Sex and Violence: A Way To Hold Women Down

Sex and violence are not topics that you would discuss on a first time meeting basis and these acts being used on women is something that is frowned upon in modern societies. Stories of sexual violence had a particular appeal for the Jacobean audience, the satisfaction of the victim of assault is ancient (Bamford 25). Sex and violence considered, by many, a topic that offends. Plus, with legal issues as they are, it is a safe topic to stay away from because one never knows when a conversation with such a topic of discussion might lead to a lawsuit. Were societies always like this? Was the Jacobean era a little more free in their social topics or were men intimidated by women as they are now? Lucky for the Jacobians, they did not have Federal Communications Commission or the Motion Picture Association of America to say what could or could not be shown or said to an audience. There were still types of censorship, but it was more on a case by case basis than a strict set of guidelines. It seems as though the Jacobians could quite literally get away with murder. Anyone who could afford to go see the productions was allowed to attend. For current viewing spectacles, books, and video games if you are not of the right age you cannot participate. It is thought that the children of our modern society are becoming more and more desensitized by sex and violence in all forms of media and women are being objectified more often than not. At least they could on stage and the amounts of sex and violence that was produced on the Jacobean stage was a public
normality. Not to mention that most of the violent or sexual acts were directed toward women. When a woman was raped in the Jacobean era, she was to blame for the act on some part. The rapist would be punished, but society would punish the women. She was seen as being unclean, unfit, and/or possibly pregnant. This was an idea that translated into and was shown in the plays of this time. Who is to say that the audiences of the Jacobean era were not also desensitized by sex and violence against women as it was performed on stage? Currently, we have a choice at what we want to view or not view, expose our children to or not. The performance variety was very slim back then and now we have the luxury to have the options in media that we have become accustomed too. Jacobean plays just erupt into sex and/or violence which with modern pieces there is a gradual build. Eruption of violence can be a distraction from the main plot(s). It is also disturbing when it involves women and most of the time rape. Rape and liberation appeared again and again on the Jacobean stage, both in the direct dramatization of the classical legends and in a variety of transformations (Bamford 61). The violent performances in Elizabethan and Jacobean tragedy confront audiences (historical and contemporary) with the play of difference that underlies the culture's various assertions of order and coherence (Booth iii). Sex and violence is something of a taboo nature in how people view it. Sex, violence, and women is something that has always drawn in audiences, but were these women destroyed because men felt threatened by Jacobean women and their power or was it a way to hold them down?

Women throughout many time periods have used their sex to get what they want. Cleopatra gained control of Marc Antony to help her empire out. Queen Elizabeth refused to have sex or marry to show that she did not need a man to rule her country. Queen
Elizabeth’s mother, Anne Boleyn, used sex to marry Henry the VIII and she lost her head over it. Marilyn Monroe used her sexual allure to win over fans and men in powerful positions like the Kennedy brothers, Jack and Bobby. A more current example would be Monica Lewinsky, who never really “had sexual relations” with President Bill Clinton. From all of these women we see they used their sex or the act of sex to gain something. Women have had to do this to survive and men exploit them for it. That alone is a violent act. Unfortunately, for the women in Women Beware Women, The Duchess of Malfi, and Revenger's Tragedy, their sexual choices lead to violence or sex is a violent violation of their bodies.

It is a sad thing in Thomas Middleton’s Women Beware Women because the sexual violence is encouraged and setup by Livia, a woman! That is what it comes down to; a woman is helping violate other women. She helps her brother, Hippolito to sleep with their niece, Bianca:

This is the comfort:
You are not the first, brother, has attempted
Things more forbidden than this seem to be.
I’ll minister all cordials now to you
Because I’d cheer you up, sir…
So, I perceive
All lies upon my hands, then. Well, the more glory
When the works finished (Middleton 1534).

Livia does this by telling Isabella that the Spaniard, Marquis of Coria is her real father and convincing her that Hippolito is not her blood related uncle:
But Keep Your thoughts to yourself, from all the world,
Kindred, or dearest friend--nay, I entreat you,
From him that you have all this while called uncle;
And though you love him dearly, as I know
His deserts claim as much e’en from a stranger,
Yet let him not know this (Middleton 1537).

Then, as if this is not enough, because Leantio wants to shield his beautiful wife, Bianca, from the world, and Livia wants Leantio for herself, Livia sets up Bianca to meet the Duke. She does this full well knowing that the Duke is a very lust driven man. Livia plays a game of chess with the Widow (Mother), which has some parallels to what is going on. All this while Bianca is being both raped and seduced by the Duke. For a woman to set something like this up against another woman is heartbreaking to say the least. Women still betray one another, but not in this fashion. Cut-throating between women is a common thing is sex trades like prostitutes, exotic dancers, and even in modeling:

Oh, the deadly snares
That women set for women, without pity
Either to soul or honor! Learn by me
To know your foes. In this belief I die:
Like our own sex, we have no enemy,
No enemy (Middleton 1591)!

Livia is a strumpet in a reverse of means. She pays for her lover, Leantio, to be a kept man. So, she in fact pays for his company and keeps, making him the whore.
There are many modern day versions of *Women Beware Women*, but the most intriguing play I have read thus far in *Posh*.

But if sexual license turns into a nightmare, marriage and its terms seem little better: one intelligent girl, whose father insists she must marry (and give her dowry to) a brutal ignoramus, laments that "no misery surmounts a woman's. Men buy their slaves, but women buy their masters." (Standpoint)

A play written by Laura Wade and produced in 2010 at the Royal Court Theatre. It is a play that centers around a group of young men that are members of “The Riot Club,” an exclusive dining club. The young men rent out the dining hall for their monthly, society dinner and meeting. The landlord, Chris, believes they will become a problem eventually due to their excessive intake of wine. Chris’s daughter, Rachel, is a waitress at the establishment and after being sexually harassed by the group of men, she runs out and her father comes in to take care of the situation. It really is in many ways a modern day *Women Beware Women*. It shows that the thoughts and ideas of sex and violence really can transcend time.

*Women Beware Women* shows that women had no control over their own bodies, by the actions of Livia and the Duke against Bianca. She was raped and seduced by the Duke, but was setup by Livia. These were things that were also going on publicly at the time as well. Case in point, Countess Castlehaven testified in court against her own husband because he encouraged his manservant to rape her and she told the courts that her husband, “talked lasciviously to me, and told me my body was his, and if I lay with any man with his consent, ‘twas not my fault but his(Gowing 53).’” In *Women Beware
*Women* the Duke eventually takes control of Bianca’s body. She is nothing more than property. Rape was, for a woman, “hardly avoidable, and yet it could also be readily taken as evidence of unchastity (Gowing 55).”

*The Duchess of Malfi* by John Webster is a play about a woman that has control over her body, but it is something that gives her an ill fate in the end. In marrying under her class to her household steward, a likeness of Miss Julie to Jean in *Miss Julie* by August Strindberg, she sends her brothers into a rage. It was for greed and incestuous lust that Ferdinand and Cardinal did not want the Duchess to marry. However, in not knowing that she is married, they assumed that she was having casual sexual relations, “Read there--a sister damned! She’s loose i’th’hilts, Grown a notorious strumpet (Webster 1781).” The crime and violence committed against the Duchess is not of a sexual nature, but against her own sexual choices. It is also a very misogynistic play based on the way Ferdinand, Bosola, and Cardinal treats the Duchess and other women. The Duchess is only discovered for sure because Antonio dropped horoscope papers for their newborn son and they were picked up by Bosola. Bosola informs Ferdinand by a letter that he had Castruchio deliver:

Antonio here about dropped a paper…

Oh, here it is.

What’s here? A child’s nativity calculated?

*He reads.* “The Duchess was delivered of a son ‘tween the

Hours twelve and one in the night, *Anno Dom. 1504*”--

that’s this year-- “*decimo nono Decembris*”--that’s this

night--”taken according to the according to the meridian of Malfi”--that’s
our Duchess. Happy discovery!

Old Castruchio

I’th’morning posts to Rome; by him I’ll send

A letter that shall make her brothers’ galls

O’erflow their lives (Webster 1778).

Ferdinand sees what his sister has done as a betrayal to him and “he attacks individual aspects of her body that have betrayed him: her ‘bleeding heart’ which is a fickle lover and her ‘infected blood’ that has remover the purity of the family bloodline (Dido).” She has soiled herself in the eyes of her brother and the only way she can be cured is through her death and the payment of death suffered by her children. By the amount of children that Antonio and the Duchess had, it leads me to believe that he would have read the guide to pregnancy, written by the Italian physician, Michele Savonarola in the fifteenth century:

In order to enter, a man must give many caresses…and consider the readiness of his wife; then, he must move in and out, in this way he will succeed. Then he must attempt to release all his sperm in one burst, not in dribbles, nor must he raise or lower himself, as is commonly done for pleasure, but instead remain fixed in the hole so the air cannot enter and corrupt the seed(Nytimes.com).

Oppression of women was a common thing for the Jacobeans, normally enacting this through marriage, sex, and/or violence. The Duchess in The Duchess of Malfi is trying to insert herself and step away from the oppression of her brothers. She is a very willful widow that goes completely against her brothers’ wishes in the pursuit of her own
If all my royal kindred
Lay in my way unto this marriage,
I’d make them my low footsteps. And even now,
Even in this hate--as men in some great battles,
By apprehending danger, have achieved
Almost impossible actions; I have heard soldiers say so--
So I, though frights and threatening, will assay
This dangerous venture. Let old wives report
I winked and chose a husband (Webster 1766).

Her actions peg her as a woman willing and eager to fight back, to prevent anyone (even her new husband, who is already her subordinate) from taking charge of her body and desires (Web Archive). The play challenges the idea that women can be manipulated and controlled through marriage. What the message in the play communicates to the audience, like the original purpose of the fairytale, to frighten children to do what their parents tell them to do and keep them out of the woods. If the Duchess’s punishment is not intended by Webster to be a moral lesson to the audience, teaching them not to break social boundaries, then what is its purpose (Luminarium)?

The Duchess is a heroine in her own right. What she has to endure due to her sex puts her in an almost martyred position, like many Saints of the same sex. This was something that Jacobean audiences took a liking too. Theatrically exciting assaults on the heroines’ chastity provoke or provide dramatic crises (Bamford 33). Even though Antonio seeks revenge for the death of his wife, the Duchess, and his children, it is
ultimately her actions and death that has the most powerful message in the play:

In contrast to the marital heroism of the avenging males, the role of the female is primarily sacrificial. As an innocent victim she absorbs the evils of political oppression - expressed sexually- and pays for them with her death (Bamford 61).

Through the Duchess’s sacrifice, her sex grows stronger and more powerful. Though in part *The Duchess of Malfi* dramatizes what men can do to women, at its core is rather what women can do to men (Web Archive).

For the Jacobean era, heroic men rally to avenge the injury and pursue the tyrant-rapist in spite of his rank and the inevitable civil upheaval (Bamford 123). This is very prevalent in Thomas Middleton’s, *The Revenger’s Tragedy*, which is, now, one of my favorite classical plays to read. An example of a more modern day style of this type of revenge tragedy would be the movie *Cruel Intentions* or *A Time to Kill*. It is a story of passion, love, rape, suicide, and revenge. *The Revenger’s Tragedy* is full of vengeance spurred by death of a loved one, ghosts of murder victims, real or feigned madness, graveyard scenes, a play-within-a-play, skulls, severed body parts, and violent scenes full of carnage that make up this master piece. It may not have the big explosions that most people want now, but it was definitely on the cutting edge when it was written and still has a powerful message in twinned in it malicious web. There are five women that are affected in the entanglement of this story: the Duchess, Gratiana, Castiza, Lord Antonio’s wife, and most importantly Gloriana, Vindici’s wife. Due to the murder of his beloved Gloriana by the hands of the envious Duke on their wedding night, Vindici goes from brooding cynic to glassy eyed doctrinaire to mad capped imposter, giddy with blood lust.
The only suffering on the part of the Duchess is that all her male family members are killed one after the other including her husband, the Duke. Gratiana deals with the wrath of Vindici and the trickery of Castiza in the end. In trying to sell her daughter’s body to the lustful Lussurioso for jewels, money, and a place at court, she ends up being put into check by her sons:

That enchant our sex,

These are the means that govern our affections.

That woman

Will not be troubled with the mother long

That sees the comfortable shine of you.

I blush to think what for your sakes I’ll do.

I’ll see how I can move.

If she still be chaste, I’ll ne’er call her mine (Middleton 1321).

A mother trying turn her daughter into a whore is a violent thing indeed. According to current London prostitutes, they view rape as many things including a ‘broken contract’ which refers equally to physical assaults, checks that bounce, and the duplicity involved when a client deliberately removes a condom (Harvey 172-173). In this view, Castiza’s mother was attempting to not only rape her, but have her raped. Castiza is actually the only innocent victim in the play. She stays pure and innocent throughout even with her mother’s ever wanting endeavor to pimp her out. Castiza does help her brother Vindici exact revenge on the Duke by helping lure him into a trap of death. Antonio’s wife is one of the saddest stories. She, who has no real name which speaks volumes on the Jacobean opinion of rape, was raped by Junior, the Duchess’s youngest son. Because of the shame
that comes with being raped, for the women back then, she killed herself to save her honor and her husband’s name. The death of sexually threatened/violated females becomes instrumental in liberating her community (Bamford 61). For this era, an incident of rape meant that a woman might be pregnant or she encouraged the attack and was therefore, to blame. In her sacrifice, she saved herself from shame, her husband’s reputation, and the chance that she might be pregnant with Juniors child:

Do you know the story of the princess whose beloved prince dies in battle? The enemy prince after overrunning the castle finds the princess and forces himself upon her. Months later the princess is with child... but whose? It's either the child of her enemy, the man that killed her husband, the man that raped her... in which case she will kill herself and the child. Or it's the child of her prince. The only thing she has left of him, a part of him still alive within her kept safe inside her, in which case... But how would she know until it was too late? How will she know until the child is born and she can see its eyes (*The Astronaut’s Wife*)?

Antonio’s wife chose not to wait for the day that she might find out that she is pregnant because it was too much for her to deal with. Gloriana, whose death is the reason for this story, died protecting her vows. The Duke poisoned her because she refused his sexual advances. All this on her wedding night that she was supposed to spend with new husband, Vindici:

Duke, royal lecher! Go, grey-haired adultery…

Thou shallow picture of my poisoned love,

My study’s ornament, thou shell of death,
Once the bright face of my betrothèd lady
When life and beauty naturally filled out
These raged imperfections…
The old Duke poisoned,
Because thy purer part would not consent
Unto his palsy lust (Middleton 1304).

By her death, the effect of rejected sexual advances, Vindici begins our story that is wrought full of violence that is delicately pursued in a skillful way. As odd as it might be, Gloriana’s need to stay pure for her husband caused her death and through Vindici’s doing, she gains her revenge by actually killing the Duke herself. The women in The Revenger’s Tragedy all have violent and/or sexual things happen to them. Not one escapes without harm in some way. The Duchess loses all she loves, Gratiana has lost her sons and daughter’s respect, Castiza does not trust her mother any longer, and Antonio’s wife as well as Gloriana pays for the crimes committed against them with their lives.

Female oppression through sex and violence has been something of a staple throughout all of history. In William Shakespeare’s play, Pericles, Prince of Tyre, which is based on Apollonius of Tyre, Antiochus rapes his daughter, “The furious rage of lust pricking him forward thereunto, he violently forced her, though seely maiden she withstood him long to her power, and threw away all regard of his owne honestie, and unlosed the knot of her virginity(Bamford 34).” Rape is not the only violent or sexual act normally committed, but is one of the most prevalent to the Jacobians. In most Jacobean plays a woman’s rape or threatened rape has significant political consequences (Bamford 123). These are still things that draw in audiences to date, take a look at the Hills Have
Eyes 1&2, which is a violent horror movie due to all the kidnapping of women, raping, and impregnating them, to be able to keep a family going. Violence and sex is a combination that has drawn humanity in since the beginning of time. From the first caveman that club a women over the head to have his way with her, through now. The post-war era is one in which gender and sexuality have been among the central preoccupations of British society, and the theatre has been at the forefront of bringing those preoccupations to the service of the national consciousness and debating them (Wyllie 7). Power and sex exist in a negative relationship with each other as power constructs discourses and prohibitions to limit sexuality (Dido). Power is something that many women and men have gained through sex, like Leantio in Women Beware Women. He used Livia almost as much as she manipulated and used everyone else. Concentration on rape and on the complicity of women with their rapists was enmeshed in Jacobean England’s discussion of subjects’ rights, a political debate that approached violation rhetoric for new uses (Burks 19-20). Women Beware Women, The Duchess of Malfi, and The Revenge’s Tragedy all shows that women are held down through sexual and violent means. There are many reasons for this, not only jealousy, but revenge, politics, power and money.