *Boston Gazette* described the event as a 'Theatre of Blood.'"<sup>55</sup> Recalling the 'tragedies of the blood' so often enjoyed during the Elizabethan and Stuart reigns, this new kind of theater replaced the deviant widow's body with the bodies of manly Patriots, her execution with

---

<sup>53</sup> Leora Auslander, *Cultural Revolutions: Everyday Life and Politics in Britain, North America, and France* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2009): 7-8.

<sup>54</sup> Auslander, 10.

<sup>55</sup> Richards, 215.

the unjust shooting of Bostonian heroes, her ambiguous character with the unimpeachable characters of American martyrs. The sixteenth-century ‘tragedy of the blood’ was reborn for a time in the virtuous attire of the new republic, both appealing to the public—the former to bloodlust and the latter to civic virtue.

While theatre’s critics certainly still denounced its immorality, its proponents had shifted their rhetoric to one comparing stage production to righteous manhood, evoking a new Americanness and a path to civic honor. Indeed, “...the American theatre, in many respects, ha[d] been highly censurable. But...some of its excesses [had been lopped off]” as if amputated from Revolutionary battle, “and the stage [was now] respected, as the imitation of life—the mirror of manners—the representation of truth.”<sup>56</sup> The staging of *Bunker-Hill* (1798) asked where one could find “A nobler theme than this, to grace the stage; / Where can one find in all th’ Historic page? / O! Rome and Cato’s fall, the world has rung, / Why not Columbia’s rising fame be sung?”<sup>57</sup> Another popular play, *André* (1797), a “Tragedy...Founded on the Tragic, recent and authentic story of the bold attempt, and death of Major ANDRE,” written by “a native of the U. States...” claimed that the author did not “vainly [toil]... for empty fame, / But to arouse that Patriotic flame: / Which in the deeds of your forefathers shone, /...bid their Sons the glorious impulse own!”<sup>58</sup> Emphasis on the fact of the playwright’s native’ birth and the usefulness of the theater in its ability to ‘arouse that Patriotic flame’ armed the stage with masculine forthrightness and bravery, countering the ‘idle’ and debauched attacks of pre-Revolutionary times. Theatre—the sticky residue of British culture, hard to remove from

---

<sup>56</sup> Jeffrey H. Richards, *Drama, Theatre, and Identity in the American New Republic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005): 311.

<sup>57</sup> *Drama, Theatre, and Identity*, 200.

<sup>58</sup> William Dunlap, *André: A Tragedy in Five Acts* (New York: Publications of the William Dunlap Society, 1887).

colonial America—became the resin and binding glue of a new American culture, causing one enthusiastic American to exclaim that ““well-regulated amusements are ESSENTIAL to the prosperity of” America. The theatre, its manifestations and reception, reveal much about the vision people had for America, the gendered language stressing how “The diversions of the stage are doubtless noble, manly and rational.”<sup>59</sup>

Women associated with the stage were often cast in the roles of republican mothers, helpmeets, and “The upholders of strage morality,” rather than licentious/sought-after widows<sup>60</sup>; once excoriated or pursued for their apparent looseness, and/or wealth, they transformed into “The fair associates of the scenick art; / Pride of the stage and pride of private life, / Whether held as actress, mother, wife.../ ‘Tis private virtue g[ave] their palm of fame.”<sup>61</sup> Much of the playwriting “reinforce[ed] the critical role of wives and mothers as ‘nationals’ who would instill national taste in their children from infancy as well as help their husbands’ loyalty to the nation and the polity.”

---

<sup>59</sup> *Drama, Theatre, and Identity*, 303.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid*, 312.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid*, 311.



Figure 3. *Mrs. Motte Directing Generals Marion and Lee to Burn Her Mansion to Dislodge the British* (1811?) by John Blake White (1781-1859); This painting shows a dramatic example of a famous widow sacrificing her home, the literal and metaphorical symbol of femininity, to aid the masculine war effort. Her virtue lies in her willingness to subordinate and set aside her lesser womanly goods and needs for the ‘greater’ national good of male patriot needs. Widow women of the new republic, in plays as well as paintings, were made the spectacles of moral stoicism, seemingly devoid of sexual threat—tropes from which to construct a national sense of identity and pride.

When poets and playwrights did mention widows, it was often in the context of masculine sacrifice and patriotism—the enactment of “the sanguinary ...and disconnected ghosts, with hollow groans [solemnizing] the fifth of March...come widowed mourner, here satiate thy grief; behold thy murdered husband gasping on the ground...while your streaming eyes are fixed upon the ghastly corpse [and] your feet slide on the stones bespattered with [your husband’s] brains.”<sup>62</sup> Or they called on red-blooded American men to act as saviors for “our virtuous wives, endeared to us by every tender tie, falling a sacrifice to worse than brutal violence, and perhaps like the famed

---

<sup>62</sup> Quoted from *Theater Enough*, 217.

Lucretia, distracted with anguish and despair, ending their wretched lives by their own fair hands.”<sup>63</sup> The widow acted as a trope used to illustrate a ‘glorious’ grief over martyred manhood, her tears spilling unashamedly over patriot graves—no longer was she the rich commodity or the cheap whore. In some sense, the theatre resurrected her along with the stage into a tool meant to awaken national sentiment in an age of American nation-building, usually to throw into starker relief and greater emphasis the virile, stout-hearted qualities of men—and in turn, the virility of the new nation. Charles Brockden Brown, author of the first American novel, wrote a dialogue in his *Alcuin* (1789) which chronicles the discussion between Mrs. Carter, a widow, and a school master as they debate the direction of the new republic and women’s place within it.<sup>64</sup> Although undecided, like the emerging nation and its still uncertain future, these early republican views on women and their debated privileges as shown on stage subtly revealed how widows were used to envision a new world rather than aspire (or castigate) an old one. Malfi no longer haunted the language of American theater, it seemed. Or had she? Did this new republican-infused language simply mask fears of an insecure new country protesting too much against its British roots? Had Americans truly strangled the spectre of the widow and replaced her with the wholesome “Republican Widow?” Studying some of the homegrown and popular plays of the early national period provide interesting answers. Mordechai Manuel Noah (1785-1851), labeled a hopeless and unoriginal imitator by detractors, nevertheless commanded a large American following for his dramas glorifying the new Republic. In his *She Would Be a Soldier*, fictive widow Christine enlisted in the army in order to escape her marriage and pursue her true love

---

<sup>63</sup> Ibid, 215.

<sup>64</sup> Charles Brockden Brown, *Alcuin: A Dialogue*, Cynthia A. Kierner, ed. (New York: NCUP, Inc., 1995).

Lenox as well as to win honor for the American cause in the War of 1812. When questioned by the corporal for her reasons for joining the ranks, the cross-dressing Christine replied proudly, “to serve my country...and though small, you will find me capable.” While imprisoned as a spy, Lenox at the last moment recognized her and saved her from a hanging in a manner similar to *The Beggar’s Opera*, but exhibiting an earnestness lacking in John Gay’s satire. Christine’s jilted lover, meanwhile, accepted her change of affections by paying her a left-handed compliment, praising “Miss Chrissy...[for] look[ing] very pretty in pantaloons, and mak[ing] a fine solger [sic], but after all, I’m glad to have escaped a wife who wears the breeches before marriage.”<sup>65</sup> Widows and fictive widows in popular American drama still pursued their own romances, cross-dressed, and acted independently of male authority--as they ever had--but they did not operate outside of the patriarchal structure of American society. Noah’s play still favored masculine endeavors like soldiering over more conventionally “feminine” contributions to the American nation-state, and Christine’s actions centered around winning the love and hand of the manful Lenox, thus settling into the conventionally feminine role of wife and eventual mother—even if she wore “breeches,” too.

---

<sup>65</sup>Mordechai Manuel Noah, *She Would Be a Soldier, Or The Plains of Chippewa* (1819) <<http://www.readbookonline.net/read/53603/100048/>> accessed 13 November 2012.

## Act V. Malfi's Ghost

Interestingly, only much later when melodrama and the play had lost its power to threaten, the Duchess pitied rather than feared and the play regarded as hardly Webster's best, descending into "less revelatory truth" of melodrama, did *Malfi* and other plays of its particular ilk begin to be collected in American folios, performed on stage, and advertised in personal libraries. In a certain way, these past plays had been sterilized of their power by having been placed in the feminized realm of irrational "melodrama," characteristics Victorians frequently assumed belonged to the "weaker" sex. Those widows, some probably assumed, suffered from a kind of sexual hysteria or neuroses commonly attributed to many overly-troubled and overly-rich fin-de-siècle women.

By the beginning of the nineteenth century, the widow and fictive widow in drama had gone from the deviant woman brutally punished for transgressing patriarchal bounds, to a comedic character advancing male protagonists to positions of power. Finally in the early American Republic, she became a woman possessed of a virtuous and plucky independence—a peculiarly unthreatening independence that served the purposes of cementing a new American patriarchal society in which dependence in marriage was the inevitable end result. Bonding her in matrimony instead of strangling her with wire became the preferred method in early national drama of depicting the issue of widowhood and unruly wives/fictive widows. "Republican widowhood," at least in imagery and popular depictions, illustrated the emerging values of the new nation and its discussions of gender. The female romantic aggressor, the cross-dresser, and the independently wealthy widow (subsumed under the category "fictive widow") were characters of light-hearted farce which cemented boundaries of Americanness instead of

focusing on the breaking of boundaries by such “gender-bending” women. Cross-dressing, actively pursuing romantic interests, and flouting male entertainment was accepted so long as these activities served the “higher” means of virtuous American service and neat, heteronormative matches at the curtain’s final close.

After the Revolution the “problem” of widows and their presence in the theater was solved by equating both as visual representations of femininity that served to highlight a national masculinity born of war. What was once cast as threatening and ambiguous, then cast out, was now cast in the premier role of national helpmate—the widow and theater were safely ‘married’ to the nation. Though it has left behind few rich sources, and the performances themselves cannot again be seen, this and especially earlier American theater attracted a great number of followers as well as antagonists, both choosing to use gendered language often describing the supposed qualities of widows in order to articulate their preferred visions of colonial society. Far from belonging to the fringes of and edges of British Empire in North America, theater and discussions about drama allow historians a window into colonial souls—a dramatic story itself in which competing models of society formed something altogether more complex than imagined. In the absence of sources, one can still draw important conclusions. Only listen to Malfi’s ghost.



Appendix<sup>66</sup>

Year	Place	Play	Widow?
1666	College of William and Mary	Ye Bear and Ye Cubb	?
1736	College of William and Mary	Cato/ The Busybody/Beaux' Strategem	Yes
1750	Boston	Orphan	no
1750	New York	The Beau in the Suds	Yes
1750	New York	The Spanish Friar	no
1750	New York	Richard III	no
1751	New York	The Busy Body	yes
1751	New York	King Richard III	no
1751	New York	Sir Harry Wildair and Trip to the Jubilee	no
1751	New York	Recruiting Officer	yes
1751	New York	Beaux' Strategem	Yes
1751	New York	George Barnwell	?
1751	New York	Beggar's Opera	Yes
1751	New York	The Distressed Mother	yes
1751	New York	Love for Love and Bold Stroke for a Wife	yes
1751	New York	The Mock Doctor/The Devil to Pay/The Walking Statue/The Old Man Taught Wisdom/Damon and Phillida/Hob in the Well/Miss in Her Teens	yes
1751	New York	Orphan	no
1751	New York	The Virgin Unmasked	?
1752	Williamsburg	The Merchant of Venice	no
1752	Annapolis	The Beggar's Opera/ The Lying Valet	Yes
1752	Annapolis	Cato/ The Busybody	yes
1753	New York	The Conscious Lovers/Damon and Phillida	?

<sup>66</sup> Statistics taken from secondary source Odai Johnson and William J. Burling's *The Colonial American Stage: 1665-1774, a Documentary Calendar* (Williamsburg, VA: 2002) and advertisements from the *Virginia Gazette*, *The Pennsylvania Journal and Weekly Advertiser*, and *The New York Mercury*.

**Mainpieces**

1st colonial season	Number Known Performances	Name
1730	35	Romeo and Juliet
1732	34	Beaux' Stategem
1750	33	Richard III
1733	32	The Beggar's Opera
1752	30	The Provoked Husband
1736	29	George Barnwell
1732	28	Cato
1752	28	The Recruiting Officer
1735	27	The Orphan
1750	25	The Fair Penitent
1752?	24	Hamlet
1754	24	The Gamester
1759	22	Douglas

1st Known Colonial	Number Known Performances	Name
1751	42	Lethe
1750	41	The Lying Valet
1751	38	Miss in Her Teens
1751	35	Damon and Phillida
1736	34	The Devil to Pay
1766	27	Catherine and Petruchio
1769	26	The Padlock
1767	26	High Life Below Stairs
1752	25	The King and the Miller of Mansfield
1752	24	The Honest Yorkshireman
1753	24	Harlequin Collector

## Bibliography

- Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. (New York: Verso, 2006).
- Appelbaum, Stanley, ed. *Old-Time Woodcuts from the Nineteenth-Century Stage*. (New York: 1977).
- Armitage, David. *The Declaration of Independence: A Global History*. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007).
- Auslander, Leora. *Cultural Revolutions: Everyday Life and Politics in Britain, North America, and France*. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2009).
- Coontz, Stephanie. *Marriage, a History: How Love Conquered Marriage* (New York: Penguin Books, 2005).
- Daly, Charles P. *First Theater in America*. (New York: 1896).
- Darnton, Robert. *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History*. (New York: Basic Books, 1984).
- Demos, John Putnam. *Entertaining Satan: Witchcraft and the Culture of Early New England*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).
- Dorman, James H. *Theater in the Antebellum South*. (Chapel Hill, NC: 1967).
- Hamilton, Clayton M. "'The Duchess of Malfi' Considered as a Tragedy-of-Blood," *The Swanee Review* 4, no. 9. (October 1901).
- Jankowski, Theodora. *Women in Power in the Renaissance Drama* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1992).
- Johnson, Odai. *Absence and Memory in Colonial American Theatre: Fiorelli's Plaster*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).
- Johnson, Odai and William J. Burling. *The Colonial American Stage, 1665-1774: A Documentary Calendar*. (Cranbury, NJ: 2001).
- Karlsen, Carol F. *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman: Witchcraft in Colonial New England*. (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1998).
- Koslofsky, Craig. *Evening's Empire*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).
- Lepore, Jill. *New York Burning*. (New York: Vintage Books, 2003).

------. *The Name of War: King Philip's War and the Origins of American Identity*. (New York: Vintage Books, 1999).

McClintock, Anne. *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest*. (New York: Routledge, 1995).

Moody, Richard. *America Takes the Stage, 1750-1900*. (Bloomington, IN: 1955).

Nash, Gary. *The Urban Crucible: Social Change, Political Consciousness, and the Origins of the American Revolution*. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press

Nathans, Heather. *Early American Theatre: From the Revolution to Thomas Jefferson*. (Cambridge: 2003).

Norton, Mary Beth. *Founding Mothers and Fathers: Gendered Power and the Forming of American Society*.

------. *In the Devil's Snare: The Salem Witchcraft Crisis of 1692*.

Rankin, Hugh F. *The Theater in Colonial America*. (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1965).

------. *The Theater in Colonial America*. (Chapel Hill, N.C.: Unpublished Thesis for Colonial Williamsburg, 1959).

Richards, Jeffrey H. *Drama, Theatre, and Identity in the American New Republic*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

------. *Theater Enough: American Culture and the Metaphor of the World Stage, 1607-1789*. (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1991).

Steen, Sarah Jayne. "The Crime of Marriage: Arbella Stuart and the Duchess of Malfi." *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 22, no. 1 (Spring 1991).

Wilson, Kathleen. *The Island Race: Englishness, Empire and Gender in the Eighteenth Century*. (New York: Routledge, 2003).

Whigham, Frank. *Seizures of the Will in Early Modern English Drama*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996)