

“Vengeance rot you all!”:

Attaining Female Agency in Early Modern Revenge Tragedies

Merel Borgonje

1063286

Radboud University Nijmegen

BA Thesis in English Literature

Supervisor: Dr Sonja Kleij

15 June 2020

Abstract

This thesis investigates the struggle of female characters, such as the Duchess, Bel-imperia, and Tamora, of attaining female agency in authoritative positions in *The Duchess of Malfi*, *The Spanish Tragedy* and *Titus Andronicus*, respectively. Current research on revenge tragedies fails to acknowledge this struggle and focuses primarily on male characters and their role in taking vengeance. To fill this gap, this thesis investigates to what extent female characters attained female agency after they challenged the ruling patriarchy. The theoretical framework of Feminist Theory, specifically Kristeva's notion of maternity, and Foucault's power theory will be used to analyse gender relations. This thesis demonstrates that female characters are, in fact, successful in attaining female agency to some extent but are severely countered by male characters that feel threatened by female power.

Keywords: *Female agency, The Duchess of Malfi, The Spanish Tragedy, Titus Andronicus, gender power dynamics*

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	5
Chapter 1: Transgressors or Freedom Fighters?: The Question of Female Agency.....	13
Chapter 2: Fight of Flight: Men Tightening their Grasp.....	19
Chapter 3: Overcoming Fearful Men.....	27
Conclusion.....	35
Bibliography.....	36

Introduction

Tanya Pollard summarises *The Duchess of Malfi* as “[i]n [the play], a disaffected hit man eventually retaliates against his two powerful patrons, a duke and a cardinal.”¹ The Duchess, the female main character, is thus not even mentioned in the summary of the play. Pollard is not alone in this neglect of female characters and their perspectives in revenge tragedies. Current research fails to acknowledge female characters and their struggle for power and is predominately focused on male characters, such as Hieronimo, Titus and Ferdinand. Indeed, research of Webster’s play often treats the Duchess as a passive side character that is used as a pawn in male schemes. When, in some rare cases, female characters are in fact investigated and assigned some agency, it is often put that the patriarchy will triumph in the end because of the male-dominated realm of social interactions. Research on female characters, such as Bel-imperia, the Duchess, and Tamora, is highly needed to fill this gap and provide a counterview of these male-oriented, existing research.

To investigate this research gap, this thesis will answer the question: to what extent did women struggle to attain female agency in authoritarian positions in the late 16th and early 17th century revenge tragedies of Webster’s *The Duchess of Malfi*, Kyd’s *The Spanish Tragedy*, and Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus*? The expectation is to find that female agency can, in fact, be ascribed to Tamora, the Duchess, and Bel-imperia. However, the latter to a lesser extent than the other two characters as her authority position is less powerful and significant compared to Tamora and the Duchess. I also expect to find that the patriarchy does have some power over these women but that they resist male agency, if not attempt to overrule it. I will be looking at female agency in governing functions in late 16th century and early 17th century plays because I want to investigate what was needed for women to attain powerful positions in society and claim female agency. This will help readers understand how the struggle and attempt of attaining female agency started long before the first wave of feminism in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. This study will also challenge the work of those who have long assumed that women were agentless beings and unable to attain powerful positions in the late 16th and early 17th centuries.

1 Tanya Pollard, “Tragedy and Revenge,” in *English Renaissance Tragedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 59.

The popularity of the revenge tragedy genre can be attributed to the fact that the audience enjoys witnessing wronged victims appease their desire for justice.² Political and social changes in England during the reign of Elizabeth I generated an immense demand for the genre.³ This was because the distribution of power was unstable at the time and, in turn, revenge addressed power abuse.⁴ Revenge tragedy is thus a useful genre to investigate female agency because it highlights asymmetrical power dynamics, which can also be underlined in gender dynamics. Pollard claims that women were assigned crucial roles in these plays.⁵ Women may defy conventional gender roles to challenge the male power abuse and with that maybe claim some form of agency since the woman is in this case the ‘wronged victim’ Pollard speaks of.

Furthermore, early modern English society was organised in very distinct class structures. Deviating from these structures was highly frowned upon. Thus, the rise of the middle class and its desire for social mobility created a lot of class antagonism and jealousy.⁶ As a result, the higher classes attempted to hold on to their privileges and their superior position in society. Consequently, cross-class marriages were slandered and seen as a disgrace.

Simultaneously, early modern citizens were also restricted in their behaviour by gender conventions. A man ruled over the objectified woman. Disrupting this power would create chaos and derange society.⁷ The woman was forced to live according to the trinity of chastity, obedience, and silence.⁸ Speaking up was considered a transgression and would suggest that the woman had loose morals. This view originated from the conviction that Eve

2 Ibid.

3 Pollard, 59.

4 Ibid.

5 Pollard, 65.

6 Christopher Crosbie, “Oeconomia and the Vegetative Soul: Rethinking Revenge in The Spanish Tragedy,” *English Literary Renaissance* 38, no. 1 (2008): 4.

7 Catherine Richardson, “Tragedy, family and household,” in *English Renaissance Tragedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 18-9.

8 Reina Green, “‘Ears Prejudicate’ in ‘Mariam’ and ‘Duchess of Malfi,’” *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 43, no. 2 (2003): 460.

seduced Adam to eat the forbidden apple through her speech.⁹ Speaking out of turn was therefore punished, which can specifically be seen in revenge tragedy plays.

Most of the research states that men are the dominant agents and more powerful than women in revenge plays. Green and Whigham portray Ferdinand in *The Duchess of Malfi* as a degrading aristocrat¹⁰ who is deaf to the Duchess's voice.¹¹ She is not deemed important enough to listen to. Hamamra further deepens this statement by stating that Ferdinand tries to overrule the Duchess with his misogynistic voice and incestuous inclinations.¹² In a different vein, Haber mentions how Ferdinand's incestuous tendencies are stated to be evidence for dominating male sexual desire and confirm the patriarchal setting.¹³

Likewise, Crosbie explains how Bel-imperia is also restricted by her social class and by male characters,¹⁴ like the Duchess, in *The Spanish Tragedy*. She is dependent on Hieronimo to carry out their revenge scheme. However, this claim is less developed than the aforementioned research on Ferdinand since Crosbie focuses solely on male characters and makes only one claim pertaining to a female character, which is also more shallow compared to his arguments on male characters. Green, Whigham, Haber, and Hamamra make therefore a stronger claim, despite their male-centred view, since they do take women into account when formulating a thoroughly researched argument.

In contrast, Emmerichs explains how Lavinia's undoing is the direct result of masculine interventions in *Titus Andronicus*.¹⁵ The article states how Titus wanted to marry her off to Saturninus whilst she was already promised to Bassianus, setting off the revenge

9 Ibid.

10 Frank Whigham, "Sexual and Social Mobility in *The Duchess of Malfi*," *PMLA* 100, no. 2 (1985): 169.

11 Green, "'Ears Prejudicate' in 'Mariam' and 'Duchess of Malfi,'" 468.

12 Bilal Tawfiq Hamamra, "'I pray sir, hear me: I am married': Language and Sexual Politics in Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*," *Anglia* 138, no. 1 (2020): 6.

13 Judith Haber, "*The Duchess of Malfi*: tragedy and gender," in *English Renaissance Tragedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 238.

14 Crosbie, "Oeconomia and the Vegetative Soul: Rethinking Revenge in *The Spanish Tragedy*," 20.

15 Sharon Emmerichs, "'Thou Map of Woe': Mapping the Feminine in *Titus Andronicus* and *King Lear*," *English Studies* 97, no. 5 (2016):555.

plot. Hence, Emmerichs shows how masculine mistreatment of females would result in tragedy and proposes that male characters are in power of deciding how the plot develops rather than that women are capable of choosing their own fate. Moreover, Hamamra supports Emmerichs when he states that Titus ensures the self-destruction of the patriarchy by murdering his son to defend his family's honour.¹⁶ However, the annihilation of the patriarchy is a considerable claim to make based on one character's actions, which makes the Emmerichs's argument a bit insubstantial. Contrastingly, Carter and Hamamra state that men are always the agents who undertake vengeance¹⁷ whereas women take on a passive role in this.¹⁸ Hence, research is divided on the role of men in the revenge plot but do overall agree that men are the more powerful agents that carry out revenge.

Women, on the other hand, are either negatively portrayed as transgressors or as agentless beings in revenge tragedies. Green claims that the Duchess is portrayed as a lascivious woman because she attempts to defy conventional power and gender relations, for which she is ultimately punished.¹⁹ In contrast, Whigham counters this by proposing that Webster highlights the Duchess's maternal motive in her antagonization of Ferdinand.²⁰ Yet, the article also states how her defiance is restricted by the masculine world of social actions. Male characters are thus said to prevail once more. Furthermore, the article is written from Ferdinand's perspective as if the Duchess is a passive character without agency. In a different vein, Haber is one of the few articles that does discuss the Duchess and her perspective but still claims that other men dominate her. The study fails to consider the Duchess's agency and focuses solely on male agency.

In accordance, Carter states that Tamora's actions are unnatural and unacceptable when she is an active agent in the revenge plot.²¹ The article even goes as far as to say that

16 Bilal Tawfiq Hamamra, "Violence and violation: A Palestinian reading of rape and revenge in Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*," *Psychodynamic Practice* 26, no. 3 (2020): 262.

17 Sarah Carter, "Titus Andronicus and Myths of Maternal Revenge," *Cahiers Élisabéthains* 77, no. 1 (2010): 39.

18 Hamamra, "Violence and violation: A Palestinian reading of rape and revenge in Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*," 265.

19 Green, "'Ears Prejudicate' in 'Mariam' and 'Duchess of Malfi,'" 468.

20 Whigham, "Sexual and Social Mobility in *The Duchess of Malfi*," 171.

21 Carter, 39.

women partaking in revenge as active agents calls for revulsion. However, this claim is not thoroughly researched and can therefore easily be debunked. Hamamra makes less radical arguments and says that Tamora's longing for vengeance destroys her maternity due to which she becomes an adulterous and murderous cannibal.²² This claim is stronger than Carter's since it is better researched and more elaborated on why her maternity is destroyed. Hamamra also states that a ruined Lavinia is the personification of the patriarchal family fantasy that women must be silenced and obedient to masculine voices.²³ She has lost her agency and has become an empty plate with which men can control the language used by female voices. However, this argument becomes ambiguous when the same article argues that Lavinia is the most powerful character in the play as her silence shows that she does have agency. This discrepancy makes the source a bit tenuous.

Contrastingly, research on *The Spanish Tragedy* either forgets to discuss Bel-imperia and her perspective or assigns little to no agency to her. Ponce mentions Bel-imperia momentarily and solely as Hieronimo's accomplice and sidekick in his revenge scheme. Crosbie discusses Bel-imperia likewise in a similar manner as she is said to have a desire for growth, reproduction, and nutrition.²⁴ This seems to be considered feminine as if reproduction is meant to be her sole desire. Hence, research on female characters in revenge tragedies does not acknowledge that women can have an active role in the revenge plot or illustrate active female agents as transgressors who are justifiably punished.

Thus, female characters are often not even mentioned in academic research (Sheerin, Ponce) or are mentioned very little because it is assumed that they do not have much agency so they must not matter for the plot (Haber, Hamamra, Emmerichs). However, women actually do sometimes set revenge schemes in motion, such as Bel-imperia does in *The Spanish Tragedy*. Current research on *The Duchess of Malfi*, *The Spanish Tragedy* and *Titus Andronicus* shows that women are often either portrayed as agentless beings who are at the mercy of men or as evil transgressors who must be punished for speaking up. Simultaneously,

22 Hamamra, "Violence and violation: A Palestinian reading of rape and revenge in Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*," 265.

23 Hamamra, "Violence and violation: A Palestinian reading of rape and revenge in Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*," 268.

24 Crosbie, "Oeconomia and the Vegetative Soul: Rethinking Revenge in *The Spanish Tragedy*," 20.

men are seen as the dominant agents in the revenge plot who actually carry out the vengeance. They are stated to be overly powerful and decide the fate of female characters. Current investigations lack the actual judgement of female agency. Hence, research is highly needed to shed light on the female perspective of these revenge tragedies to investigate if women do have some agency.

For the theoretical framework, I will be using Feminist Theory, specifically Julia Kristeva's theory of maternity. She "suggests that females stay too close to the maternal semiotic to be able to exploit that semiotic for revolutionary purposes like males can. Whereas in males an identification with the maternal semiotic is revolutionary because it breaks with traditional conceptions of sexual difference, for females an identification with the maternal does not break traditional conceptions of sexual difference."²⁵ Here, I will attempt to put Kristeva into perspective since I will argue that female characters, such as Tamora and the Duchess, do in fact use their maternal voices for revolutionary purposes, namely to claim female agency to some extent.

Kristeva also remarks that defilement rituals give rise to a strong sense of sex separation which favours male authority over women.²⁶ Transgressing women, who do not stay in their passive and objective state as anticipated, are punished and put as "baleful schemers".²⁷ Similarly, Stavreva comments on the characterisation of 'shrewish wives'. Scolding women are often "subjected to a series of public humiliations ... equating it [her transgression] with negative femininity."²⁸ Wright elaborates on this theory by claiming that in the patriarchal state, women are "condemned to occupy the place of signifier for the male other, who can give free reign to his fantasies and obsessions, and, what is more, implicate her in them."²⁹ This theory reinforces male domination and agency and will be used to analyse

25 Kelly Oliver, "Julia Kristeva's Feminist Revolutions," *Hypatia* 8, no. 3 (1993): 97.

26 Julia Kristeva, "Maternity, Feminism, Language," in *French Feminism Reader* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2000), 172.

27 Ibid.

28 Kirilka Stavreva, "Unquiet Women on the Early Modern Stage," in *Words Like Daggers: Violent Female Speech in Early Modern Europe* (Lincoln: university of Nebraska Press, 2015), 50.

29 Elizabeth Wright, "Thoroughly Postmodern Feminist Criticism," in *Between Feminism and Psychoanalysis*, ed. Teresa Brennan (London: Routledge, 1989), 142.

‘transgressive’ women in three revenge tragedies to see in what ways they are punished and to what extent these characters can overcome their defilement and possibly use that to claim authority.

Besides, Foucault’s poststructuralist theory on power discourse is strongly related to the French feminism of Kristeva.³⁰ He defines power as “a relation between forces, or rather every relation between forces is a ‘power relation’ ... [a] force is never singular but essentially exists in relation with other forces.”³¹ Bertens claims that “Foucault locates power firmly in language, and language is the business of literary studies.”³² Using Foucault’s power theory is thus beneficial when investigating revenge tragedies since it can shed light on underlying gender power dynamics which comments on the process of attaining agency. Furthermore, literary analysis is a useful way to investigate the female identity because identity is allegedly a linguistic construct as we form our identity via interaction since we are dependent on others.³³ Communication is thus a key element in developing an identity and a hierarchical structure, which is where power dynamics comes into play. Women therefore need men to form their individual identities as something to set them off against.

Three revenge tragedies will be analysed by means of close reading and discourse analysis, specifically how gender roles are visible via dialogue and how they are challenged by characters. Furthermore, I will use these strategies to investigate how female characters use language to attempt to assert agency and how male characters react to this.

Firstly, I will address the question: to what extent play the Duchess, Bel-imperia, and Tamora an active part in their desire for revenge? This chapter will discuss the actions (or passiveness) of the female characters and their speech in the plays. Secondly, I will answer the question: to what extent are the female characters countered by male characters that seek to prevent their attainment of agency? This chapter will analyse the actions and speech of male characters and their attempt to continue their domination over women. Thirdly, I will address the question: to what degree can the Duchess, Bel-imperia, and Tamora overcome

30 Hans Bertens, “Poststructuralism continued: Foucault, Lacan, French Feminism, and postmodernism,” in *Literary Theory* (Oxford: Routledge, 2014), 137.

31 Gilles Deleuze, “Strategies or the Non-Stratified: the Thought of the Outside (Power),” in *Foucault* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 59.

32 Bertens, 129.

33 Bertens, 135-6.

these male counterattacks? This chapter will discuss how successful the three women are in countering threats posed by the male characters and explore the construction and conceptualisation of masculinity. The conclusion will draw up the balance by revisiting the points made in the previous chapters. It will reveal the acquired degree of female agency in revenge tragedies as it will answer the main research question.

Chapter 1

Transgressors or Freedom Fighters?: The Question of Female Agency

As aforementioned, Julia Kristeva argues that women stay too close to the traditional view of maternity so that it cannot be used for revolutionary causes.³⁴ However, it can also be argued that Tamora and the Duchess manage to reshape the notion of maternity, each in their own terms, and are capable of taking an active role in the revenge plot because of this. Tamora orders her sons to murder Bassianus and draws on her maternity to get her sons to execute her wishes: “Revenge it, as you love your mother’s life, / Or be ye not henceforth called my children.”³⁵ Here, she weaponizes her maternity and obliges her sons to do their duty for her. She is successful since Demetrius stabs Bassianus and says: “This is a witness that I am thy son.” (2.3.116) Tamora empowers and reshapes motherhood to an authoritarian position which she uses to direct orders. Critics may contrastingly state that Tamora has the need of her sons to actually carry out the revenge murder as if she could not have done it herself because of gender restrictions. Yet, it could also be stated that Tamora has risen to a more powerful position of authority where she takes on the role of a general carrying out orders rather than executing the murder like a soldier.

In contrast, Emmerichs reimagines the pit in which Bassianus’s body lies and compares it to Tamora’s womb. It is said that the destructive pit would underscore her voracious nature and oppose the function of the womb: it takes life instead of giving it.³⁶ Her maternity is here negatively presented and turned into a killing force. Ironically, this idea, which intended to reduce Tamora to a transgressor, also suggests that some power can be ascribed to Tamora as she decides who must die. Carter may give an explanation of why this noxious view of Tamora’s body came to be. He says that there is “a general aversion to women participating in unnatural violence that seems to create an anxiety and sense of

34 Oliver, “Julia Kristeva’s Feminist Revolutions,” 97.

35 William Shakespeare, *Titus Andronicus*, ed. Eugene M. Waith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 2.3.114-5.

36 Emmerichs, ““Thou Map of Woe”: Mapping the Feminine in *Titus Andronicus* and *King Lear*,” 557.

revulsion when representing vengeful, violent maternal characters.”³⁷ Stavreva presents a similar view that “women wielding verbal power were stigmatised as unnatural usurpers of male authority.”³⁸ Tamora is thus feared because she actively takes part in the revenge plot. Yet, she would only be feared if she had agency and not if she was a passive character, submissive to patriarchal voices. Thus, Tamora contrasts Kristeva’s statement of maternity since she does use it for revolutionary purposes and develops it into a powerful position.

Furthermore, Wright argues that a “[w]oman in patriarchy is condemned to occupy the place of the signifier for the male other, who can give free reign to his fantasies and obsessions, and, what is more, implicate her in them.”³⁹ Women were required to be silent and obedient so that men could rule over women. However, this pattern can be broken when women start speaking up and refusing to be a subject of patriarchy. Tamora manages to do this when she voices her desire to dominate the emperor Saturninus: “My lord, be ruled by me, be won at last.” (1.1.442) She wins Saturninus over by proclaiming her bloody revenge: “I’ll find a day to massacre them all, / And raze their faction and their family, / The cruel father with his traitorous sons, / To whom I sued for my dear son’s life.” (1.1.450-3) Tamora’s antagonistic feelings towards Titus are drawn from her maternity. Her internal drive to care for her children was heavily violated when Titus killed her firstborn son. Her maternal rage fuels her desire for revenge and gives her power to conduct this vengeance. Interestingly, Foucault argues that power is firmly located in language, just like identity can be constructed in language.⁴⁰ Tamora’s assertion of power through speech can for instance be seen in the passage where she vows to “massacre them all” (1.1.450). She radiates power with this statement as she becomes one of the main revenge schemers in the play. Similarly, Green states how “discussions of speaking and listening focus on the speaker as actively controlling

37 Carter, “Titus Andronicus and Myths of Maternal Revenge,” 48.

38 Kirilka Stavreva, “Unquiet Women on the Early Modern Stage,” in *Words Like Daggers: Violent Female Speech in Early Modern Europe* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2015), 52.

39 Elizabeth Wright, “Thoroughly postmodern feminist criticism,” in *Between Feminism and Psychoanalysis*, ed. Teresa Brennan. (London: Routledge, 1989), 142.

40 Bertens, “Poststructuralism continued: Foucault, Lacan, French Feminism, and postmodernism,” 128-135.

communications, with the listener being considered powerless.”⁴¹ Thus, Tamora can and does create her (maternal) identity via her speech and uses that to claim power and dominate speech dynamics. She also forms her maternal identity in that same speech as she explains that the murder of her son drives her to claim this authority, making her an active speaker.

Moreover, Kristeva argues that “if language, like culture, sets up a separation and, starting with discrete elements, concatenates and order, it does so precisely by repressing maternal authority.”⁴² The Duchess of Malfi is another victim of this repression of maternal authority. When she is faced with imminent death, she is still concerned with the wellbeing of her children, also with the succession in mind: “I pray thee, look thou giv’st my little boy / Some syrup for his cold, and let the girl / Say her prayers ere she sleep.”⁴³ Like Tamora, the Duchess creates her maternal identity via her speech here by voicing her concerns for her children. Unlike research has stated on Tamora, Whigham says that the Duchess is not presented as a negative wilful woman, or as Stavreva puts it, a shrewish wife, because Webster highlights the Duchess’s maternal motive in her antagonization of Ferdinand.⁴⁴ However, Whigham unfortunately implies that the Duchess would never triumph over her brothers and that the patriarchy would always have prevailed in the end. Yet, it could also be said that the Duchess was self-determined in her task of pursuing her heart’s desires until the actual point of her assassination. Indeed, she was murdered for transgression because male characters believe that she was ‘speaking out of terms’, but it can also be argued that the murder was conducted out of fear for her and her actions since her brothers could not control her anymore. This is not the first time that male anxiety leads to negative portrayals of women as transgressors; Tamora faces that same fate.

According to Kristeva, “there is a general social law, that this law is the symbolic dimension which is given in language and that every social practice offers a specific

41 Reina Green, “‘Ears Prejudicate’ in ‘Mariam’ and ‘Duchess of Malfi,’” *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 43, no. 2 (2003): 459.

42 Julia Kristeva, “Maternity, Feminism, and Language,” in *French Feminism Reader* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2000), 174.

43 John Webster, “The Duchess of Malfi,” in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, tenth edition, vol. B, ed. Stephen Greenblatt et al. (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, Inc., 2018), 4.2.182-4.

44 Whigham, “Sexual and Social Mobility in *The Duchess of Malfi*,” 171.

expression of that law.”⁴⁵ This implies that certain social practices reinforce patriarchal ideas. An example of this is the separate sphere ideology that believes that men belong in the public sphere whereas women adhere to the private sphere and are confined to their houses. However, the Duchess defies this: “Why should only I, / Of all the other princes of the world, / Be cased up, like a holy relic? I have youth / And a little beauty.” (3.2.134-7) The Duchess, interestingly, compares herself to her male peers (line 135), not to other female princesses. By associating herself to the male sex, she attempts to validate her authority position, since it was more accepted for men to hold positions of power. By breaking with the conventional gender behaviour pattern, she manages to claim some agency, especially because Ferdinand does not have a justifiable explanation for or defence against her question: “I will never see thee more.” (3.2.139) Ferdinand’s lack of response becomes a recurring phenomenon. The Duchess repeatedly tries to speak to Ferdinand: “But, sir, I am to have private conference with you / About a scandalous report is spread / Touching mine honour.” (3.1.46-8) With which Ferdinand answers: “Let me be ever deaf to ‘t.” (3.1.49) Later on, the Duchess again tries to say, “Pray sir, hear me” (3.2.72) and “I pray, sir, hear me. I am married” (3.2.79), but Ferdinand continuously dismisses her with “Do not speak” (3.2.73). Green explains that “[w]omen are censured for refusing to listen to male authority and for listening to other speakers, but they lack the power to censure men who fail to listen to them. Instead, women must suffer the consequences of male deafness.”⁴⁶ However, the Duchess refuses to suffer from Ferdinand’s deafness as she states in a reply to Ferdinand’s command to stay silent: “No, sir: I will plant my soul in mine ears, to hear you.” (3.2.74) This defiance allows the Duchess to dominate the conversation and claim a power position. If Kristeva argues that language represses maternal authority as aforementioned, then the task of maternal figures is to recreate a new maternal language which stimulates maternal authority.

In contrast, turning maternity and motherly love into a power position is, however, not reserved for Bel-imperia, simply because she is no mother. But Bel-imperia manages to claim her active role and desire for autonomy by using an assertive voice along the lines of Foucault’s power theory. Like Tamora and the Duchess, she draws power from another feminine aspect: love. Her love for Don Andrea and Don Horatio drives her to take revenge

45 Julia Kristeva, “Linguistics, Semiotics, Textuality,” in *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 25.

46 Green, “‘Ears Prejudicate’ in ‘Mariam’ and ‘Duchess of Malfi’,” 470.

on those who wronged her. She comments that she cannot rest and find love again until after Balthazar is murdered:

BEL-IMPERIA Yes, second love shall further my revenge.
 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 in rigor of my just disdain
 Reap long repentance for his murd'rous deed.⁴⁷

Bel-imperia anchors love here as a motivator to seek agency. However, Bel-imperia is partly dependent on Hieronimo and his revenge scheme, but after it takes him too long to become an active revenger, Bel-imperia jumps in and confronts Hieronimo with his passiveness: “With what excuses canst thou show thyself, / From this dishonor and the hate of men? - / Thus to neglect the loss and life of him [Horatio].” (4.1.9-11) The aforementioned idea of Foucault that power is located in language is visible in this passage as Bel-imperia shames Hieronimo into becoming an active agent in the plot. She furthers her argument by mentioning that she, a woman, “should send their hateful souls to hell / That wrought his downfall with extremest death.” (4.1.28-9) Afterwards, Hieronimo and Bel-imperia form an alliance and both become active in the revenge plot. Bel-imperia's speech was needed to set the scheme in motion. This spurring of Hieronimo requires power, which is situated in Bel-imperia's language. Thus, like Tamora, Bel-imperia dominates speech dynamics to command men and can hence be considered to have authority.

Additionally, Sheerin explains that gift-bestowal functioned as social glue on which the political structure rested. A hierarchy of courtiers and the monarch was kept in place by the flow of benefits and gifts.⁴⁸ This shows how the gift-giver marks the power position whereas the gift-receiver is at the mercy of the gift-giver. Sheerin uses this perspective solely to investigate male characters with which he neglects another important character: Bel-

⁴⁷ Thomas Kyd, “The Spanish Tragedy,” in *Renaissance Drama: An Anthology of Plays and Entertainment*, second edition, ed. Arthur F. Kinney (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 1.5.66-72.

⁴⁸ Brian Sheerin, “Patronage and Perverse Bestowal in The Spanish Tragedy and Antonio's Revenge,” *English Literary Renaissance* 41, no. 2 (2011): 255.

imperia. As her name suggests, Bel-imperia, meaning beauty of empire, signifies the state. The three men that love her do so because they want the power of the state which can be acquired through her. But interestingly, it is Bel-imperia who chooses who she loves. Thus, following Sheerin's theory, Bel-imperia is the one who would be bestowing gifts rather than being on the receiving end. Moreover, Bel-imperia has the potential to become a mother to powerful heirs. This gives another dimension as to why these men pursue her: she can bestow them the gift of power through children, who are in line of succession. This does not put her on the same level with Tamora and the Duchess motherly-wise but makes for an interesting comparison because potential motherhood is apparently as powerful as motherhood itself. She puts herself in a powerful position because, despite the attempts of her father and the king, she chooses not to give Balthazar the gift of herself and therefore defies gender restrictions. Foucault argues that "force defines itself by its very power to affect other forces (to which it is related) and to be affected by other forces."⁴⁹ Bel-imperia has the power to affect other people, such as the king and Balthazar and even the future of the nation by refusing to marry Balthazar, which proves that she has enough agency to act according to her wishes. She is thus liberating herself, something that Foucault urges men to do⁵⁰, by actively pursuing autonomy.

To conclude, Bel-imperia, the Duchess, and Tamora are each successful in claiming agency, but how this authority is asserted is done in different ways. Tamora and the Duchess redefine motherhood in that they change the focus point of being a mother. Motherhood was considered to be an agentless, passive position where a mother's sole concern was to raise children. However, these characters draw power from motherhood and threaten to overrule those who seek to hurt their children. In contrast, Bel-imperia draws on love to pursue agency and autonomy by using forceful language to dominate the speaker-listener dynamic. Despite these differences, the women manage to draw power from feminine subjects to claim their agency.

49 Gilles Deleuze, "Strategies or the Non-stratified: the Thought of the Outside (Power)," in *Foucault*, ed. Seán Hand (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 60.

50 Deleuze, 77.

Chapter 2

Fight or Flight: Men Tightening their Grasp

Threatened by these aforementioned women, men seek to prevent the attainment of female agency in several ways in revenge tragedies. They believe that women need to be controlled and subdued, which is done by spying on them, locking them up, or even mutilation.

Ferdinand chooses to opt for the first option when he orders Bosola to observe the Duchess:

I give you that
 To live i' th' court here, and observe the duchess;
 To note all the particulars of her 'havior,
 What suitors do solicit her for marriage,
 And whom she best affects.
 She's a young widow:
 I would not have her marry again. (1.2.157-62)

He tries to keep the Duchess in check and scrutinises her every move. Ferdinand fears that the Duchess may remarry which would result in him losing his grip on her, as her new husband would be in control of her, not him. It becomes obvious that this fear is shared by the Cardinal. Together they press the Duchess that she must never remarry:

FERDINAND You are a widow:
 You know already what a man is; and therefore
 Let now youth, high promotion, eloquence –
 CARDINAL No, nor any thing without the addition, honor,
 Sway your high blood.
 FERDINAND Marry! They are most luxurious
 Will wed twice.
 CARDINAL Oh, fie! (1.3.1-7)

This is partly in line with the view Emmerichs presents. She says that “the female gender is viewed by the patriarchy as passivity, fertility, penetrability, a need for a male protection,

[and] a submissive return to the domestic.”⁵¹ According to this, the Cardinal and Ferdinand feel an internal drive that they must protect the Duchess. However, this sense of protection goes overboard as they start to restrict the Duchess in her behaviour, or specifically here, prevent her to remarry as ‘fie’ is used to express their disgust of a second marriage. Contrasting with Emmerichs, if the Duchess would remarry, she would ‘return to the domestic’ as a wife, which is presented as something that the patriarchy desires. Yet, that is the very thing that her brothers try to prevent from happening, which thus counters the statement. This may be explained by the ambition to conquer the Duchess that seems to overrule the ambition to put her back into the domestic sphere since Ferdinand is convinced that putting her back in the private sphere is not enough to constrain her.

Moreover, Ferdinand also opts for the second option: imprisonment. After he has detained the Duchess, Ferdinand states: “Damn her! That body of hers, / While that my blood ran pure in ‘t, was more worth,” (4.1.119-20) i.e. the Duchess was purer with solely his blood running through her veins, implying that she is now contaminated by other men or vile by her attempt to claim agency. By establishing the Duchess as an impure being, Ferdinand tries to reclaim his dominant position since he feels threatened by her. This passage furthermore highlights Ferdinand’s incestuous inclinations as his desire to ‘run his blood through her veins’ which may refer to the act of penetration. Haber claims that his incestuous tendencies “are stated to be evidence for male sexual desire, confirming the patriarchal setting [and] ... depend[ing] upon a violent appropriation of the female body.”⁵² Thus by forcing his sexual desire to the Duchess, he feels that he can overrule her attempts of authority and subdue her.

Similarly, Bel-imperia is also spied upon by Pedrigano on orders of her brother Lorenzo:

PEDRIGANO What I have said is true, and shall for me
 Be still concealed from Bel-imperia.
 Besides, you Honor’s liberality
 Deserves my duteous service, even till death.
 LORENZO Let this be all that thou shalt do for me:

51 Emmerichs, ““Thou Map of Woe”: Mapping the Feminine in *Titus Andronicus* and *King Lear*,” 551.

52 Haber, “*The Duchess of Malfi*: tragedy and gender,” 238.

Be watchful when, and where, these lovers meet,
And give me notice in some secret sort. (2.2.94-100)

A parallel can here be drawn with Lorenzo and Ferdinand, Pedrigano and Bosola, and Bel-imperia and the Duchess. Pedrigano and Bosola loyally carry out their mission but are both betrayed by their superiors in the end. Bel-imperia and the Duchess are the victims of these observations but both continue to pursue their desire anyways, which will eventually lead to their deaths.

Furthermore, another resemblance is that Bel-imperia and the Duchess are both imprisoned by male family members. Bosola is there for the Duchess to escort her to her prison and says to her that “[y]our brothers mean you safety and pity.” (3.5.107) However, what they actually mean is to lock her up and split up her marriage to Antonio so that she can be controlled and stripped of any agency. Likewise, Bel-imperia is locked up to keep her away from court:

What means this outrage that is offered me?
Why am I thus sequestered from the court?
No notice? Shall I not know the cause of my secret and suspicious ills?
Accursed brother, unkind murderer,
Why bends thou thus thy mind to martyr me? (3.9.1-6)

Bel-imperia is unaware of why she is imprisoned, but the reader can infer: she must marry Balthazar. Contrastingly, she is thus imprisoned for the opposite reason as the Duchess is; where the Duchess is prevented from marriage, Bel-imperia is forced to marry. Whigham explains that Ferdinand is portrayed as a threatened aristocrat that fears contamination of his social rank and therefore massively defences it via his incestuous inclination towards the Duchess.⁵³ Hence, by sealing the Duchess off from all contact, he can have her all to his self and play his incestuous and patriarchal fantasies on her. It is his fear of degradation that fuels him to take revenge on the Duchess. In a different vein, Green claims that “[w]hen women have verbal or sexual intercourse with men of their own choosing, they threaten established patterns of government and inheritance.”⁵⁴ Bel-imperia is thus stripped of her freedom as she threatens the ‘patterns of government and inheritance’ by pursuing a relationship with firstly

53 Whigham, “Sexual and Social Mobility in *The Duchess of Malfi*,” 169.

54 Green, “‘Ears Prejudicate’ in ‘Mariam’ and ‘Duchess of Malfi’,” 471.

Don Andrea and then Horatio. She is therefore feared by the king and her father, the Duke of Castile, since she holds the future of the nation in her hands. All in all, a recurring theme that motivates Ferdinand and Lorenzo in these male counterattacks is fear.

Alternatively, Demetrius and Chiron opt for the third option in restraining women: mutilation. They take their counterattack to extremes as is described in the opening of scene 2.4:

2.4 Enter the Empress' sons, Chiron and Demetrius, with Lavinia, her hands cut off, and tongue cut out, and ravished.

DEMETRIUS So now go tell, an if thy tongue can speak,
Who 'twas that cut thy tongue and ravished thee.

CHIRON Write down thy mind, bewray thy meaning so,
An if thy stumps will let thee play the scribe.

DEMETIRUS See how with signs and tokens she can scrawl.

CHIRON Go home, call for sweet water, wash thy hands.

DEMETRIUS She hath no tongue to call, nor hands to wash,
And so let's leave her to her silent walks.

CHIRON An 'twere my cause, I should go hang myself.

DEMETRIUS If thou hadst hands to help thee knit the cord. (2.4.1-10)

As if the mutilation itself is not enough, the brothers even mock Lavinia for not being able to call for help or explain what happened (lines 1-4). They gave her a fate worse than death and they taunt her for not being capable of ending her misery (lines 9-10). Following the already mentioned speaker-listener power dynamic⁵⁵, Lavinia is stripped from her agency because she is not able to voice herself anymore. As the listener is condemned to be powerless, so is Lavinia. Yet, Hamamra voices a different view on *Titus Andronicus*: “Lavinia resists the view that agency is linked with speech, for ... in silencing her, they have inadvertently made her the most powerful character in the play. ... In voicing her desire for revenge and revealing her rapists, Lavinia subverts the patriarchal restraint of the female voice.”⁵⁶ But Hamamra fails to

⁵⁵ Green, 459.

⁵⁶ Hamamra, “Violence and violation: A Palestinian reading of rape and revenge in Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus*,” 270.

take into account that Lavinia heavily relies on the help of male characters, such as her father and uncle, who show her how she can communicate with them:

MARCUS My lord, look here; look here, Lavinia;

He writes his name with his staff, and guides it with feet and mouth

This sandy plot is plain; guide, if thou canst,
 This after me. I have writ my name
 Without any help of any hand at all.
 Cursed be that heart that forced us to this shift!
 Write thou, good niece, and here display at last
 What God will have discovered for revenge.
 Heaven guide thy pen to print thy sorrows plain
 That we may know the traitors and the truth! (4.1.67-75)

She takes the staff in her mouth, and guides it with her stumps, and writes

This shows that Lavinia acquires the help of her family to show them who mutilated her. It is moreover a male character that aspires to take revenge (line 73) and is also the one that will carry out this revenge. This shows that Hamamra's statement that Lavinia 'subverts the patriarchal restraint' is shaky at best. It could instead be said that Lavinia has become an agentless being, subject to male figures and their desires.

Additionally, another way in which male characters attempt to reciprocate female characters is by behaving in an extremely masculine manner to compensate for the loss of superiority, which is seen as a threat to their masculinity. Ferdinand overdoes the masculine virtues of bravery and assertiveness until it becomes a form of brutality. This is visible in the scene where Ferdinand visits the Duchess in her confinement: "I come to seal my peace with you. Here's a hand / [*Gives her a dead man's hand.*] / To which you have vowed much love; the ring upon 't / You gave." (4.1.43-44) Ferdinand deceives the Duchess here that he cut off Antonio's hand and gives it to her for "[w]hen you need a friend" (4.1.49) in her isolation. He furthermore admits to Bosola later on that he acted "[t]o bring her to despair" (4.1.114). Even his brother speaks to him about his anger issues:

CARDINAL Yes, I can be angry, but
 Without this rupture: there is not in nature
 A thing that makes man so deformed, so beastly,

As doth intemperate anger. Chide yourself.

...

Come, put yourself in tune. (2.5.56-62)

Yet, Ferdinand does not listen to him and goes on about desiring to kill the Duchess, which proves the Cardinal's point that his anger makes Ferdinand beastly and brutal. However, these brutal actions seem to be conducted out of fear of powerlessness. Hamamra comments on *The Duchess of Malfi* that "Ferdinand's revenge against the Duchess is a kind of defensive mechanism because revenge veers the focus away from his feelings of loss and powerlessness."⁵⁷ By acting ruthlessly, Ferdinand thus feels like he has the upper hand and in a position where he has usurped the Duchess.

In a like manner, Titus takes the masculine feature of brutality to extremes, specifically when it comes to his family honour, which he carries too far as he decides to murder his daughter:

TITUS Was it well done of rash Virginius

To slay his daughter with his own right hand,

Because she was enforced, stained, and deflowered?

SATURNINUS It was, Andronicus,

...

Because the girl should not survive her shame,

And by her presence still renew his sorrows.

TITUS A reason mighty, strong, and effectual;

A pattern, precedent, and lively warrant.

For me, most wretched, to perform the like.

Die, die, Lavinia, and thy shame with thee,

And with thy shame thy father's sorrow die. (5.3.35-46)

He kills her

Titus states that Lavinia must die for 'her' shame whilst she was the victim of her assault. She is murdered by her own father to restore the family honour that Titus so desperately seeks. But he is very calculated in this passage as he firstly seeks the approval of the emperor by

⁵⁷ Hamamra, "'I pray sir, hear me: I am married': Language and Sexual Politics in Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*," 10.

comparing his case to that of Virginius, who killed his daughter to prevent her from being raped. Ironically, Hamamra argues about *Titus Andronicus* that “Titus’ affirmative voice contains the seeds of a self-destructive patriarchy”⁵⁸ by murdering his son Mutius to defend his family’s honour. He creates a paradox by murdering his family to attempt to uphold his honour. In the passage above, Titus again shows ‘the seeds of self-destructive patriarchy’ by ending his daughter’s life for a sense of respect, showing that his masculinity is exaggerated.

Consequently, it is precisely this aggressive, self-destructive behaviour that Tamora responds to. Tamora’s rivalry with Titus is portrayed through the action and, even more important, the reactions to each other which slowly escalate until it results into outright cannibalism. This creates a contrast with Lavinia as she is struck down once not able to rise from her fall. Tamora, instead, refuses to be ruled by Titus and reciprocates his revenge schemes, as does Titus to hers. Hamamra introduces the idea that “Tamora’s voice is a mouthpiece of Titus’ ruthless speech and his deafness to female figures’ voices,”⁵⁹ suggesting that they are in conversation with each other. The interplay of schemes starts at the beginning of the play when Titus kills her firstborn son as a punishment for all of his sons that died during the Goth war. This causes Tamora to avenge herself by giving the order to maim Lavinia. This ‘conversation’ shows equal amounts of offence and defence, implying that they are evenly matched. The schemes continue to develop and can only come to an end that is fitting with the genre: death.

In contrast, for Lorenzo and Balthazar, it is not bravery and honour that are radicalised but rather the notion that women may be seduced in order to ask for their hand in marriage. Bel-imperia despises Balthazar after he killed her lover Andrea but Balthazar wishes to marry her and feels defeated at Bel-imperia’s hateful behaviour. However, Lorenzo is of the opinion that a woman can always be wooed: “In time the savage bull sustains the yoke, / In time all haggard hawks will stoop to lure, / In time small wedges cleave the hardest oak, / ... / And she in time will fall from her disdain, / And rue the sufferance of your friendly pain.” (2.1.3-8) This suggests that Bel-imperia cannot resist marriage if a man is offering, forcing her to be without agency. Similarly to Ferdinand and the Cardinal, Lorenzo also views the female gender as Emmerichs describes. He is convinced that Balthazar and Bel-imperia will marry

58 Hamamra, “Violence and violation: A Palestinian reading of rape and revenge in Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus*,” 262.

59 Hamamra, 261.

since he believes that she is in need of male protection as well as a passive character in this potential marriage. This seduction becomes problematic when Bel-imperia is incarcerated in an attempt to impose the marriage on her.

Altogether, male characters feel threatened by females that attempt to stand up for themselves and acquire authority since that would result in a significant decrease of power for them. Due to this threat, men feel vulnerable and seek to oppose these developments by trying to tighten their grasp on women and intensify their masculinity. Yet, Tamora proves the exception to the rule. As Lavinia's foil, she is able to match Titus in his retribution.

Chapter 3

Overcoming Fearful Men

The female characters are not so easily conquered by these male counterattacks. As aforementioned, Tamora forced to endure the murder of her firstborn son. The scene activates the protective nature of her maternity during which she redefines Kristeva's notion of motherhood, which causes Tamora to rise from the hardships made by Titus and escape imprisonment because she manages to govern the emperor and wrap him around her finger. This is, for example, visible in the passage where the emperor fears that Lucius and his Goth army would attack Rome:

TAMORA I will enchant the old Andronicus
 With words more sweet and yet more dangerous
 Than baits to fish, or honey-stalks to sheep,
 ...
 SATURNINUS But he will not entreat his son for us.
 TAMORA If Tamora entreat him, then he will;
 For I can smooth and fill his aged ears
 With golden promises, that were his heart
 Almost impregnable, his old ears deaf,
 Yet should both ear and heart obey my tongue.
 (*To Aemilius*) Go thou before to be our ambassador;
 Say that the Emperor requests a parley (4.4.88-100)

This passage shows that Tamora persuades Saturninus not to worry about the threat of a battle because she will enchant Titus and prevent it from happening. She convinces her husband with her honey-tongued speech. She depicts Titus as an ageing man (lines 95 and 97), creating the image of a weak and incapable man, and uses that to assert her dominance over the man that captured her at the beginning of the play. As is apparent in the passage, Tamora even sends out orders to set her plan into action (lines 99-100). Tamora thus uses her speech to reclaim her agency. She also lets her maternal identity shine through by treating the emperor as a frightened child: "And now, sweet Emperor, be blithe again, / And bury all thy fears in my devices." (4.4.110-1) By taking care of the emperor's concerns, she falls back on her maternal instinct of protectiveness with which she simultaneously acquires authority by acting

on Saturninus's fears and facing them. Hence, Tamora's maternity reigns over the emperor of Rome.

However, Tamora's deception of Titus, when she personifies Revenge, fails in the end. Tamora's assertion of authority would have been complete if Titus did not see through her façade since she would have conquered the emperor and Titus. But instead, the latter prevails:

TITUS Hark, wretches, how I mean to martyr you:
 This one hand yet is left to cut your throats,
 Whiles that Lavinia 'tween her stumps doth hold
 The basin that receives your guilty blood.
 You know your mother means to feast with me,
 And calls herself Revenge, and thinks me mad.
 Hark, villains, I will grind your bones to dust,
 And with your blood and it I'll make a paste,
 And of the paste a coffin I will rear,
 And make two pasties of your shameful heads, (5.2.180-189)

By failing to deceive Titus, Tamora gives him the perfect opportunity to get his vengeance on Tamora's sons for mutilating Lavinia and with that, the doom of her sons since they are killed and made into a pie which Tamora is forced to eat, making her a cannibal. Even worse, Titus also kills her right after he has revealed that Tamora ate "the flesh that she herself hath bred," (5.3.61) taking the chance to retaliate away from her. After her death, there is still no peace for her as Lucius claims, in the ending lines of the play, that for Tamora, there will be "[n]o funeral rite, nor man in mourning weed, / No mournful bell shall ring her burial," (5.3.195-6), leaving her to an unhonourable and disgraceful death.

Yet, it is conceivable that Tamora is so harshly treated because she came so anxiously close to stating her authority that male characters, such as Titus, felt the need to brutally resist and prevent that. Compared to Lavinia, who is murdered by her father as mercy killing, Tamora did fight back and attack Titus to get her revenge, to which agency can be ascribed. That this ascension of power ultimately results in her death could also be attributed to the nature of the play; it is a revenge tragedy after all.

Similarly, The Duchess overpowers Ferdinand in a way that she stoically meets her end and remains authoritative until the very last moment. She verbally retaliates against

Bosola who must escort her to her prison: “Men oft are valued high, when they’re most wretched. / But come, whither you please. I am armed ‘gainst misery; / Bent to all sways of the oppressor’s will: / There’s no deep valley but near some great hill.” (3.5.138-41)

Especially the last line here implies that she will rise from the downfall. She also states that this misery and oppression will not break her (lines 139-40). The Duchess claims power with this speech as she refuses to be weakened by the obstacle that Ferdinand and Bosola pose. Her strength is deepened when she sticks to her cause in her isolation. As the beginning of the fourth act describes:

FERDINAND How doth our sister duchess bear herself
In her imprisonment?
BOSOLA Nobly. I’ll describe her. (4.1.1-2)

Ferdinand’s attempt to overrule the Duchess is faltering because of her resilience. She goes as far as to threaten her brother that she will starve herself to death. Even after Ferdinand has shown her the wax figures of Antonio and their children and she has no one to live for, her resilience does not falter: “I am full of daggers. / Puff, let me blow these vipers from me.” (4.1.88-89) This contrasts Emmerichs’s view that the patriarchy considers women as penetrable, passive, and in need of male safety⁶⁰ because the Duchess is certainly not passive nor in need of male protection in these scenes. It can therefore be stated that the Duchess overcomes Ferdinand’s attack to some extent since she does not crumble and comply but rather shows her strength and continues to resist him.

Furthermore, other characters are inspired by her toughness since they continue to fight for her even after her death. Antonio says that he will take revenge in honour of his wife. He unfortunately is murdered before he could do so. Surprisingly, it is Bosola, who was ordered to spy upon and imprison the Duchess, who picks up where Antonio left off: “Revenge for the Duchess of Malfi murdered.” (5.5.77) The Duchess thus persuades even former enemies to her side through her nobility and toughness. Moreover, Hamamra comments about *The Duchess of Malfi* that “the Duchess’s son’s inheritance of Malfi suggest that matrilineal succession overrides patrilineal succession.”⁶¹ The matrilineal succession also

60 Emmerichs, ““Thou Map of Woe”: Mapping the Feminine in *Titus Andronicus* and *King Lear*,” 547.

61 Hamamra, ““I pray sir, hear me: I am married”: Language and Sexual Politics in Webster’s *The Duchess of Malfi*,” 3.

suggests that the Duchess's legacy and authority was strong enough to survive her death. Thus, her authority shines through and lives on, even after the Duchess's death, through her son.

However, one setback in this acquisition of agency is that the Duchess does not survive the play. But when the moment of her death is upon her, she meets her end with grace. She even pardons her executioners and continues to endorse her authority position: "I am Duchess of Malfi still." (4.2.125) Richardson explains that the man had to "behave as a Christ-like king in his authority,"⁶² giving him some form of executive power, whereas women were placed in the household, giving her a sense of domestic authority.⁶³ It is interesting to see that the Duchess, as a woman, combines these two forms of authority, the executive and the domestic. The executive form of power is, for example, visible in the aforementioned quote where the Duchess reminds Bosola that she is still the Duchess and thus above him when he attempts to belittle her. The domestic form of power is evident when she decides to go against her brothers' wishes and marry Antonio or when it comes to her children and their wellbeing. The combination of these two forms of power strengthens her authority since she does not allow anyone to overrule either of these spheres.

Interestingly, this domestic authority can be linked to Kristeva's notion that women need to find power in maternity, rather than staying too close to the maternal semiotic which supposedly causes some of the oppression women experience.⁶⁴ The Duchess shows how she draws power from motherhood as she rises to an authoritative position which she utilises that power to act against patriarchal figures. She also argues that "women's oppression can be partially attributed to our discourses on motherhood."⁶⁵ According to this, more discourses on powerful motherly figures would relieve women's oppression to some extent. *The Duchess of Malfi* could be considered an example of this new type of motherhood discourse since Webster creates a strong maternal figure who manages to pose a real threat to the patriarchy.

Altogether, where Tamora is not given a chance to retaliate against Titus, the Duchess is, for she is not silenced by death immediately after the patriarchal attack. But like Tamora, the Duchess knows to claim agency, yet is faced with men who do not comply. This does not

62 Richardson, "Tragedy, family and household," 19.

63 Ibid.

64 Oliver, "Julia Kristeva's Feminist Revolutions," 97.

65 Oliver, 105.

make her relent since she stoically faces her fate. Her power lives on through her son who becomes the new Duke, ensuring matrilineal succession.

In a different vein, Bel-imperia attains vocal authority and casts off Lorenzo's attempt to isolate her. This is vividly depicted in the scene where she is dragged from her isolation to court where Lorenzo wants to marry her off to Balthazar:

LORENZO Now, sister -
 BEL-IMPERIA Sister? No,
 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 then to hurry me, like whirlwind's rage,
 Amid a crew of thy confederates,
 And clap me up where none might come at me.
 Nor I at any to reveal my wrongs.
 What madding fury did possess thy wits?
 Or wherein is't that I offended thee? (3.10.24-34)

It is apparent that Bel-imperia retaliates and puts Lorenzo in his place verbally. As Lorenzo listens to her, she attains vocal authority over her brother. Interestingly, she accuses Lorenzo of being controlled by his emotions, specifically that rage blinds him (line 33). Hysterics is, ironically, usually a trait typically ascribed to women. Stavreva calls this phenomenon of a scolding woman shrewish behaviour and argues that this “create[s] the recognizable stereotype of the shrew and pit[s] her against another stereotype, that of the shrew tamer, a part that provides exciting acting opportunities for the companies' male leads.”⁶⁶ Yet, the gender roles seem to be subverted in the abovementioned passage. It is not Bel-imperia but rather Lorenzo that is put forward as the shrew since his sister ‘tames’ him of his resentful behaviour, for she highlights that Lorenzo threatened and imprisoned her without any explanation (lines 28-32). Stavreva additionally argues that “the textual protocols of the penance [for shrew-shaming] reinforced normative gender binarism that denied outspoken women vocal authority. Ironically, however, penances relied on women's voices to institute the social peace.”⁶⁷ Thus, by reversing the gender roles, Bel-imperia undermines gender

66 Stavreva, “Unquiet Women on the Early Modern Stage,” 45.

67 Stavreva, 53.

binarism because she is given vocal authority in the act of shrew-shaming. This reinforces the notion that ‘penances relied on women’s voices to institute the social peace,’ since her speech solves, if only for a moment, their quarrel. By putting herself in the dominant and logical position, she attains masculine features of authority and simultaneously forces Lorenzo to occupy the submissive (feminine) position of the listener. Her rhetoric is in line with Foucault’s thesis on power that “power is not essentially repressive,”⁶⁸ since she does not repress Lorenzo with her vocal authority but rather upholds her honour and chastens her brother but does take it to extremes, such as Ferdinand does in *The Duchess of Malfi*.

Additionally, another passage in which her vocal authority shines through is when she gets her revenge and prevails over Lorenzo and Balthazar. Moments before Bel-imperia stabs Balthazar in Hieronimo’s play, she says:

BEL-IMPERIA Tyrant, desist soliciting vain suits
 Relentless are mine ears to thy laments,
 As thy butcher it pitiless and base,
 Which seized on my Erasto, harmless knight.
 Yet by thy power thou thinkest to command,
 And to thy power Perseda doth obey.
 But were she able, thus she would revenge
 Thy treacheries on thee, ignoble Prince. (4.4.59-66)

Stabs him.

Her lines mirror her feelings about Andrea and Horatio’s murder. Erasto (played by Lorenzo) is Perseda’s lover (played by Bel-imperia) but the former is murdered on orders of Soliman (played by Balthazar). This resembles the murders of Bel-imperia’s two former lovers. In her speech, Bel-imperia expresses her true motives for the first time to Balthazar but he is deceived that it is part of Hieronimo’s play. Her agency rises and comes forward when she stabs Balthazar after her speech, completing her revenge scheme. At that point, she bested her malefactors, showing her supremacy over Lorenzo and Balthazar, who are both dead. Yet, this pinnacle is only temporary because she stabs herself afterwards. But poetic justice is given to her cause and allows her to rest peacefully in the afterlife as the ghost of Andrea will “lead my Bel-imperia to those joys / That vestal virgins and fair queens possess.” (4.5.21-2) Hence, while Tamora claims her power through brutal actions, Bel-imperia does so via her speech.

68 Deleuze, “Strategies or the Non-stratified: the Thought of the Outside (Power),” 60.

She uses a dominant voice to subjugate Lorenzo and Balthazar and complete her scheme of vengeance.

The question that remains is whether the characters' agency was acquired through a masculine or feminine voice. Hamamra argues that "[f]emale rulers often have masculine characteristics such as courage, strength and cunning."⁶⁹ A male voice is thus characterised by assertiveness, boldness and rhetoric. Many critics do unfortunately not explain what highlights a female voice in contrast, except for the view that women are characterised by their silence and obedience. Instead, it could be argued that feminine power is defined by finding strength through emotions, beauty, and nurturement. Following these definitions, Bel-imperia, the Duchess, and Tamora all combine these two forms of power. Carter and Hamamra both consider Tamora masculine because she is put forward as a vocal aggressor⁷⁰ as well as a cunning schemer.⁷¹ Bel-imperia uses rhetoric and logical speech to rise above Lorenzo. Haber and Hamamra present the Duchess as publicly⁷² usurping the masculine language.⁷³ These are all masculine features. The abovementioned critics all assign a male voice to these characters because they still look through the lens of the standard feminine notion of silence and obedience. However, feminine features can also be ascribed to them. As beforementioned, Tamora acts as a loving nurse and mother to Saturninus; the Duchess finds her strength in nurturing her children and her love for Antonio and gives emotive speeches to defend them; Bel-imperia pursues love as her grieving emotions about her lost loves drive her to seek revenge. All in all, these characters may use male voices but they do so for feminine subjects. Stavreva argues that a female character destabilises a man's identity by obtaining a male voice, subverting the gender binarism."⁷⁴ Hence, the female characters may have used the combination of a female and male voice because they hereby undermine the patriarchy,

69 Hamamra, "Violence and violation: A Palestinian reading of rape and revenge in Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*," 263.

70 Hamamra, 265.

71 Carter, "Titus Andronicus and Myths of Maternal Revenge," 39

72 Haber, "*The Duchess of Malfi*: tragedy and gender," 243.

73 Hamamra, "'I pray sir, hear me: I am married': Language and Sexual Politics in Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*," 6.

74 Stavreva, "Unquiet Women on the Early Modern Stage," 63.

from which they learnt that this is the manner in which they could achieve their aspiration of attaining agency.

Conclusion

In sum, the female characters are successful in claiming agency but their path towards it differs. Bel-imperia adheres to Foucault's theses on power by actively controlling the conversation as a speaker, which she uses to pursue autonomy and love. Tamora and the Duchess redefine Kristeva's notion of motherhood as they divert from the idea that a maternal position is agentless and submissive by changing its focus point and instead use it as a source of power to overrule their enemies. They are successful in creating a new maternal language which asserts their authority. However, men do not willingly accept and feel threatened by these powerful women. They view this as a usurpation of power that will lead to their demise, causing them to retaliate forcefully by intensifying their masculinity and radically controlling women by confining them. Interestingly, all these women manage to rise from these male counterattacks: Tamora eludes from her prison and continues to respond to Titus's threats in an equally aggressive manner, the Duchess continues to overrule Ferdinand verbally and stoically meets her end, and Bel-imperia uses her vocal authority to overthrow Lorenzo's attempt to isolate her. It is important to note that these plays are revenge tragedies; death is often an inevitable consequence. The three women are successful in their attainment of agency to some degree; they manage to pose a significant threat to dominant patriarchal figures. Their deaths do not mean that their fight was for nothing, nor does it reverse their authority. On the contrary, it shows that it was simply not accepted at the time for women to hold powerful positions. Yet, it does illustrate that women did not obligingly accept the imposed role of obedient wife. It also portrays how the feminist waves of the late 19th and early 20th centuries did not appear effortlessly. It enforces the idea that many centuries before, there were already movements of proto feminism during which women tried to threaten the patriarchy. *Titus Andronicus*, *The Spanish Tragedy*, and *The Duchess of Malfi* clarify that women are not puppets to be played with for male pleasure. This thesis has contributed to the growing research area of female agency and of female perspectives in a masculine world. Further research could be done by investigating female agency in another genre, such as comedies from the 16th and 17th centuries. This will deepen the arguments made in this thesis and would provide a ground on which these results can be compared to. It will also further close the gap of male-oriented research that unfortunately still dominates this research field.

Bibliography

- Bertens, Hans. "Poststructuralism continued: Foucault, Lacan, French feminism, and postmodernism." And "Literature and culture: cultural studies, the new historicism, and cultural materialism." In *Literary Theory* 123-149. Oxford: Routledge, 2014.
- Carter, Sarah. "Titus Andronicus and Myths of Maternal Revenge." *Cahiers Élisabéthains* 77, no. 1. (2010): 37-49.
- Crosbie, Christopher. "Oeconomia and the Vegetative Soul: Rethinking Revenge in *The Spanish Tragedy*." *English Literary Renaissance* 38, no. 1 (2008): 3-33.
- Deleuze, Gilles. "Strategies or the Non-stratified: the Thought of the Outside (Power)." In *Foucault* 59-77. Edited by Seán Hand. London: Bloomsbury, 2014.
- Emmerichs, Sharon. "'Thou Map of Woe': Mapping the Feminine in *Titus Andronicus* and *King Lear*." *English Studies* 97, no. 5 (2016): 546-67.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/0013838X.2016.1168647>
- Hamamra, Bilal Tawfiq. "'I pray sir, hear me: I am married': Language and Sexual Politics in Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*," *Anglia* 138, no. 1 (2020): 1-19.
<https://doi.org/10.1515/ang-2019-0056>
- [Hamamra, Bilal Tawfiq. "Violence and violation: A Palestinian reading of rape and revenge in Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*." *Psychodynamic Practice* 26, no. 3. \(2020\): 260-77. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14753634.2020.1789892>](https://doi.org/10.1080/14753634.2020.1789892)
- Green, Reina. "'Ears Prejudicate' in 'Mariam' and 'Duchess of Malfi.'" *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 43, no. 2 (2003): 459-74. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4625077>.

Haber, Judith. "The Duchess of Malfi: tragedy and gender." In *English Renaissance Tragedy* 236-248. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.

Kristeva, Julia. *The Kristeva Reader*. Edited by Toril Moi. New York: Columbia University Press, 1986.

Kristeva, Julia. "Maternity, Feminism, and Language." In *French Feminism Reader* 153-200. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2000.

Oliver, Kelly. "Julia Kristeva's Feminist Revolutions." *Hypatia* 8, no. 3 (1993): 94-114.

Pollard, Tanya. "Tragedy and revenge." In *English Renaissance Tragedy* 58-72. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.

Ponce, Timothy M. "Reconsidering the Early Modern Machiavellian: Illicit Manuscripts and Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*." *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 60, no. 4 (2018): 443-66. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26778814>.

Richardson, Catherine. "Tragedy, family and household." In *English Renaissance Tragedy* 17-29. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.

Sheerin, Brian. "Patronage and Perverse Bestowal in The Spanish Tragedy and Antonio's Revenge." *English Literary Renaissance* 41, no. 2 (2011): 247-79.

Stavreva, K. "Unquiet Women on the Early Modern Stage." In *Words Like Daggers: Violent Female Speech in Early Modern Europe*, PAGE NUMBERS. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2015.

Whigham, Frank. "Sexual and Social Mobility in *The Duchess of Malfi*." *PMLA* 100, no. 2 (1985): 167–86. <https://doi.org/10.2307/462288>.

Wright et al. "Part 4: Towards another symbolic (2): beyond the phallus." And "Part 5: Sexual difference (1): reason and revolution." *Between Feminism and Psychoanalysis* 139-224. Edited by Teresa Brennan. London: Routledge, 1989.