Women Beware Women
and the Economy of Rape

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In February 1986 the Royal Court Theatre in London presented a new version of Middleton's *Women Beware Women*, reshaped and substantially rewritten by the English dramatist Howard Barker. His version ends with a rape, carried out presumably in the interests of some kind of enlightenment, a gesture which he seems to think valuable and necessary. In a violent world, only a violent act can split sex off from what drags it down and under—its linkage with money and power. Thus Barker, a male playwright, claims to bring liberation to a woman through sexual violence. As male author of this paper, I'm afraid I lack Barker's cocksureness. On the contrary, as a critic influenced by and sympathetic to feminism, but unsure whether it's really possible for a man to write feminist criticism (at least at the present juncture), I tread warily in the minefield of gender, though I am aware that Middleton highlights it in both title and text. Barker, it seems, wants to split power off from gender, to let passion free, but in Middleton things are not that easy. How can the sexual dancers be liberated from the dance? Not, surely, just by following the same old steps with a different intention.

*Women Beware Women* examines the pressures of sexual power in a quite startling way. At its center stands a rape, presented not as a brutal motive for revenge, as in *Titus Andronicus*, nor simply as a way of impelling one element of the plot, as in *The Revenger's Tragedy*, but as an emblem of hierarchy and an image of the domination that characterizes most of the play's relationships. The Duke, accustomed to power, uses his authority to crush Bianca's

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resistance ("I am not here in vain. . . . I can command, / Think upon that" [II.ii.334, 362-63]). The confrontation is a variation of the old case of the master, the seigneur, exacting his "right": and it includes the woman's fear and inevitable submission. Let's first rid ourselves of the idea that the Duke's action constitutes a seduction (which is what virtually every critic calls it) rather than a rape. Middleton is very explicit about this. He locates the issue where it belongs—in the area of power relations—and deliberately leaves ambiguous the legal bugaboo of consent. (In fact the difference between seduction and rape, hinging on the idea of consent, is not nearly as stable as the two terms, themselves part of a male discourse, would have us believe.) Bianca is clearly frightened, and her fear results precisely from her awareness of her own social, sexual, and even physical inferiority:

Duke.        Do not tremble
            At fears of thine own making.
Bianca.       Nor, great lord,
            Make me not bold with death and deeds of ruin
            Because they fear not you; me they must fright.
            Then am I best, in health.

(II.ii.349-53)^2

Bianca's fearfulness is a mark of her social position: not only a woman, not only an inferior, but also a stranger to Florence whose wary uncertainty is one of her most consistent features.³ Hence her need for protection, and hence also her submission to, and ultimate embracing of, the Duke. But this, at least at first, is not the same as consent. She is caught in a fierce economy of sexual exchange—she is indeed the currency of that exchange, exactly as she had been for her husband at the beginning of the play:

View but her face [says Leantio], you may see all her dowry,
Save that which lies locked up in hidden virtues,
Like jewels kept in cabinets.

(I.i.54-56)

The duke is more aristocratic, but equally straightforward; when Bianca protests, "Why should you seek, sir, / To take away that you can never give?" he replies,

But I give better in exchange: wealth, honour.
She that is fortunate in a duke's favour
Lights on a tree that bears all women's wishes.

(II.ii.369-71)
He goes on explicitly to downgrade what her husband can offer in exchange for her body—"necessities, means merely doubtful"; he offers himself as shelter from the storms of want, and concludes: "We'll walk together, / And show a thankful joy for both our fortunes" (lines 376-87).

Significantly, Bianca says nothing in response to this and the two of them exit to complete the transaction. Her silence is parallel to that of Isabella at the end of Measure for Measure who, like Bianca, is apparently nonplussed by an inescapable economy: for the second time in as many days, authority, in the person now of Duke Vincentio himself, not Angelo his substitute, is asking Isabella to barter her body for her brother's life. Of course, Claudio has already been saved, and this is the moment of comic closure, but the difficulties of Shakespeare's ending are notorious. The fact that we are dealing in Women Beware Women with a different Duke and (perhaps) a rather different kind of woman (though I wouldn't want to exaggerate their differences: both are young, fearful, ardent, somewhat alienated, and uncertain how to handle their sexuality in relation to the actual world) should not blind us to the structural similarity between the two situations. In both cases the impasse that the woman finds herself in is registered by her silence, forcing an interpretation on reader or actor, so that her consent becomes a matter of how we read, and hence of our own cultural context. The text as it were withholds its consent, teasing us by its very reticence. Furthermore, recent feminist criticism has made us alert to the meaning of silence as it bespeaks powerlessness and passivity, the woman as the object of the male gaze and hence eroticized and cut off from subjectivity, desire, and action. In this play, and indeed in a good deal of Renaissance literature, this silence is tied up with Petrarchan images, where, as Nancy Vickers argues, the original male transgression of gazing and the subsequent punishment of dismemberment, figured in the Actaeon myth, are reversed and the lady is ultimately silenced while the poet sings in praise of her scattered beauties. What matters here is the woman's body, how it is viewed, imaged, handled, and exchanged.

That Women Beware Women generates this kind of thinking emerges from a consideration of how it represents marriage. In all the play's marriages it is made crudely explicit that the woman's body is a commodity, a "purchase" or "treasure" (I.i.12, 14) to be bought (or stolen) and hoarded. (Even in the reversed situation later in the play, when Livia claims a passive Leantio, there is a close link between her
sexual availability and her treasure—“You never saw the beauty of my house yet, / Nor how abundantly fortune has blessed me / In worldly treasure” [III.iii.358-60]). In Leantio's case the dominant metaphor is economic, in keeping with his job as a factor and his role in the play as chief exponent of petit bourgeois values. Sex, for him, is an economic temptation—one kind of “business” (I.i.153) undoes the other—“It spoils all thrift, and indeed lies abed / To invent all the new ways for great expenses” (I.iii.11-12). For him, the “expense of spirit” is literal; he must save his wealth (sexual and monetary) and spend it “careful[ly]” (line 42). In keeping with Leantio's commercialized, debased Petrarchanism, I don't think it coincidental that Bianca first appears at a distance, that she says nothing, and that we, like the Mother, are called upon to gaze at her:

And here's my masterpiece: do you now behold her! Look on her well, she's mine. Look on her better. Now say, if 't be not the best piece of theft That ever was committed.

(I.i.41-44)

She is indeed his master-piece, a token that reveals his mastery, his theft.

For the Ward, the bridegroom of the sub-plot, the dominant metaphor is athletic, in particular the crude, brutally physical “sports” of tipcat and trap that he plays with Sordido. This leads to all sorts of obvious phallic puns on cat-stick, trap-stick, and shuttlecock, all dedicated to an analogous form of mastery, as well as the more pervasive and insidious pun on “game” which extends to the main plot as well. Conversely, the predominant economic metaphor of the Leantio plot is carried over into the sub-plot through the haggling and finagling over the marriage of the Ward and Isabella. Probably no scene in Jacobean drama represents so graphically the commodification of women as that in which the Ward and Sordido peer down Isabella's throat and peep under her skirts in their efforts to scan “all her parts over” (III.iv.43) before buying. As in the main plot, economics and erotics come together here in the act of speculation. Isabella is not only a valuable commodity to be ventured for, she is also a visual, erotic object to be looked at. And the numerous sexual puns throughout the scene suggest what Laura Mulvey, following Freud, calls scopophilia—an eroticism of looking. The thrust of the scene is clearly voyeuristic, and fetishistic, insofar as the woman's parts are enumerated and
investigated severally. It thus parodies the Petrarchan mode. Linking psychoanalysis with feminism in a perceptive reading of film imagery, Mulvey argues that voyeurism connects not only with fear of castration and, from that, sadism, but also with the viewer’s own involvement. As she bluntly puts it, “sadism demands a story”; hence, for her, the genesis of narrative. Without perhaps going quite that far, we might note two peculiarities of the scene which such a theory would help explain: the comic but nonetheless real anxiety that the Ward and Sordido show in the face of the woman, and Isabella’s punning allusion to ball-playing, castration, and sexual sport, “I have catched two in my lap at one game” (III.iv.91). Most commentators refuse to take the Ward seriously, seeing him as vulgar comic relief, but I think we ought to ask what exactly he is doing in the text. As I see it, he is a brutalized embodiment of the male fantasies in operation in the rest of the play—he does the same thing as Leantio and the Duke, only in a cruder way. Beyond that, as audience to the Ward’s voyeurism, we are brought uncomfortably into the story, implicated in its processes, made to watch the watchers. This is a familiar tactic in Jacobean drama, but Middleton uses it in an unfamiliar way. He is less interested in dramatic self-reflexivity than in enacting power relations themselves.

However, in certain ways, he subverts himself and the complex moral point he is making. At the beginning of the scene under discussion, Isabella cites her own “advantage,” which arises ironically through her incestuous involvement with Hippolito—“But that I have th’ advantage of the fool . . . What an infernal torment ’twere to be / Thus bought and sold, and turned and pried into” (III.iv.33-36). Hence the irony cuts both ways: even as it establishes her limited options within the overall economy, it reminds us of her morally compromised position—the fact that she has already been sold to and pried into by Hippolito. The further irony of her being “really” a male actor was probably beyond even Middleton, although it could serve as an added element both erotic in itself and yet, in terms of the economy I have been discussing, distanced and alienating. At any event, our sympathy with Isabella is far from simple. We perceive her status as an object and commodity; we are induced into looking, gazing, through the Ward’s eyes; we are reminded of her/his theatrical presence; and we are not allowed to forget her incest. Significantly, she ends the scene silent, like Bianca and that other Isabella, her consent tacit and skeptical.

In his book, Drama and Society in the Age of Jonson, L. C. Knights scolds Middleton, finding him amoral, pragmatic, and
cynical, attitudes to which the Scrutiny group as a whole were unsympathetic.9 Had Knights looked a little more closely, however, he might have found a more precise perception of the social changes he was tracing than is typical of the other playwrights he discusses.10 Characters like Allwit in A Chaste Maid in Cheapside, for example, survive because they know how to manipulate commodities (including the lust of aristocrats and the bodies of their own wives) for their peculiar ends, and they know when to spend and when to save. The process by which spiritual values can be and are transformed into material goods is one that Middleton was deeply interested in. Knights’s problem was that he wanted his playwrights to be sharply critical of rising capitalist trends whereas Middleton was more concerned with tracing their effect on public and private experience. Leantio, in Women Beware Women, is a rewriting of Allwit into a darker context; when he loses Bianca to the Duke, he grudgingly accepts the latter’s offer of a captainship, “a fine bit / To stay a cuckold’s stomach” (III.iii.46-47). He never lets go of the mean-minded commercial attitude toward women and possession he had manifested earlier. Here is no tragic anagnorisis, simply an unsentimental picture of the bourgeois spirit, hurt but unchanged:

Here stands the poor thief now that stole the treasure,  
And he’s not thought on. Ours is near kin now  
To a twin-misery born into the world:  
First the hard-conscienced worldling, he hoards wealth up,  
Then comes the next, and he feasts all upon ’t—  
One’s damned for getting, th’ other for spending on ’t.  
(III.iii.88-93)

It is quite in keeping with this way of thinking that a little later in the same scene, Leantio, after briefly mourning Bianca’s loss, sells himself to the importunate Livia, and exits with the assurance, “Troth then, I’ll love enough, and take enough.” The underlying values and directions of nascent capitalism are, I think, more precisely delineated in such portraits than in the extravagant caricatures of Puritan acquisitiveness in Jonson.11 Nor is Middleton awed by the presence of old money and aristocratic generosity, which Knights sees in several Jacobean writers as an antidote to, or a bygone value threatened by, capitalism. In the clash between the Duke and Leantio over Bianca, Middleton coolly represents the ethos of aristocratic display crushing the opposing ethos of bourgeois thrift and secrecy—“feasting” vs. “hoarding” in Leantio’s terms.
At the end of Act I, the Duke first sees, and gazes at, Bianca. The moment is handled with typical Middleton irony—a procession, a look, and a conversation on the balcony between Bianca and her mother-in-law:

Bianca. Methought he saw us.
Mother. That's ev'ry one's conceit that sees a duke;
If he look steadfastly, he looks straight at them;
When he perhaps, good careful gentleman,
Never minds any, but the look he casts
Is at his own intentions, and his object
Only the public good.
Bianca. Most likely so.
(I.iii.105-11)

Here we have an intersection of two complementary codes, one erotic and textual, the other social. By the first, Bianca is the passive object of the male gaze, and is hence brought into the triangular narrative, made part of the story which will involve her rape. By the second, she enters the aristocratic arena simply by being on public view. Once Bianca is open, at the window, on display, she becomes subject to the milieu which values showing; hence, later, the Duke is discovered to her as a dazzling, costly portrait, and hence too, when Leantio finds that she is known (that Measure for Measure pun), he decides to lock his “life’s best treasure up” in the dark secret parlor where his father, “kept in for manslaughter” (III.ii.165-66), used to hide. He thus tries to keep her in the bourgeois world.

Despite their differences in position and style, however, there is a clear congruence in the underlying attitudes of Leantio and the Duke, which is registered in the language they use. Both, as I said, see the sexual exchange in economic terms: the woman is to trade her body for wealth, honor, protection, or whatever. There’s nothing specifically remarkable in this; it’s the standard fare of Jacobean drama, and reflects the dominant social practice, but Middleton seems intent on showing how similar these two characters really are.

“But that I glory in: ’tis theft, but noble / As ever greatness yet shot up withal” (I.i.37-38), says Leantio of his original “theft” of Bianca; the Duke counsels her likewise to “take hold of glory” (II.ii.374). Both seek to shelter their nervous treasure from storms:
But let storms spend their furies; now we have got
A shelter o'er our quiet innocent loves,
We are contented.

(Leantio at I.i.51-53)

Let storms come when they list, they find thee sheltered.

(Duke at II.ii.383)

Leantio speaks of Bianca as a masterpiece; the Duke first appears to her as exactly that, the monument of Livia's art collection, and then ironically reverses the silence and passivity suggested by that pose, and turns Bianca into his masterpiece, a figure that "makes art proud to look upon her work" (II.ii.343). More effectively than Leantio, he of course enactsthe mastery, both economic and phallic, that his metaphor implies. Even the language of restraint and imprisonment, so typical of Leantio's hoarding instinct, is part of the Duke's sexual vocabulary:

Strive not to seek
Thy liberty, and keep me still in prison.
I' faith you shall not, till I'm released now;
We'll be both freed together, or stay still by 't;
So is captivity pleasant.

(II.ii.329-33)

Thus do Leantio's "theft" and the Duke's rape turn out to be similar strategies carried on in the name of an identical power, even though the former is "sealed from heaven by marriage" and sanctioned by Bianca's consent. From this we can perhaps speculate that the play redefines aristocratic rape as a bourgeois act—one motivated by a spirit of possession and characterized by the deployment of a power that despite its flamboyance has a clear counterpart in middle-class marriage; indeed, the so-called "conjugal family" was marked by a distinct "reinforcement of patriarchy" during the Jacobean period.13

But what of the woman in this economy? According to Ian Maclean, who has done a thorough study of the Renaissance notion of woman, "Marriage is an immovable obstacle to any improvement in the theoretical or real status of woman in law, in theology, in moral and political philosophy."14 Isabella in Women Beware Women puts the matter even more bleakly:
When women have their choices, commonly
They do but buy their thraldoms, and bring great portions
To men to keep 'em in subjection—
As if a fearful prisoner should bribe
The keeper to be good to him, yet lies in still,
And glad of a good usage, a good look sometimes.
By 'r Lady, no misery surmounts a woman's:
Men buy their slaves, but women buy their masters.

(I.ii.169-76)

This extraordinary statement describes the experience of powerlessness using the dominant terms of exchange and the subsidiary image of imprisonment so crucial to the depiction of sexual relations and sexual desire both in this play and in Measure for Measure, a text that in many ways stands behind Women Beware Women as a precursor. But Isabella's very next lines deflate the perception she has just elaborated: "Yet honesty and love makes all this happy, / And, next to angels', the most blest estate." Either these lines are ironic, which seems unlikely, or they register an uncontrolled ambivalence, not only on Isabella's part, but on that of the play as a whole—an ambivalence parallel, I think, to that suggested by Shakespeare's rather shaky happy ending in Measure for Measure.

At other points in Women Beware Women, a similar doubleness is signalled by the combination of traditional anti-feminist clichés with unsentimental observation of either male fantasies about women or their actual social situation. The title itself shares the ambivalence; is it ironic? Does the play really ask us to take away only a simple anti-feminist message? Nowhere is the swing more noticeable than in the treatment of Bianca, in, for example, the before and after of the rape scene, and again in her final speeches. To take the second example first, the last scene blends the fervent and youthful romanticism of a Juliet with Bianca's own special, alien wariness ("What make I here? These are all strangers to me," V.ii.206), while at the same time, the two feelings are haunted by an alarmingly emblematic leprosy and accompanying moralistic fever:

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 honour! Learn by me
To know your foes; in this belief I die:
Like our own sex, we have no enemy, no enemy!

(V.ii.210-15)
Bianca destroys her beauty, convinced somehow that it is responsible, and dies guilty but repentant. So goes the economy: she is seen, desired, stolen (Leantio) or raped (the Duke), promoted (wife, Duchess), and killed off. In the process, her moral status declines, until it is restored by her death—she is “saved” by the very sadism that has made the story.

The clearest dramatization of what the process does to her is the aftermath of the rape scene, where the shift from modest innocence to brash experience is indecently rapid—condensed into a twenty-line speech. Anticipating the finale of the play, she first blames her beauty (“Why should I / Preserve that fair that caused the leprosy?” [II.ii.424-25]), then turns her anger, which in the early part of the speech is aimed at the Duke, on Guardiano who betrayed her, “a stranger.” By the end of the speech, she is “acquainted” with sin, “no couple greater,” and has embraced the treachery though she “hates the traitor.” In internalizing the rape as guilt, deflecting her anger away from the Duke and coming to love him, she displays the classic pattern of the victim succumbing to and embracing the inevitability of redefined power relations.

It is remarkable, if not really surprising, how often in discussions of rape, even in a modern, legal context, the belief that women provoke rape arises. Susan Griffin argues that this attitude makes the woman’s body, her desire, and hence her power, suspect:

Does not the guilt of the one who is raped, that shame of the “victim” so often called irrational . . . does it not in this ancient woman-hating frame become reasonable? . . . The very existence of our bodies [is seen as] provocation to violence . . . How does one move about the world in this body which has the power to invoke malevolence against oneself? . . . [And] what of our own desire? What of our experience of our bodies as we are inside ourselves, not as provocation but as being? . . . Our own desire, which is inseparable from our power in the world . . . becomes the harbinger of violence, the feelings in our bodies dangerous to our bodies, we enemies of ourselves.16

Griffin is reacting here not only to the social scientists and legal experts, but at least implicitly to those psychoanalysts, among them prominent women like Helene Deutsch, who believe that female masochism is “natural.”17 What Griffin defines is the problem of a space for women’s power, although in relying on a model of domination and victimization for her analysis, she perhaps over-
simplifies the issue. Recently, some feminist critics have sought to redefine traditional power relations in terms of the woman's frequently subversive place both in the text and in the world. Power is not just a matter of domination, but in Foucault's terms, a network of force relations with, by definition, points of resistance; it is "the name that one attributes to a complex strategical situation in a particular society."\textsuperscript{18}

The figure of Livia in the play illustrates some of these issues provocatively, with the same ambivalent swing between simplistic moral judgment and acute social observation noticeable in the cases of Bianca and Isabella. Bianca's final comment, "O the deadly snares / That women set for women," which the audience has just seen acted out in a serio-comic way in the masque,\textsuperscript{19} expresses the prevalent view of Livia's behavior: by devious means she destroys the innocence of the young women in her orbit. True, she has some scruples about suggesting Isabella into incest, but sincere sisterly love for Hippolito (itself a little suspect) impels her. With Bianca she has no scruples at all, constructing around the central rape scene the elaborate charade of the chess match, which acts out in comic ritual the deadlier game being played on the upper stage and behind the scenes. The Bianca-Duke sequence is both surrounded by the chess game and counterpointed with it (Livia and the Mother continue their game on the lower stage as the crucial scene unfolds on the upper). This has the effect of partially reducing the seriousness of the rape scene, since we view it as something signified by and signifying a chess match. But this effect is modified by the intensity of domination and victimization dramatized in the confrontation between the Duke and Bianca. Hence a dual reading of the scene as a whole is established: from one perspective we are absorbed, or repelled, by the spectacle of male power; from the other we are intrigued by the cleverness of Livia's representation of that spectacle.

As Shakespeare had shown in \textit{The Tempest}, and Middleton was to illustrate much more fully a few years after \textit{Women Beware Women}, chess is a powerful theatrical symbol because it condenses and transforms conflict into game through semiotic operations akin to those of the theater.\textsuperscript{20} Livia, a theatrical manager par excellence, is fully aware of the potential of chess to point beyond itself, that is, to signify. She improvises her game with the Mother and teasingly transforms it into an ironic sign, marked by a series of puns on "business," "game," "man," "Duke," "ducat." There are two sides to the game, power (the Duke) and craft (Livia), and they reinforce each other. As the Duke exerts political force above, he also exercises
craft; as Livia marshalls her ludic skill below, she also displays power. Taken together, the various elements of the scene—the split focus, the punning, and especially Livia’s ironic self-awareness—highlight the fact that one stage event stands for another. According to Keir Elam, semiosis in the theater is usually projected outward towards the depiction of a represented world; here, however, the “meaning” of the chess game derives from our recognition of it as a sign of another sign.

It is thus that Livia asserts her power. In controlling the lives of Bianca and Isabella, and by transforming the chess game into a reflexive event, she defines a space for herself. Hers is a power of signification and the fabrication of meanings. Her semiosis is, or seeks to be, subversive—she, as it were, takes back language and representation from dominant figures. Her house boasts a famous picture gallery in which the Duke himself appears as a grand monument. However, when she tries to assert her desire directly, as she does later with Leantio, she loses. In moving from her game of deliberate representation into the world of sexual commerce, she both loses sympathy and undoes herself. The Duke, as it turns out, is not a chess piece after all. Livia’s careful construction of meanings is unmetaphored, the Duke asserts his actual power, and Livia is crushed. So too her climactic attempt to translate symbolic forms into reality (that is, to transform the masque from a theatrical, and hence representational, event into a “real” event) backfires.

The chess game ends in mate, as the love scene does. In both cases the loser is trapped, unable to move. The pun is deftly appropriate. Sexual mating leads to checkmate, and even the strategies that the players adopt to avoid the traps that their matings set don’t work. This result applies to all the couples in the play and is the source of all the ironic reversals at the end. Livia’s chess strategy has collapsed, and eventually all the kings and queens, bishops and even pawns are toppled. Note, however, that the major reversals come as a result of botched attempts on the part of women to assert their desire and power in the actual world—to move out of the realm of fantasy or the symbolic and into the world of life and death.

That curious ending has elicited a good deal of comment, ranging from those who see it as sensational incompetence on Middleton’s part, a hapless descent into allegory, to those who see it as dramatizing incompetence in a mocking indictment of tragedy itself, and thus as a deflation of Middleton’s own project. In the latter reading the moral intention is deliberately undermined, while in the former, the moral intention is clear but unsuccessfully or too
obtrusively enacted. In between, we have the view, best exemplified by Mulryne, that "the scene plays itself out like a speeded-up newsreel, and produces a similar effect, at once farcical and horrible."\textsuperscript{23} For him, the moral ironies are patent (Livia as the marriage goddess, for example), structurally fitting, and paramount, while the grotesque comedy of the masque, far from being a blemish, underlines the uncertainties of life in the represented world.

I would prefer to approach the scene as the result of two coherent and independent modes of thinking and dramatizing which come into overt conflict in the concluding masque. I have been suggesting that at various times in the text a double commitment is observable: one an effort to register as precisely as possible the social position of women in relation to semiotic, economic, and sexual power; the other, in conflict with the first, a frequent tendency to reassert a conventional moral view of sexual power relations, in particular to condemn women as devious, lecherous, and corrupt. Indeed, this latter aspect was the meaning singled out by the first published critic of the play, Nathaniel Richards, who wrote in his commendatory verses printed in the first edition (1657):

\begin{quote}
\textit{Women Beware Women, 'tis a true text}

Never to be forgot: drabs of state, vexed,
Have plots, poisons, mischiefs that seldom miss,
To murder virtue with a venom kiss

\begin{flushright}
he [Middleton] knew the rage,
Madness of women crossed; and for the stage
Fitted their humours—hell-bred malice, strife
Acted in state, presented to the life.\textsuperscript{24}
\end{flushright}
\end{quote}

Even Richards softens his condemnation by inserting the participles "vexed" and "crossed" to designate the source of feminine fury, thereby admitting some ambiguity or extenuation. (It's odd, ironic, and no doubt revealing that Richards gives weight to the startling metaphor, "venom kiss," when a quick glance at Jacobean tragedy shows \textit{men} to be literal specialists at this particular art—witness Vindice, or Brachiano and his conjuror as explicit examples, Othello or Ford's Giovanni as only slightly displaced ones. Bianca, successful where Juliet was not, uses the venom kiss to kill \textit{herself}.)

At any rate, the vexed and crossed woman attacks with energy, and there is plenty of evidence in both the language and action of the last scene to justify Richards's interpretation. It won't do, I think, to
explain it all away as ironic, or as generally moral rather than as explicitly anti-feminist. Conversely, the comedy of the final scene seems to deflate the moral posture and to do so almost inadvertently. There is at one and the same time a conventional moral rendering of the meaning of these events, made explicit by Richards, and a clear failure of dramatic commitment to that position. It is precisely the gaps opened up by the conventional reading, its failure to represent actual experience, that make the alternative, subversive reading not only possible but necessary.

The role of the Cardinal, normally taken as either straight or ironic by commentators, illustrates the strain the text is under. In the course of one powerful modern production, there was a ripple of audible relief in the audience when the Cardinal made his great fourth act denunciation. From a purely theatrical point of view, condemnation at that moment of the increasingly grotesque antics of these characters seems dramatically desirable, even necessary. And Middleton provides it. But the impossibility of sustaining the critique, its theatrical impertinence later on, renders the Cardinal almost speechless in Act V, until, of course, he's allowed the conventional moral tag at the end. His capitulation marks him out not so much as an inconsistent character, still less as the voice of the playwright, but rather as an overt image of irresolvable textual contradiction. And the breakdown in the character underlines the dramatic split displayed by the masque, with its combination of moral suasion and theatrical artifice.

Nearly forty years earlier, Kyd had linked revenge and the artifice of the masque in the interests of effective closure, but even he had not escaped, or resisted, the encroachment of ambiguity and self-subversion, the possibility of mute meaninglessness and "endless tragedy" (the concluding words of the play). He too had played with comic misunderstandings on the part of his bewildered onstage audience, as Middleton does in Women Beware Women, and had forced upon them a retrospective reinterpretation of their theatrical experience as tragically "real." (In The Spanish Tragedy this technique is further complicated by the continuing presence of Andrea and Revenge as another audience.) This strategy tends to break down the boundaries between categories, whether moral or aesthetic; theater in these endings has a way of dissolving into "reality" (and vice versa) and its ontological slipperiness becomes a model for the difficulty, even impossibility, of forging unambiguous moral assertions. The masque ending produces closure with a vengeance, but that closure paradoxically opens a gap between the
projected meaning of experience—what it means for both the onstage audience and for the "real" audience—and the experience itself. It thereby "threatens [as Eagleton remarks in relation to post-structuralist and Freudian theory] the ideological security of those who wish the world to be within their control, to carry its singular meaning on its face and to yield it up to them in the unblemished mirror of their language." To seek ideological security in the play is to read it as Richards did.

We witness in the final scene of *Women Beware Women*, I would therefore argue, a rupture in the text wherein a moralized rendering of experience is revealed as no longer tenable. This generates contradictory critical interpretations, but neither the ironic nor the straight reading really acknowledges the textual gap. The close analysis of power relations so evident earlier in the play is at least partially revoked in the final scene, leading us to the view that there was no way for the forms available to Middleton to produce a satisfactory conclusion to that dramatic line. He falls back on the grotesque farce of the masque, not as a cop-out, but as the only way of registering the dilemma posed by the conflict he is dramatizing. The text at this point may be incoherent, but that incoherence is a sign of the divided way the play represents the experience of women (in both the subjective and objective senses of that phrase).

Howard Barker, to end where I began, wants to eliminate the incoherence and what he sees as the moralistic convention of Middleton's ending. He seeks to take a critical stance against sexual domination—state power metaphorically and actually linked to sexual power and money—by bringing into play what he calls "the redemptive power of desire"; but he ends up exploiting male fantasies against and about women as a mode of resolution. Sordido, a minor character in Middleton, becomes central here, as does the Ward, no longer a fool but a clever clown-lover angling for Isabella and playing the fool to hide his despair, a "study in pain." Sordido is a bitter malcontent, part idealist and part madman, very much in the Jacobean, especially Websterian, mode. Barker calls him a "model of modern youth, culturally embittered." Significantly, Barker cuts the voyeuristic scene with Isabella (III. iv) from his re-cast text (of which the first half is all Middleton, cut and spliced, and the second half all Barker); he ends his play, as I noted at the beginning, with a second rape—Sordido punishing Bianca for her acquisitive complicity in her first rape. Her "protesting mouth" against the Duke was, says Sordido, "stopped, not by a fist, but greed and glamour suffocated it." So he, Livia, and the Ward plot to steal
“her toy virginity” as a pseudo-political act by which “all the poor of Florence grab their rights.” The Ward crows in response to this plan, “While he, immaculate rebel, among her moist wound intrudes, I’ll shout out O exquisite robbery” (p. 31). Here we have a much more dangerous voyeurism-sadism than the Ward’s in Middleton, though it may indeed be one that is prevalent in our own society. But the problem is that it is here given the full weight of the play’s authority. The rape occurs in the final scene, just before the wedding, and immediately after it Bianca, who had been vain and frivolous, suddenly becomes insightful and tormented, looking for the meaning of desire and rejecting the easy link between sex and power. We thus get a kind of reversal of the degradation following the first rape. In keeping with the overall economy described earlier, Bianca’s status is raised—she is once again saved by sadism, though the outcome is different. She escapes rather than dies. The Duke, wanting her to go on with the charade of the wedding, threatens to kill her when she refuses, but relents and collapses, handing over power at last to the obsessively passionate lovers Livia and Leantio. But now a wedge has been driven between these two and they are specifically enjoined, in the last words of the play, “Don’t love! don’t love!” (p. 36). Love should be more important than power, but the tragedy is that it may not be possible to sustain such a view. So sex is to be separated from power once again, power crushing and destroying passion, while rape is represented as an instrument of liberation from power and greed. The idea would be absurd if it were not so serious. Unlike Middleton, Barker seems unable to see the irony of his own position, and, doubly, the irony reflected back on sexual relationships by social hierarchies. Despite his claim for optimism over Middleton’s pessimism, his imagination feels darker and less resilient. He opts for a ferocious consistency, but Middleton’s ending seems, by comparison, more honest and more truthful, just because it is more confused.

In Middleton’s version, an awareness of what rape means in the social and political economy, its relationship to sexual blackmail, social institutions, and political power, finds a place in the text but no effective way out of it. Barker’s way out of the dilemma seems as bad as the original problem. The dramatic fiasco of the masque reveals Middleton wrestling unsuccessfully with closure and suggests the impossibility of bridging the gap between genre and an often acute perception of gender, at least within traditional ideological limits—within the limits, that is, of the “discursive practices” available to him.
NOTES


2 The text I have used is the Revels edition, J. R. Mulryne, ed. (1975; rev. edn. Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press, 1983).


7 Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Screen 16,3 (Autumn 1975):6-18. As the title suggests, Mulvey seeks to show how the viewer's own pleasure is implicated in the construction of male-dominant images of women. The importance of this influential article can scarcely be overestimated. See also Teresa de Lauretis, Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1984), esp. ch. 5.


10 T. B. Tomlinson, writing in the Scrutiny tradition, does just this in A Study of Elizabethan and Jacobean Tragedy (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1964). He suggests that Middleton is interested in "exploring and commenting on the entry of . . . commercial values and modes . . . into the business of living and loving" (p. 172).

11 Mulryne calls the portrait of Leantio "a perfect stereotype . . . of the bourgeois mind" (p. lxiii).

12 See Mulvey, p. 14, and de Lauretis, pp. 103ff. It can readily be seen from my view of this moment and what follows from it, that I strongly disagree with the sense of the scene, and indeed the whole play, propounded by A. A. Bromham in a recent issue of this journal: "Political Meaning in Women Beware Women," SEL 26,2 (Spring 1986):319ff. Bromham ignores the ironies surrounding the word "peace" and downplays the role and position of women in the play. The use of the upper stage in this scene (and subsequently) is the subject of an interesting essay in the same issue of SEL, although I cannot agree with all its conclusions either: Leslie Thomson, "'Enter Above': The Staging of Women Beware Women," pp. 331-43.


15Margot Heinemann, _Puritanism and Theatre_ (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1980), comments in general: "What is new in [Middleton's] plays is not so much the sexual situations as the ability of the women to reflect on them in general terms, and the natural way in which exploitation by men is shown as contributing to aggressiveness or deceit in women" (p. 194).


19Several critics have emphasized the grotesque comedy of the masque: Heinemann, p. 197, Mulryne, p. lvii, and Nicholas Brooke, _Horrid Laughter in Jacobean Tragedy_ (London: Open Books, 1979), pp. 105ff.

20The precise nature of chess allegory has been the subject of some debate lately. See, for example, Paul Yachnin, "A Game at Chess and Chess Allegory," _SEL_ 22 (Spring 1982):317-30, and Neil Taylor and Bryan Loughrey, "Middleton's Chess Strategies in _Women Beware Women_," _SEL_ 24 (Spring 1984):341-54. Neither of these articles seems to me to stress hard enough the fundamental issue—that chess symbolism necessarily reduces and condenses actual conflict and hence draws attention to the semiosis itself. See my essay on _The Tempest_ in Anthony B. Dawson, _Indirections: Shakespeare and the Art of Illusion_ (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1978).


22See Tomlinson, pp. 183-84, for the former point of view, and Brooke, pp. 108-10, for the latter.

23Mulryne, p. lvii.

24Revels edition, p. 3.

25I am indebted to Joel Kaplan for information on this production, which was presented at the Coach House Theatre, Toronto, in 1967, and directed by Brian Meeson. See also Mulryne, p. lxxviii.


