

HYSTERIC HISTORIA

HYSTERIC HISTORIA: WOMEN OF WOE IN THREE RENAISSANCE
HISTORY PLAYS

By

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Abstract

This thesis focuses generally on the critically neglected area of stock characterisation in Renaissance history plays. Specifically, it examines the role of stock women characters in these plays, particularly the “wailing woman” type. My readings of three plays – John Bale’s *King Johan*, Thomas Preston’s *Cambises*, and William Shakespeare’s *King John* – challenge typical twentieth-century approaches to them. In addition, I prove that feminist critics in general, though they often refute the assertions of other twentieth-century critics, tend to make the same mistakes as their non-feminist contemporaries in their analyses of female characterisation. While feminist criticisms purport to reassert the importance of female dramatic characterisation, they often discredit female characters’ power, even during their identification of it. My thesis redresses these issues, emphasising the essential power of stock characterisation in Renaissance histories and arguing the centrality of “women of woe” in these three plays.

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Introduction

From Greek and Roman times, the concept of history came down to Renaissance thinkers as “Historia,” the female personification of memory and the past, whose role was to educate and instruct. Despite this gendering, chronicles from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries almost always concern the exploits of young men. Graham Holderness writes that sixteenth-century histories were based on assumptions of the heroic literature: “The function of historical instruction and historical examples is conceived as the inculcation in young men, by precedent patriarchal example, of strength and heroic resolve” (56). According to Holderness, the gendering of Historia as female is a moot point – with the exception of its propagandistic relationship to Elizabeth I – because its application and content are related to a patriarchal model.

However, Holderness also writes that “[i]n the early modern period, generally to the human race and specifically to a nation, history was thought of as equivalent to the individual memory: as solemn memory retains or revives the past, so ‘grave’ history recalls and revivifies antiquity (51). Although Holderness generally implies that the female gendering of history in this period is unworthy of attention, this particular quotation suggests otherwise. For in Renaissance history plays women characters often embody “individual memory,” that is, history. This identification is particularly the case for women of woe.

Women of woe are powerful dramatic stock characters. They function in numerous important political, social, thematic, and rhetorical roles in various Renaissance history plays. In particular, this thesis focuses on the dramatic significance of the wailing woman in three of these types of plays: John Bale's *King Johan*, Thomas Preston's *Cambises*, and William Shakespeare's *King Johan*. Generally, this thesis participates in a larger critical narrative: it seeks to re-examine and reassert the sophistication of Renaissance stock characterisation, a much overlooked area of early modern scholarship.

Stock characters are dramatic types, which generally dramatically represent an entire section of the population. One quality of the social, cultural, or gender group is emphasised above all other traits. Stock types are popular for dramatic use, since they are immediately recognisable to audiences. The label "woman of woe" can generally refer to any woman character who is given a reason to suffer. Typically, they are figures of lack who have lost loved relatives – either husbands, children, or siblings – or personal effects, such as clothing or housing.

Women of woe are stock characters who typically represent feelings and opinions opposite to those in power; their position as dramatically shifting figures allows them this function. Hence the "wailing woman" inhabits a particularly integral dramatic role, as a character who also questions authority and represents interests different from a higher ruling class, usually men. Women of woe retain memories of dead kings and warriors as well as deceased children and husbands, particularly those killed in battle. It is my contention that "women of woe" in particular function dramatically as those who recall

and revivify the past, both heroic and personal events. This is especially true of the characters studied in this thesis. In *King Johan* Widow England's loss personifies the nation's lack of the "true" – i.e. Protestant – church. The Mother character in *Cambises* retains memories of a more personal nature, remembering and evoking the past of her dead son. And *King John*'s grieving Constance recalls the past on both personal and political levels, blurring the lines between the public and private spheres.

Sometimes in Renaissance history plays certain memories can haunt women of woe; in Renaissance notions of history, "[m]emory can... be a haunting, in which the present consciousness is overwhelmed by images of the past; disabled by nostalgia or the sense of loss, unnerved by the unbearable burden of recollection" (Holderness 53). As we will see in *Richard III*, Margaret plays the ghost after being deprived of her lover (Suffolk, murdered in *2 Henry VI*), her husband, and her children. She stays in the action as the central figure in act four, scene four, to curse the activities of those around her, particularly Richard. She and the other women present in this scene function to keep alive the memories of their dead male relations. Other women of woe straddle the lines between public and private; Margaret inhabits the liminal position of the ghost and also straddles the line between theatre and metatheatre. And though these and other female characters participate in a patriarchal model, this does not negate their individual rhetorical, thematic, and dramatic powers. In fact, I will argue that individual women of woe derive part of this rhetorical, thematic, and dramatic power precisely from, rather than despite, their status as stock characters.

Women of woe, like other stock characters, appear in theatrical performance. And therefore any critic examining them must recognise the inherent malleability within the type that comes from the performance medium where every production involves or requires its own interpretation in performance. As Kathleen McLuskie writes,

[t]he vitality of... [a] performance depends as much on the creativity of the director or actors, their ability to create startling stage images, as much as it does on the cogency of their interpretation in literary critical or historical terms. (40)

As performances vary greatly from one to another, the staging of character types is not fixed, but is made fluid. Yet directors may well face particular difficulties when interpreting stock characterisation for modern audiences. The differences between twentieth- and sixteenth-century cultural attitudes about “stereotypes” could be a stumbling block for the success of modern productions of Renaissance history plays – especially *Cambises* – which contain a large number of stock characters. This is because our late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century approach to conventional characterisation in plays is to see it as an inferior method of dramatisation. Generally, modern audiences may find it difficult to appreciate stock characters as anything more than comic devices.

From a twentieth-century perspective, then, the audience of an English Renaissance history play might see female figures of woe as excessive in their grief, as parodies of “real” women, made caricatures by their loud lamentations. No doubt in some drama the “wailing woman” is played to comic effect. However, my contention is that – at least in the plays covered here – the wailing woman has more than just passing

significance as a “set piece” or a “stereotype.” Indeed, it is the stereotypical nature of the woman of woe – who brings with her a long literary (and biblical) legacy – that gives her dramatic import. In part, it is a modern day bias that makes some overlook the dramatic, and even societal, significance of women of woe: “It has frequently been observed that throughout the twentieth century grieving has increasingly taken place in private.... the twentieth century has been marked by a reluctance to indulge in public demonstrations of grief” (Howarth 247). It is possible that modern audiences not used to facing overt grief in public might assume that scenes of sorrow enacted in a play are excessive or melodramatic.

It is often necessary for modern day audiences to understand the cultural context of the Renaissance history play; with regards to the woman of woe character type, it is especially important that a viewer know the biblical heritage behind this figure. I should not say “biblical,” since the Virgin Mary taken for the woman of woe’s ancestor is from an apocryphal source, i.e. of medieval popular account. In the midst of her grief, Mary was reputed to have yelled at and insulted the Roman soldiers responsible for Christ’s torture and execution. In late medieval French dramas depicting the passion of Christ, Mary is extremely vocal and her scenes – in which she recites the *planctus Mariae* – are long (Witt 164). In English cycle dramas her grief is “never allowed to become excessive” (Witt 69). Though this might be the case, the account of Mary as a vocal mourner underlies both traditions, and was a popular conception of the Virgin in both countries. Thus the import and weight of Mary’s narrative would be recalled for

contemporary audiences in each dramatic representation of the wailing woman in Renaissance theatre.

One should not forget the dramatic significance of Mary Magdalene either. According to biblical sources, Mary Magdalene was one of the primary mourners at Christ's tomb and the first person to see him after the resurrection. The Magdalene's past as a "fallen woman," her absolute recantation, and her strong relationship to Jesus gave her particular appeal to dramatists. Her cult was "particularly significant in the later Middle Ages, though English devotion to this saint has been traced back to Anglo-Saxon times" (Davidson 72). The Magdalene was represented throughout mystery and miracle plays of the late medieval and early Renaissance periods (late fifteenth century to the 1570s).¹ Lewis Wager's *The Life and Repentance of Mary Magdalene* (printed 1566) is a late example of the Magdalene's dramatic popularity. Wager's representation of the wailing women at the tomb of Christ is an example of the extreme emotionality that traditionally underlies the woman of woe character type.

In this play and in earlier mystery and miracle drama the audience is expected to identify with the characters and particularly in the passion plays to empathise with or "revivify" the sufferings of Christ. The important thing to glean from the woman of woe's medieval and early Renaissance heritage is that performative suffering may seem melodramatic to us as modern-day audiences, but not necessarily to medieval and Renaissance ones. The intent of earlier playwrights was to create a dramatic atmosphere

¹ Clifford Davidson writes that the dramatisation of a saint's life "might have been tolerated prior to 1570" (75). Of course, saint plays may not have been too welcome on the stage (or safe to write) during the reigns of Henry VIII, Edward VI, and Elizabeth I.

in which audience members felt they could participate. The idea was that the audience was to empathise with the characters: to feel the sorrow of the wailing women characters when they witnessed the passion of Christ. Moreover, the tradition was not to “innovate” new drama and new characters but to create recognisable figures that would recall the past biblical and popular representations of religious figures. Far from being seen as an inferior mode of representation, conventional dramatisation was entirely desirable, from the perspective of both playwright and audience. This was also true, I wish to argue, with respect to the conventional portrayal of women of woe in Renaissance history plays.

Very generally defined, a history play is a dramatisation of the life of a historic and secular personage. In part, I follow Irving Ribner's definition, which notes that the Renaissance history play typically “uses an historical event of the past to throw light on a political problem of the present and to offer a guide for its solution” (36). Unfortunately, however, Shakespeare's *King John* is not so didactically or morally inclined. The play illustrates the difficulties of bad kingship, of rebellion, and of making political alliances, but it does not offer a solution to them. *King John* may highlight issues like the succession problem, drawing parallels between John's narrative and the present political concerns of Elizabeth, but Shakespeare eschews any clear-cut answers. Even *Cambises*, arguably more didactic in its intent, does not offer a solution concerning how to deal with a cruel tyrant. Cambises' death has nothing to do with his prior crimes; *pace* W.A. Armstrong, the passive acceptance of his brutality does not seem like a “guide” to solving the problem of a tyrannical king.

What I do accept from Ribner's definition is that history plays are related to the contemporary events of the times in which they were written or performed. All three plays that I will concentrate on in this thesis address issues relevant to their respective decades. *King Johan* concerns topics related to Protestant reform and Henry VIII's creation of the "true" church. *Cambises* addresses the always-topical issue of good kingship (or queenship). It is also a potential critique of Henry VIII's reign and of the handling of his six wives. *King John* treats the subjects already mentioned, relevant to Elizabeth's foreign policy and to internal affairs more generally. Though *King Johan* and *Cambises* may be described as "hybrid" plays – combining the morality play tradition with that of the later history play (Bevington) – I am more interested in viewing all three plays' conceptions of history, while examining the role of wailing women within their respective historical models.

Although on occasion I make comparisons between the earlier plays and Shakespeare's, sometimes indicating influences of the former on the latter, I reject an artificial teleology. Some critics view English Renaissance drama as a grand progression toward the art of Shakespeare and other "sophisticated" playwrights. James Myers places *Cambises* in just such a teleological progression. He writes, "Preston endeavors to reach the new dramatic territory later claimed by such innovators as Marlowe" (369). However, the idea of "innovation" in the Renaissance age is something of an

anachronism.² The implication that there even exists a “new territory” to be reached is out of tune with Renaissance notions of dramatic creativity.

Therefore I study these three plays in chronological order, not to imply a narrative progression of the drama, but to give a greater sense of the general political and religious changes at work in the fifteenth century and to show how these changes and events are reflected in the historical drama of the times. For certainly each play provides instances of cultural assumptions being used for each playwright's political, religious and overall dramatic intent. It does not mean that one play or playwright is inherently better than another; my goal is to show how each dramatist used theatrical convention to his specific purposes. The “quality” of the playwright's skill does not factor into the equation.

I have chosen my texts – *King Johan*, *Cambises* and *King John* (with a side glance at *Richard III*) – for three reasons. First, they generally lack feminist critical attention. Second, the feminist attention they *have* received has been too narrowly focused on a too narrowly defined notion of political significance, particularly as concerns female characters. Third, not just feminists but twentieth-century critics more generally have taken an overly dim view of stock characterisation in their eagerness to narrow a play's significance to its political function and to discredit it based on its adherence to convention.

W.A. Armstrong, for example, despite having arguably spent more critical attention on *Cambises* than any other scholar, writes that “[t]he characterisation of

² At times, “innovation” was a chargeable offense: “religious innovation” was akin to heresy. This is why so many English thinkers had to be careful about jumping on the Protestant “bandwagon”: “Bale too, was fighting against the charge of novelty and religious innovation” in his writings (Kesselring 47).

Cambises is naïve... not only because of Preston's artistic limitations, but because *Cambises* is a doctrinaire creation designed in imitation of the black and white examples of the *speculum principis*" (294).³ First of all, Armstrong ascribes, wrongly I think, *Cambises*' "inferiority" to "artistic limitations" on the part of Preston. Moreover, Armstrong equates a lack of dramatic potential with the inflexible acceptance of religious and political dogma. Finally and most significantly, Armstrong believes that the play's "naïve" characterisation is a consequence of the play's didactic and doctrinaire political purpose.

Armstrong's argument is especially problematic to me because he implies that stock characterisation is only useful for the propagation of easy didactic lessons and is therefore "naïve." This is a very narrow view of the dramatic potential of conventional characterisation, as Armstrong is forced to reject any complexity within Preston's dramatisation of historical personages. Armstrong's bias illustrates the twentieth-century reluctance to see artistic skill in convention, including dramatic acceptance of political convention.

In emphasising artistic skill, my approach to these plays is "formalist" as opposed to Armstrong's historicist leanings and to the general feminist intent toward the politicisation of texts. I view Renaissance history plays with an eye to emphasising the rhetorical, thematic, and dramatic significance of female characters within this type of drama. However, my approach is feminist in that my intention is to resurrect and refocus attention on female characters in historical drama. I would call myself a "new formalist"

³ *Speculum principis* is a genre of prescriptive literature designed to instruct kings "by confronting them with examples of good and bad rule" (Armstrong 292).

in that I try to historicise aesthetic approaches to Renaissance history plays. My purpose is also to re-evaluate the place and significance of stock characterisation generally, both by historically contextualising the stock characterisation tradition and by reasserting its political, rhetorical, thematic, and dramatic significance within Renaissance history plays.

Chapter One looks at *King Johan* and Widow England's role in Bale's conception of history, religion, and the nation. The stock portrayal of England as an allegorical character is essential to Bale's construction of a nationalist, anti-Catholic drama. Not only does England's dramatisation as a wailing woman make her readily identifiable to Tudor and Elizabethan audiences; her status as a wailing widow gives her license to critique the Catholic church in a particularly virulent and emotional way. Moreover, her constancy in widowhood presents the audience with a view of an eternal and essential England, in keeping with Bale's eschatological perspective of history. Her constancy and truth allow the audience to identify by contrast the traits of the shifting and "false" (i.e. Catholic) church. Widow England's conventional characterisation is thus at the core of Bale's religious and political message.

Chapter Two examines the similar centrality of wailing woman figures in Thomas Preston's *Cambises*. In an important scene, Cambises has his Queen executed for her vocal criticism of his decision to have his brother killed. The king's refusal to abide by the cultural code whereby men protect women reveals the greatest extent of his brutality; this is emphasised by the scene's penultimate (and climactic) position within the play. Usually in the history play genre, a woman's liminal position with respect to the public and private spheres allows her to voice criticisms of the ruler without fear of punishment.

For example, Blanch speaks out in the midst of crisis – the war between the French and the English – and her role as a sideline figure and woman of woe permits her to safely reflect on the domestic costs of political conflict. However, Preston does not follow this convention in order that the dramatic potential of his play – the senseless victimisation of central female characters – might be enhanced.

The Mother character in particular is the “heart” of *Cambises*, evoking audience sympathy and representing the crimes committed against the private sphere when a tyrant rules the nation. Her centrality – both literal and metaphorical – illustrates the sophistication of Preston’s play, which normally is described as imbalanced and ill constructed. Moreover, the stock characterisation of both the Queen and the Mother permits them a greater lexical depth and emotional impact than other characters. Their roles as women of woe are essential to their dramatic effectiveness, and hence that of Preston’s play as a whole.

Chapter Three continues to examine the woman of woe’s centrality in the later Renaissance history play, especially in Shakespeare’s *King John*. To set up my reading of *King John*, the chapter also looks at act four, scene four, of *Richard III*, focusing primarily on the wailing woman figures of Margaret, Elizabeth, and the Duchess of York in order to later read *King John*’s Constance and Blanch. This chapter challenges arguments that discredit or neglect the women of woe character type on the basis of her lack of individualisation. While many feminist critics assert the centrality of female characters in Shakespeare’s histories, they simultaneously disparage their roles, implying that women characters are only worthy of study insofar as they reinforce or subvert the

patriarchy. Ironically then, feminist critics of Shakespeare's histories generally diminish or ignore the aesthetic and rhetorical power of female characters. My intention is to reassert the woman of woe's rhetorical, thematic, and dramatic power in the Renaissance history play, showing her continued role in revivifying the past, both personal and heroic.

The reader may notice that I have not included Lady Anne in my study of *Richard III*. The reason for this is that my examination of the play focuses entirely on 4.4 as an archetypical example of the "wailing woman" scene, a congregation of sufferers. I do not mention Anne simply because she is not present in the gathering. But my neglect of her character is not meant to preclude her role as a woman of woe, nor the study of her as such in the future.

As I have noted, the intention of my thesis is to re-evaluate and reassert the dramatic significance of the woman of woe specifically and of stock characterisation generally. With regard to the former, I redefine the terms of female power. My interpretation of "power" is determined more broadly than that of other feminist critics, such as Juliet Dusinberre, Virginia Vaughan, Jacqueline Vanhoutte, Jean Howard and Phyllis Rackin. Female characters' power is illustrated in their shared thematic significance; women characters often address the same issues as male characters, though they generally embody a different perspective. A woman of woe's agency can thus be determined in numerous ways, political and otherwise: in her abilities to cross both public and private boundaries, in her abilities to emotionally persuade an audience, and in her abilities to use lexically and imagistically sophisticated language. My hope is that this widened view of female power, which encompasses aesthetic intents, will both emphasise

criticism of general feminist approaches to Renaissance history plays and suggest a different method of feminist appreciation of them.

**“Rule Britannia”: Widow England and the Construction of Nationhood in
John Bale’s *King Johan***

Not surprisingly, women in John Bale’s *King Johan* have received little critical attention. The reason for this neglect is understandable: there is only one female character in *King Johan*, one of only two in all of Bale’s drama. Yet the rarity of women in Bale’s plays, I suggest, only emphasises the complex significance of Widow England’s role in her play. Barry Adams, editor of the standard critical edition of *King Johan*, writes that England is “conceptually the play’s most complex personage” (148).

This idea goes against the first feminist critic to discuss *King Johan*, Thora Blatt, who sees England as merely an ideal abstraction that reinforces female stereotypes. She writes that England has an important role in *King Johan*, but implies that the character lacks interest in and of herself. Blatt argues that the conflict of the play rests in “the distance between the ideal of Widow England and the reality” of the trouble caused by the ambivalence created by Nobility, Clergy, and Civil Order (127). The implication is that *King Johan*’s dramatic interest lies less in England’s character than in the problems caused by other characters.

My argument also goes against the second feminist critic to discuss England: Jacqueline Vanhoutte. However, Vanhoutte studies England in terms of her relative position to masculine power. Vanhoutte says that the play equates impotence with femininity and ideality: “*King Johan* imagines the nation’s space – its body – as limited,

passive, ideal, and feminine” (65). She supports this notion by citing England's reliance on the masculine support of King John to redress the crimes committed against her by the Church.

Vanhoutte's view is itself limited by her narrow focus on certain events that occur within the play. Vanhoutte argues that “England's sovereignty... depends on the men who inhabit and ‘instrutte’ her” (65-6). She neglects to mention that England asserts herself as essentially in opposition to the corrupt practices of the Catholic clergy, who are “vnnaturall” bastards (l. 69). England's inherent dislike of the Catholic church both informs John's decisions and instructs him, as we see in the opening scene and throughout the entire play. As God's widow and the king's potential spouse, England has a unique and significant role in the play's religious and political propagandistic intent. As a woman of woe, she also has interest in terms of her individual rhetorical and dramatic power. These powers help to define the woman of woe's various functions in the Renaissance history play; England in particular is certainly not passive and definitely not restricted in her function.

England also plays a significant role in Bale's eschatological view of history. England's role as a eulogist for John's Christ-like martyrdom assists in illustrating Bale's perspective that history is constantly replaying the events of the past, a cycle that can only end with the apocalypse. This same role allows England to intertwine the playwright's nationalistic and religious goals, making the nation's history – notably a *Protestant* history – seem divinely ordained. Her unchanging stock identity is not a weakness, but a strength; her stasis as a woman of woe implies that England is a stable

nation, albeit a grief-stricken one, in comparison to a deceitful, changeable Catholic church. England's stock characterisation as a wailing woman is essential for the communication of the play's various intents.

England is a grieving widow both temporally and in Bale's eschatological view of history; this makes her liminal, but differently from Shakespeare or Preston's women of woe. She is liminal because she is neither fully historical, in the temporal sense, nor fully abstract, in the sense of an allegorical personification. Her liminality allows her to both critique the "false" church and to "humanise" the political crises of the nation, giving the public realm private concern. As a widow, England grieves her losses and injuries. Instead of mourning dead sons or husbands, as is the usual subject for widows' lamentations, England grieves for the exile of God. God is figured in private terms – he is England's husband – but the implication of this allegorical marriage is that the population of England, the public realm, has also suffered a tremendous loss. So when Widow England laments her situation, she refers to both the private and the public spheres. This is the nature of her liminality; England functions on the threshold of both areas.

Following a brief outline of Bale's religious and political positioning and of *King Johan's* historical context, I will explain how England's figuration as a woman places her in a specific relationship to the "real Church" – a Protestant one – and puts her in opposition to the "false Church" of Catholicism, especially to the character Sediton.⁴ I will discuss five key parts of the play in which England's role is important. The first is

⁴ The binary of the "true Church" versus the "false Church" comes from Bale's prose work *The Image of Both Churches* (1545), a commentary on the Book of Revelations and other writings.

her dialogue with John (ll. 1-154), in which her speech functions as exposition and informs both the audience and John of the corrupt Catholic clergy's transgressions. The second key part of the play (ll. 1534-1681) occurs when England introduces poor and blind Commonalty. Here her roles are that of political advisor and of curse-maker. The third part (ll. 1703-1983) is significant in that it shows the only disagreement between England and King John and the king's choice between his people's lives or their freedom. The fourth key section (ll. 2050-2192) shows England in her most important roles as widow and keeper of "national memory." The scene features the death of John and the eulogy that England gives him. The final key section (ll. 2193-2691) is the meeting of allegorical figures at which England is, significantly, not a part. Her absence here provides the play with its strongest connection to Bale's eschatological view of national history.

John Bale was a Carmelite friar before he left the Catholic church to become an ardent Protestant reformer. He was forced into and out of exile twice during the reigns of Henry VIII and Mary. His first exile, eight years long, ended with Henry's death in 1547 and continued during the entire reign of Mary (1553-58). Bale did not write for a courtly audience. He wrote "evangelically and propagandistically for a popular audience. In doing so, he tried to turn the weapons of the enemy against themselves. In all his extant plays Bale works from within the conventions of Catholic religious drama" (Potter 95). Bale vehemently opposed hagiographical plays and what he saw as the idolatry inherent in the Catholic network of saints. So instead of writing plays that glorified the saints, he

wrote martyrologies. *The Examinations of Anne Askew* (1546-7) and *King Johan* (1538)⁵ are commonly cited examples of Bale's writings in this genre.

However, *King Johan* is not only a martyrology that recounts the tale of an exalted figure. It is also a history play in that "in typical Renaissance fashion, it uses an historical event of the past to throw light on a political problem of the present and to offer a guide for its solution" (Ribner 36). Bale saw John's earlier defiance of Pope Innocent III as a prefiguration of Henry's then-current battles with Pope Clement VII. This method of political exegesis – using the past to illuminate the present – is related to Bale's perception of history. According to numerous sixteenth-century Protestant reformers, "the key to the understanding of history is to be found in the perennial opposition between Christ and Antichrist as expounded mystically in the Apocalypse" (Adams 59). By figuring John as Christ and the Catholic church as the Antichrist, Bale uses his religio-historical perspective to create a nationalism that is apparently divinely ordained. Therefore Bale's portrayal of England is greatly influenced by his particularly Protestant and eschatological construction of history.

When Barry Adams writes of England as *King Johan*'s "most complex personage," he is referring to the multiple relationships that she has with other characters. She is God's widow, Commonalty's mother, (implicitly) the mother of Nobility, Clergy, and Civil Order, and potentially John's wife. Thora Blatt writes that England's significance rests in her numerous roles: "She is messenger, confidante, and counsellor" (127). Adams and Blatt thus agree that England's importance lies in her connections

⁵ It is suggested that Bale wrote *King Johan* in 1538 but revised it sometime during the reign of Elizabeth (Adams 20-24; Blatt 99-100). Bale died in 1563.

with others. And although I agree with them, there is more to England than relative interest. Indeed, neither critic considers her independent import or the rest of her varied relative roles: as advocate of Protestantism, the “true” church, as John’s eulogist, and as national memory. Granted, her widowhood is defined by her relationship with others, but as I am arguing throughout this thesis, the woman of woe has special status in English drama of the sixteenth century. This character type has its own conventions and encompasses many functions not mentioned by these and other critics. In examining England’s spoken lines more closely, it becomes evident that her role as widow allows her great thematic, rhetorical, and dramatic power, more influence than these critics allow her.

There are two motivations for Bale to make England a female character. The first is Bale’s acceptance of cultural convention. The image of Britannia, the female personification of England, is a long-standing popular tradition that was common in the sixteenth century and prior; in this ideological model, England is a woman who needs to be protected by the male forces that rule her (Ostovich). Thora Blatt describes another cultural convention, this time religious in nature: “Widow England from *Kynge Johan*... is female simply because the Christian congregation is regarded as the spouse of Christ” (101). Since John is described in Christ-like terms, England is naturally his bride, especially under the Henrician marriage of church and state.

Both of the above cultural assumptions influenced Bale to make England a woman, but they do not totally explain his decision to make her a widow. Protestant reformers rejected the “excesses” of the Catholic church: the ritual and what they saw as

“idolatry” in the veneration of holy artifacts. Bale links the excesses of the church with the potentially ornate “whoredom” of some women. Claire McEachern explains Bale’s Protestant view: “ ‘whoredom’ links female decorativeness with the institutional gaudiness of the Catholic church requisite to idolatry, ‘for what else,’ asks Bale, “[but a woman] beareth out this malignant muster in their copes, crosses, oils, mitres, robes, relics, ceremonies, vigils, holy days, blessings, censings, and foolings,... a wanton... vain-glorious pomp?” ” (McEachern 246).⁶ It is therefore understandable that England is portrayed as a poverty-stricken widow. She lacks even the “merely outward, or superficial presence” that McEachern says Bale associates with the Roman Catholic church (McEachern 247). Bale associates transparency and simplicity with truth in *The Image*. England is in direct contrast with the ornamentation of the play’s Catholic characters.

This contrast is apparent in terms of clothing. England is described as “wan and pale” (l. 57) and is likely dressed in simple, black widow’s garments.⁷ She also expresses distrust of the Catholic clergy by focusing on their clothing:

Such lubbers as hath dysguysed heades in þer hoodes,
Whych in ydelnes do lyve by other menns goodes:
Monkes, channons and nonnes, in dyvers coloure and shappe,
Bothe whyght, blacke and pyed. God send ther increase yll happe!

(ll. 36-9)

⁶ Quotation is from *The Image of Both Churches* (London 1545); reprint in *Select Works of John Bale*, ed. Henry Christmas. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1849, 36). 494-96.

⁷ Neither the characters nor the stage directions describe very closely the dress of the actors. Hence, Widow England’s appearance is merely hypothesised.

She relates the clergy's duplicity to their covered heads and to the various colours or shades of their garments.

Also, England is presented as the same character throughout the play (she is the epitome of stock characterisation). Usurped Power and his minions disguise themselves as temporal or historical characters. Usurped Power becomes the Pope, Sedition is Canterbury bishop Steven Langton, Dissimulation is the monk Simon of Swynsett, and Private Wealth is Cardinal Pandulphus. The evil Catholic clergy also have props which signify their love of material things: they keep the "bocke, bell and candell" (l. 1059). The changability and showiness of the resolutely malevolent characters is contrasted with the guilelessness and simplicity of England. England therefore takes on religious connotations in this model: she is allied with Bale's conception of the "true" church.

The first scene of the play introduces England suing for King John's help in her "wedowes cause" (l. 22). She brings up the initial charges against the corrupted clergy. The dialogue is drawn out by England, who first hints at the reason for her dissatisfaction before finally disclosing it. John appears as an innocent, unaware of the nation's problems. He asks many questions and shows general ignorance: "gentyll wydowe, tell me what þe mater is"; "Whome do they intyce for to do the inivrye?"; "go forth with thy tale" (ll. 26; 30; 56). From a dramatic standpoint, this exchange allows England to introduce Bale's political intent in a type of socratic dialogue. Indeed, England functions as Bale's voice here as much as the Interpreter does later in the play. She says, "God abydyth not where his word ys refusyd" (l. 116). Since the play shows the Pope and his

followers disallowing the preaching of the Gospel (ll. 855-7; 1979-81), it seems that by the term “word” England means the Gospel, the primary text of the Protestant reformers.

England is not the only character to espouse the virtues of the Gospel; King John also does this. Peter Happé writes, “The king’s responses to what happens to him take the form of doctrinal exposition akin to preaching, which suggests that for Bale the ideal of kingship included the need to spread the Gospel” (93). Since England also advocates “the word,” the implication is that not only is Gospel preaching essential to kingship, it is a part of the make-up of the nation itself.

Sedition’s entrance provides a tonal counterpoint to the seriousness of the opening scene. Though he provokes and insults England, she “is able to give as good as she gets in abuse,” especially later in the play (Happé 94). England thus fulfills one of the major roles of the “wailing woman,” that of the curse-maker. Her most metaphorically developed speech in the first scene condemns the Catholic church in very visual terms:

Lyke as the vyle swyne þe most vyle metre dessyer
And hath gret plesure to walowe them seluys in myre,
So hath this wyld bore, with his church vnyversall –
His sowe with hyr pygys and monstres bestyall –
Dylyght in mennys draffe and covytus lucre all.
Yea, *aper de sylua* the prophet did him call.⁸

(ll. 81-86)

⁸ *Aper de sylva*: Latin for “wild boar of the woods.” From the Vulgate, Psalm 79:14. The translation is from William Whitaker’s online Latin-English dictionary.

Thematically this passage is significant: the symbolic relation between a pig's litter and the Pope's followers (and the Catholic church generally) runs throughout *King Johan* (ll. 106; 119; 637-8; 1976; 2414). This passage also introduces the Catholic leaders as "monstres bestyall." The bestial nature of the "false" church is emphasised in various places as well. At different points the Pope's minions are compared to "worme[s]" (l. 2252), "whelpes" (l. 2831), and foxes (l. 714). This passage introduces the three issues that are repeatedly illustrated throughout the play: the religious leaders' rejection of "Godes word" (l. 79), their decadent lifestyle, and their covetousness.

England's function in the first part of the play is therefore basic but essential in setting the religious tone for the rest of the play. She introduces themes, tropes, and images that are central to Bale's political intent. Her role as a widow and injured party allows her to speak openly to the king about her private concerns. Bale interestingly mixes the issues that cause England private grief with the political problems of the nation. As a widow, traditionally her role is private and domestic. But since she is an abstraction of the country, her grievances are really public concerns that affect the entire nation's population. The use of a widow to introduce public concerns is a way to get a more sympathetic reaction from the audience for the "wedowes cause." Bale's intent is to "humanise" matters of the state and make them affecting on a personal level, emotionally accessible to the audience. This way, England participates in both public and private spheres. Her position as a widow allows her this liminality.

England's role in her next appearance at line 1534 is to usher in Commonalty, to show John the nation's state of deprivation. Dramatically, this section has obvious

didactic significance; England functions as exposition. John effectively becomes a member of the audience, learning as it learns. England expands on the connection between ignorance and physical infirmity, an idea that she introduced in the opening scene of the play. Commonalty is blind and sick, explaining that “pristes, channons and monkes” have deprived him of his “substance” (ll. 1566; 1565).

If Commonalty is a starving man, deprived of the things that compose him, then England is a woman/nation deprived of all of the things that define her. She needs her “spowse and [her] londes at lyberte” (l. 1572). Her lack of a husband identifies her as a widow; her lack of “londes” identifies her as a nation in bondage. She laments, “Alack for pyte that euer ye grantyd this./ For me, pore Ynglond, ye haue done sore amys;/ Of a fre woman ye haue mad a bonde mayd” (ll. 1765-7). Jacqueline Vanhoutte writes that these lines imply the rape and enforced prostitution of England (68). The critic notes that the overtly sexualised language of Sedition proves that the clergy are portrayed as sexual predators. Usurped Power is defined in part by his sexual appetite: “Sumtyme I must hunt, sumtyme I mvst Alysen kys” (842). However, though taunting Sedition calls England a prostitute, she never describes herself this way, nor does she act like one. What Bale does is to make a conceptual connection between rape as sexual violation and rape as seizure (of land) in England’s relation of her poverty-stricken state in the above passage.⁹

⁹ The emphasis on this point also depends on the actor’s interpretation of England’s part. Gestures and actions could be added to her portrayal to suggest sexual victimisation.

England's other function in this passage is the resumption of her role as curse-maker. At John's excommunication, she tells the Cardinal and the clegy, "I beshrowe your hartes" (l. 1617). She also curses the Catholic church and its customs:

I am clene ondone by yowr false merchandyce –
Yowr pardons, yowr bulles, yowr purgatory pyckepurse,
Yowr lent fastes, yowr schryftes – that I pray God geve yow his cursse!
(ll. 1625-7).

The figure of the grieving woman as one who curses comes from medieval representations of Mary at the cross. By popular English account, she curses the Romans for their brutal treatment of Christ (Witt 67).¹⁰ As a character who curses, England has didactic power – informing the contemporary audience of the Catholic church's transgressions – as well as dramatic interest.

Bale's allusion to Mary – an icon of Catholicism – is an example of Potter's claim, which I noted earlier: Bale "tries to turn the weapons of the enemy against themselves," while working "from within the conventions of Catholic religious drama" (95). Any religious play from the pre-Reformation era would likely mention the Virgin Mary; hence, Bale would have to deal with this audience expectation. Bale plays upon the reverence that the population would undoubtedly still feel for the Virgin, regardless of the changes brought on by the religious reformation. Though the implication is present, the play never overtly mentions an analogy between Widow England and the Virgin.

¹⁰ Shakespeare also continues this cultural convention in his portrayal of Margaret in *Richard III*, as we will see in my final chapter.

Bale thus saves the play from ironical criticism, i.e. a Protestant play invoking the name of a Catholic icon.

This scene also shows England's important political function. John decides to banish the church on England's advice:

Eng. [Y]f ye permytt contynvance of ypocresye
In monkes, chanons and pristes, and mynysters of the clargy,
Yowr realme shall neuer be withowt moch traytery.
K. John. All þat I perceyve and therefor I kepe owt fryers,
Lest thy shuld bryng the moch farder into þe bryers.¹¹

(ll. 1589-93)

This passage indicates England's active role in the politics of the country. She may at times "depend on the men" who should protect her, but she is not "passive" as Vanhoutte suggests (65). England influences John's political decisions and controls the audience's perception of the church. Unlike many wailing women in pieces of Renaissance histories – for example the Mother in *Cambises* (ll. 593-4), the wailing women of *Richard III* (4.4), and the Duchess of Gloucester in *Richard II* (1.2.1-74) – England does not resort to cursing because she lacks the power to influence the political world around her. But she does curse to instruct and influence John and the audience, to provoke the Pope's followers, and to provide *King John* with a specific type of dramatic interest associated with the figure of the widow.

¹¹ This reference to "bryers" or thorns appears to relate England's suffering to Christ's, who is forced to wear the crown of thorns up to and during the crucifixion.

In the next section (ll. 1703-1983), after deliberating with King John, England shows her strongest opposition to the Pope's power. John enters having decided to deliver up the crown to the papal legate, Pandulphus. He says it is preferable to submit rather than suffer "the great displeasures of warre,/ The daungers, the losses, the decays both nere and farre" (ll. 1705-6).¹² He emphasises that "I do not thys of cowardnesse/ But of compassyon" (ll. 1719-20). But Widow England ardently tries to dissuade John from this action. In their only moment of conflict in the entire play, John chastises England for not thinking of her people. John's decision to concede to the Pope is an example of his protective role over the land: "O Englande, Englande, shewe now thyselfe a mother;/ Thy people wyll els be slayne here without nomber" (ll. 1717-18). She is a widow focused on her present grief and neglects to think as a mother. She anticipates that John's decision will make her a "bond mayde" (l. 1767) as mentioned earlier. Each has a valid point and their conflict reveals to the audience the moral dilemma of good rule: should a monarch put the lives of his people before their freedom – religious or otherwise – or vice versa? Should his people be slain in the "ruffle and turmoyle" of his Catholic "enemyes" or should they be saved and suffer the corrupt dominion of the Pope? As England eventually tells John, "Do as ye thinke best; yche waye is to my smarte" (l. 1776). In this case, John's virtue is presented as a desire to save the lives of the English population.

Bale must follow history in this scene, defending John's decision to submit to the Pope. By placing him in opposition to England, Bale illustrates the difficulties involved

¹² John considers the potential result of opposing the Pope: Catholic nations such as France and Spain would be inclined to spring to Rome's defense and declare war on England.

in the king's role as physical and spiritual protector of the nation. The playwright also strengthens the rationale for John's decision, allowing his dialogue with England to show that protecting the lives of his people is more advantageous than opposing the Church in these circumstances. Bale therefore answers the critiques of medieval and Renaissance historians who had interpreted John's submission as "cowardnesse." Bale gives Verity a monologue which names some of these historians: "Giraldus and Mathu Parys.../ Yea, Paulus Phrigio, Iohan Maior and Hector Boethius" (2202-3). Therefore Bale intends his play to be an apology for John's reign.

Contrary to the widow's usual role in history plays – to look after the domestic interests of the nation – England represents political and religious xenophobia, which is the role usually assigned to the king and his nobility. By "domestic" I mean the internal interests of the nation that are not political. In times of political crises women are often left to look after the home affairs while men go to war. So, not usually being able to take an active role in politics, women maintain an internal status quo. However, here England is more concerned about the political dominion that will be undertaken by a foreign Pope and his corrupt clergy if John submits his crown to the legate. Bale doesn't conform to the convention of widows (or women generally) caring for the private sphere and men looking after the political security of the state. Bale switches these roles in order to make his defense of John more convincing and sympathetic.

The animosity between England and Sedition on the stage allegorically represents the nation's battle with insurrection against John's regal authority. England's role as a woman of woe is important to the scenes featuring their conflicts. Sedition's verbal

victimisation of England shows the constant barrage of attacks she is forced to suffer, made especially cruel by Widow England's impoverished appearance and state. Equally important is Sedition's dramatic function of providing comic relief. Sedition's inappropriate taunting of a stately and otherwise lamentable figure works to undermine England's seriousness.

Using scatological references, Sedition tempers the severity of England's case against the Church. To one of her interjections he replies, "Out with thys harlot! Cockes sowle, she hath lete a fart!" (l. 1757). Indeed, England suffers a great deal of name calling at the hands of Sedition. At various points throughout the play he calls her "whore" (ll. 87; 1714), "folysh woman" (l. 1882), "queane" (l. 1907), and "callet" (l. 1940). He responds this way only when England attacks the church or laments her state. Sedition's reaction is a stereotypical response to the wailing woman. We see the same type of ridicule in Ambidexter's reaction to the Queen in *Cambises* (ll. 1127-1135) and in Richard's lines to the cursing Queen Margaret (*Richard III* 1.3.157-302).

Sedition's threatening function within the play is as important as his comic role. As David Bevington writes, vice characters are "sinister beneath their comic exteriors" (122). The audience can hear the gleeful malevolence in Sedition's whispered lines to England. After John's submission to the Church, England asks if the Gospel will have any place in the "new" order. Sedition replies, "That I shall tell the, kepe thu it in secrete counsell:/ It [the Gospel] shall neyther come in churche nor yet in chauncell" (ll. 1980-1). The numerous fricatives in these lines – "shall," "the," "thu," "secrete," "counsell," "chauncell" – communicate the sinister nature that Bevington ascribes to Vices generally.

Though *Sedition* displays this character trait throughout the play, the audience sees his particularly vicious threat to the nation in his exchanges with Widow England.

Vanhoutte suggests that *Sedition* “reduce[s England] to the early modern stereotype of the wanton woman” (65). But in order for England to be “reduced,” the play would have to show England being altered in some way by *Sedition*’s jibes. But she rarely, if ever, responds to his insults or shows that they have affected her. In Bale’s eschatological model of history, England is portrayed as stable, unchanging, and unwavering in her opinions. Her stasis as a woman of woe, unaltered by *Sedition*’s taunts, is important to Bale’s nationalistic purposes. The playwright’s intent is to show a nation always in crisis, always and eternally threatened by “sedition,” “dissimulation,” and the corrupt practices of the Catholic church, and always potentially in a position of poverty and sorrow.

Yet in the final section of John’s narrative (ll. 2050-2192) England’s role is not to lament, but to support the king while he is at his weakest and most cynical. Here we will see England perform her most significant duties as a widow. John enters the scene pessimistic and demoralised. Addressing God, he cries, “I would resygne vp gladlye/
Both my crowne and lyfe; for thyne own ryght it is,/ If it woulde please the, to take my
sowle to thy blys” (ll. 2061-3). England comforts John and acts as a messenger: “Sir, be
of good chere, for the pope hath sent a legate/ Whose name is Gualo, your foes to

excommunicate” (ll. 2068-9).¹³ But John is inconsolable and does not trust anyone “as weare that Marke [of the Catholic church]” (ll. 2083).

Oddly, though John reiterates this distrust at length, when Dissimulation enters disguised as the monk Simon of Swynsett bearing a cup of liquor, he says “In dede I wolde gladly drynke” (l. 2106). After he drinks, England cries, “Alas, alas, your grace is betrayed cowardlye”: she notices Sedition bearing off the monk, who begins to die after drinking from the same cup as John (l. 2139). Here England’s role is mostly that of exposition, but her most important function in the scene comes next.

England begins to eulogise King John, even before he has died. As he lies dying on the stage, she says,

A false Iudas kysse he hath gyuen yow and is gone.

The halte, sore and lame thys pitiefull case wyll mone.

Neuer prynce was there that made to poore peoples vses

So many masendewes, hospitals and spyttle howses

As your grace hath done yet sens the worlde began.

(ll. 2144-8)

Here England begins constructing a nationalist history even before the past has entered the past. In keeping with Bale’s apocalyptic notion of history, John is immediately given an enduring place in English legend, a place that has been seemingly ordained by God. Indeed, John himself enlists the help of the audience, asking them to “Pray for me, good people, I besych yow hartely,/ That the lorde aboue on my poore sowle haue mercy” (ll.

¹³ Adams writes that Gualo was a monk sent by the Pope to support John against the invading forces of France and against the rebelling English barons (188).

2172-3). Not only is John looked upon as having a divinely given role in history within the text of the play, but the audience must also continue John's legacy.¹⁴ The martyrological function of the play depends upon John's passing from the play into the religious memory of the audience. England is the character who initiates the fusing of the martyrology with nationalistic intent, creating a "nationalistic *pietà*" (Vanhoutte 67). Her widow's lament is the medium which allows her to accomplish this.

At the end of John's narrative, England is the only character left to lament his death. This is often the pattern in Renaissance history plays that contain female characters: women perform the function of caring for the dying and of remembering the dead, particularly young men killed in battle. It is no surprise then that John asks England to "provyde for my buryall./ A wedowes office it is to burye the deade" (ll. 2184-5). She stays with John as he dies and promises to remember him: "I wyll not leaue ye thus,/ But styll be with ye tyll [God] do take yow from vs [the audience and herself?]/ And than wyll I kepe your bodye for a memoryall" (ll. 2181-3). Women, particularly widows, function as embodiments of memory. Not only does England keep John's body as a memorial; as a written text her words – and the entire play – stand as a memorial to John too. The body will always be present for England (the character and nation) as long as the play survives to be performed.

England's final speech, after John's death (ll. 2186-2192), is significant in that it both signals the end of the King John narrative – reporting the death of John, who weighs "so heavy as leade" – and is a choric curse on the Catholic church. Her curse is

¹⁴ Blatt notes the play's numerous comparisons between John and biblical figures like David and Moses (128). These comparisons emphasise the divine nature of John's rule.

particularly effective in terms of poetic sound: the lines are laden with a succession of prominent stops (in bold):

Oh horryble **case**, that euer so noble a **kynge**

Shoulde thus **be destroyed** and lost for ryghteouse **doynge**

By a **cruel sort** of **disguised bloud souppers** –

Vnmercyfull mutherers, all **dronke** in the **bloude** of **marters!**

As a result of these hard consonantal sounds, England's final speech is harsh, biting, and venomous, matching the lines' content. The violent speech is a fitting end to the scene depicting John's murder and the virulently anti-Catholic tone of the play generally.

The final section of the play (ll. 2193-2691) introduces the character Imperial Majesty, the "embodiment of essential princehood" (Blatt 123). Many critics identify Imperial Majesty as Henry VIII, but Thora Blatt writes that he is an abstraction that can be embodied by any ruler, including Elizabeth I, who came to the throne shortly before Bale revised *King Johan* (Blatt 102).¹⁵ The final scene presents ideal abstractions – Imperial Majesty, Verity, Nobility, Clergy, Civil Order – and the Vice, Sedition. Both Blatt and Vanhoutte describe England as an ideal abstraction (Blatt 127; Vanhoutte 65) and as we have seen, she is also non-temporal, having a trans-historical place within Bale's account. If this is the case, then why isn't England present at the trial of Nobility, Clergy, and Civil Order, playing the same part as Verity and Imperial Majesty?

¹⁵ Blatt also writes that "Bale is, as always, intent on a review of history as he sees it, though he is eager to pay his respects to the ruling monarch" (102) be it Henry VIII, Edward VI, or Elizabeth. However, Imperial Majesty best recalls Henry VIII, as he has "due supremacye" to exile the Pope (l. 2359). The wording, of course, recalls Henry's Act of Supremacy (1534), the bill that made Henry head of church and the state.

One answer to this question is that she is not on the same level of perfection as the other abstractions and hence has no place in the proceedings of the scene. As mentioned before, John chastises England for her self-interest in the matter of submitting to the Pope: “Shewe now thyselfe a mother” (l. 1717). He warns her about the potential loss of life if the nation opposes the Church. Having the ability to decipher the “true” church from the “false” church, England is caught between her innate repulsion toward the Catholic clergy and John’s desire to submit to the Pope. That England initially questions and opposes John’s will as the nation’s divinely appointed ruler illustrates her lack of ideality. She does not submit immediately to her monarch, as a good subject must. The other abstractions – Verity and Imperial Majesty – are perfect, inhabiting an entirely ideal realm. Nobility, Clergy, and Civil order are not perfect, so their function is to reassert their allegiance and be chastised. England is neither wholly ideal nor requires chastisement. Her position in the play is liminal. The final scene involves only non-liminal characters, therefore England can’t be present in the scene.

Another theory is that England’s disappearance from the stage occurs because harmony is restored to the play: “[England] becomes... internalized: a common point of reference to the remaining characters who end the play by praying for the ‘confort of this nacyon’ [l. 2689]” (Vanhoutte 71). Vanhoutte suggests that England becomes “internalized” not only by the characters, but by the audience as well.

Both theories are valid, but I would go one step further than Vanhoutte and argue that England’s disappearance has as much to do with Bale’s attention to dramatic effect. The final scene of *King Johan* concerns the restoration of order: Sedition is executed and

John's spirit comes back, sort of, in the form of Imperial Majesty (Happé 98). The three estates repent their allegiance to the Pope and return to their proper place under Imperial Majesty. But where does Widow England fit in this schema? Well, being defined as a widow throughout the text of the play, she inhabits a position of perpetual lack. Her function in the play is resolutely tied to her status as a widow. She has interest as a character who weeps, pleads, and curses, but if her ability to weep, plead, and curse is taken away, she lacks definition. Widowhood is only dramatically useful when things in a play are ill.

Also, in Bale's eschatological view of history, it is unsuitable for him to dramatise Widow England recovered from her victimisation. England's suffering, as a woman of woe, is essential Bale's political intent, which is to evoke a sense of urgency and immediacy about the dangers of a corrupt Catholic clergy and of Catholicism in general. As an immediately recognisable and powerful image of suffering this Widow England arouses the audience's sympathy. Her suffering and unchanging pathetic appearance transmit an image of the nation that is always in danger of the Catholic threat. Bale's intent is to show that the crimes of the Catholic church were not only a threat to King John, but are *always* a threat to any future monarch. Bale's history is located not only in the past, but is constantly reoccurring, a cyclical battle between good and evil forces. Widow England's suffering must be continual throughout *King Johan* because of the eternal Catholic threat: past, present, and future.

Despite this integral role in *King Johan*, Widow England has been surprisingly neglected in criticism. There are two possible reasons for this. The first is that in a

propaganda play so vehemently anti-Catholic and so focused on John's relationship with the Pope and his minions, it can seem that England has a minor role. Indeed, the reader may simply see England as John's double, as they both represent the ideal reformed position towards the church and nation. Since the play also contains the attractively evil Vice-figure Seditio, attention naturally gets drawn towards him and his antics. The other reason for the critical neglect of Widow England is that she seems at first glance a conventional, even stereotypical, reinforcement of feminine ideals. What I hope that my chapter on Bale's *King Johan* has proven, however, is that even within the term "stereotype" there is great dramatic potential for the communication of religious, nationalistic, or historical intents.

**Reconsidering *Cambises*: Weeping Women at the Heart of
Thomas Preston's "Lamentable" Play**

The general academic feeling about Thomas Preston's *Cambises* is that it displays "competent mediocrity" (Johnson 27). Critics have called Preston's diction and metre "halting," "cumbrous," "plodding," and "oafish" (Hill 405; Craik xii; Johnson 10; Kaplan 104). Some have gone so far as to dispute Preston's identity, being unable to imagine how a Cambridge don and "academic" playwright could come to write this drama.¹⁶ It has been thought that the play we have now is not the play that Preston originally wrote. Perceptions like these tend to devalue the common appeal of *Cambises*, assuming that popularity does not make a successful play. And *Cambises* was well received by audiences and widely played (Ribner 50). Part of the reason for this was the play's good balance of gore, violence, comedy, and tragedy, regardless of its diction and metre, which is not as bad as it is made out to be. So why is *Cambises* so maligned? Its heavy reliance on stock characterisation is probably the reason. Throughout the play, characters appear and disappear, never to be seen again so there is little possibility for character development, apart from that of Cambises himself.¹⁷

Women stock characters in *Cambises* are hardly studied at all. This is surprising considering that a wide spectrum of female stereotypes are represented, including the

¹⁶ See Howard B. Norland, who writes that earlier twentieth-century critics E.K. Chambers, J.M. Manley, and J.Q. Adams "hypothesized that another Thomas Preston perhaps with connections to popular [as opposed to "academic"] performance may have been responsible for the extant text of the play" (330).

¹⁷ Ambidexter is an exception to the rule of stock type neglect; he is often studied in terms of his position in the sixteenth-century development of the Vice character.

maiden, the whore, the tragic queen, the grieving mother, and the stern, chastising housewife. Women characters in *Cambises* are also essential to the play's counterbalance of tragedy and comedy, especially women of woe, like the Mother and Cambises' queen.

W.A. Armstrong has done the most research on *Cambises*, and does look at the role of women in the play. However, he does so solely in the context of religious doctrine. He sees women characters – particularly the Queen – as figures that represent and reinforce submission to the Protestant “doctrine of obedience” (289). To situate *Cambises* politically and religiously, Armstrong argues that the play “illustrates loyal Anglican doctrines about the duties of kings and subjects” (289). He points out that Preston follows early reformer William Tyndale, bible translator and author of the treatise entitled “The Obedience of a Christian Man” (1528). “The Obedience of a Christian Man” argues that “Christians living in the dominion of a pagan or oriental prince should willingly obey him in all worldly matters” (Armstrong 295). Armstrong connects this Anglican doctrine to Preston's narrative of the tyrant king who commits one just deed prior to the terrorisation of his innocent subjects. The Wars of the Roses were still within recent memory. Armstrong argues that Preston wanted to write a play that warned about the inappropriateness of rebellion. Since the play was likely written originally for a court audience, the idea was that it would also illustrate to royalty the evils of bad rule (292).

The upshot of Armstrong's argument is that *Cambises* is less a piece of entertainment than a doctrinal “document.” *Cambises* is generally counted as a “hybrid”

play, manifesting the transition between the didactic morality and the history play. Armstrong refutes *Cambises*' historical function, limiting its role by making it into merely an inflexible regurgitation of dogma.¹⁸ While this opinion is valid enough, Armstrong assumes, wrongfully I think, that the politicisation of the play is the result of Preston's lack of dramatic skill. Moreover, this perspective totally ignores the aesthetic intents of the play, including the roles of the stock characters, of which there are numerous types.

Contrary to Armstrong's ideas about the solely didactic intent of *Cambises*, however, it is indeed a history play, if one defines the genre as following the story of a historic (and secular) personage.¹⁹ Cambises ruled Persia from 530 to 522 B.C. He was the son of a famous ruler, Cyrus the Great, and his major accomplishment was the conquest of Egypt, as recounted in Preston's play. The story of Cambises originated in Herodotus, but was found in numerous works of late medieval and early Renaissance writers, notably Chaucer and Lydgate (Johnson 6). Preston came by the story of Cambises via Richard Taverner's *Garden of Wysdome* (c. 1538), which was "partly designed as popular propaganda in support of Henry VIII in his quarrel with the papacy" (Armstrong 289).

Given Preston's source text, it is tempting to view his play as merely a dramatic reflection of that material with similar political intentions. However, *Cambises* is a more sophisticated play than it has sometimes been credited with being. Its arguably political

¹⁸ Eugene D. Hill contests Armstrong's theory: "If the playwright's intention was to urge obedience to the commands of a duly constituted king, it is difficult to imagine why he would present royal servants like the Knight obeying Cambises' vicious commands with such absurdly obsequious alacrity" (406).

¹⁹ I use the term "secular" here to differentiate the history play from the saint play or the biblical (mystery) play.

function does not necessarily preclude thematic and dramatic potential. In particular, Preston's use of stock characters illuminates their common theatrical function. Though not "innovative" – a suspect term in itself when used to describe Renaissance drama – Preston's "wailing women" in particular give the play domestic and tragic interest. The women of woe also disprove Armstrong's theory of *Cambises* as mere religious/political doctrine. My study of "women of woe" in *Cambises* includes their rhetorical, thematic, and dramatic power, both as individuals and in relation to the rest of the play. It is my aim to re-examine and perhaps renew interest in this neglected area of study in a neglected play.

To do this, I will look at three scenes of grieving in *Cambises*. The first involves Otian, the judge Sisamnes' son, who pleads for his father's life after discovering the king's execution warrant. The second scene of sorrow concerns the Mother's lament over the body of her child, who has been murdered by the king. The third is the Queen's parting speech, delivered as she is led to her execution by Murder and Cruelty. After the long initial scene of Sisamnes' appointment, his transgression, and his execution – which accounts for one-third of the play's action – the grieving scenes are spaced roughly evenly throughout.

This attention to balance indicates that Preston clearly structured his play. He also alternates the rustics' comic scenes with the tragic ones; some critics argue that this is an awkward technique, but the comic scenes do provide relieving laughter after the "heaviness" of previous scenes, creating tonal balance. One might even compare this technique with Shakespeare's alternation of comic and tragic scenes. However, far from

being merely a stepping-stone in a teleological progression toward Shakespeare, Preston uses conventional techniques for his own specific dramatic purposes. His stock wailing women characters in particular are given rhetorical and dramatic significance.

More significantly than the function of providing relieving laughter, *Cambises*' comic scenes form a counterpoint to the serious action of the tragic scenes. The fights between Ambidexter and the rustics parody the king's real campaigns in Egypt. On a more emotional level, the thievery of "cosin Cutpurse" is contrasted to the more tragic and personal theft of the child from his mother. It is demanded that the audience quickly change its reactions: from the rustics' comic banter and fighting to the three death scenes – featuring Sisamnes, the Mother's son, and Smirdis – back to the comedy of Ambidexter, Hob, and Lob. The ease with which some audience members could go back and forth between emotional reactions was perhaps a comment on the cheapening of human emotion in English society.

The Mother's lament is central because her performance of grief is given more lines than any other grieving character and her main speech is delivered at the mathematical centre of the play (Hill 407).²⁰ A comparison between her speech and Otian's will help us see the difference between masculine and feminine expressions of woe. More importantly, the Mother's speech owes its centrality to its emotional and rhetorical depth; her lines refute those critics who write about Preston's lack of artistic skill. The playwright sees particular dramatic potential in the woman of woe. Part of this potential is located in the wailing woman's fragile identity. When the Mother loses her

²⁰ The Mother's speech begins at line 579 and ends at 599. There are 1192 lines total in the action of the play (not including the Prologue and Epilogue). $1192 \div 2 = 596$.

son she falls to pieces, as indicated by her lamenting speech, which mentions numerous disembodied parts of the anatomy. Her focus on body parts also emphasises the internal connection she feels with her murdered son. The extremely personal relationship figured by the Mother highlights the severity of her woe, as well as the great dramatic potential in the stock character.

As a woman of woe, the Queen's function in this play is to provide a particular sort of emotional impact. Her farewell to the court (and audience) is a lexically and metrically sophisticated piece of poetry that, as an elegy, is an emotionally effective dramatic set piece. Considering its solely poetic function, the Queen's farewell provides an emphatic counterpoint to Cambises' brutal condemning language that commands her execution.

This rhetorical sophistication, in addition to the thematic and structural centrality of wailing women in *Cambises*, illustrates the potential inherent in stock characterisation in Tudor history plays more generally. That Preston can write a play in which women of woe form the "heart" indicates the dramatic flexibility of an apparently "stale" stock character. The particular situations in which the Queen and the Mother find themselves are only possible due to their stock characterisation as women of woe. Ambidexter too, as a conventional vice figure, provides the play with a great deal of comic and theatrical interest. His puns and visual gags contrast evenly with the seriousness of the wailing women. The implication is that a successful Tudor play – successful in the sense of being both well crafted and commercially popular – can depend almost solely on stock characterisation.

The first scene I examine in this study of stock characterisation involves not a woman of woe, but a man of woe. Otian enters scene four pleading for his father's life, begging for leniency and offering himself up instead of Sisamnes: "In sted of his requested life, pleaseth your grace take mine:/ This offer I as tender Childe, so duty doth me bind" (ll. 431-2).²¹ Notably, Otian mentions his father in every line of his speech (ll.427-32) except the last, either by the title of "father" or by pronoun. Otian addresses himself to the king and refers to himself as a child:

O mightie King, vouchsafe your grace, my father to remit:

Forgive his fault, his pardon I doo aske of you as yet.

Alas although my father hath your princely hart offended:

Amends for misse he wil now make, and faults shalbe amended.

(ll. 427-30)

The effect of this passage is an emphasis on relationships: Otian must acknowledge himself as subject to both the king and his father. He prostrates himself – as his "duty" to his father – in an effort to spare his life. Otian's lines, which urge rectification and forgiveness, show his helplessness: Otian knows that he can do nothing but repeat his offer, not being able to redress his father's crimes. In this sense, his lines are formal; he presents himself in a manner which accords with the situation.

Otian's next speech (ll. 445-54) best articulates his grief. As might be expected, this relatively brief passage repetitiously contains words related to suffering bereavement: "tears," "greefs," "sighs," "death," "slain," "woeful," "doleful," and "unhappy."

²¹ I am using Robert Carl Johnson's edition of *Cambises*; all scene divisions are his.

Interestingly, Otian uses terms of grief, but he does not describe his sorrow, except to say that his heart “doth breke in twain” (l. 447). Primarily, he laments that he, as a child, should have to see his father executed before him, before his father’s time. The emphasis is on the unnaturalness of the act, rather than on Otian’s feelings of loss; he says that it is “against nature’s mould” to see his father killed before him and in such a grotesque manner (l.465).

Thematically, this passage is important, particularly if one subscribes to Armstrong’s theory that the play enforces the doctrine of obedience. Otian invokes the name of “that false and fickle frowning Dame,” Fortune, who “turneth as the winde” (l.449). A corollary to the doctrine of obedience is the notion that bad kings are agents of divine retribution, that they are punishment for the sins of the people. It is inevitable that bad kings will rule (as it is inevitable that people will sin); the doctrine of obedience dictates that the sinner must submit to God’s agent. One might read the invocation of Fortune as a pagan representation of this notion.²²

Even if one doesn’t agree with Armstrong’s theory, the passage still has thematic importance. The issue of helplessness, resulting from the subject’s lack of agency, is central here and throughout the play. “Unnaturalness” is also another major theme in *Cambises*, and Sisamnes’ execution is just one example of unnatural death: Cambises will kill another son in front of his father, he will murder his own brother, and he will execute his wife. His marriage to his first cousin is another act of unnatural behaviour: “Lust leads [Cambises] to violate divine and natural law by incestuously marrying his

²² Preston’s alternation between pagan and Christian references is evident throughout the text of the play. Sometimes the characters invoke the name of Jove; other times they swear to God.

own kinswoman” (Armstrong 294). All of this evidence proves that Otian's lines are significant in their initiation of important themes. However, their dramatic effect appears less when compared to the Mother's lament in the next scene.

The Mother's initial speech (ll. 573-77) has much the same effect as the lines that Otian speaks on his entrance. The passage identifies the Mother through her relationships with the king, her son, and with her “husband and Lord” (l. 577). Note these last two identity markers: the order implies that she regards herself as a mother first and a Lady second. Note also that in the cast of characters she is listed as “Mother” and not “Praxaspes' wife” or “Lady.” Preston places the emphasis on the Mother as a mother; that is her most significant dramatic function. The playwright realises the dramatic potential in the stock character of the grieving mother and identifies her immediately as such.

Significantly, the core of the Mother's speech (ll. 579-99) is twice as long as the core of Otian's. This difference might be expected, since the majority of the grieving female characters in the Renaissance history plays studied in this thesis are much more vocal in their sorrow than their male counterparts: hence the stereotype of the overly-emotional or “appalling” woman (Baker 806).²³ Yet this scene in particular illuminates the faulty assumptions behind the stereotype and refutes the notion that male playwrights disparage women in plays of this era by depicting them as vocally emotional.

The unwitting child is taken away from his equally unwitting mother to be killed by Cambises. The king wishes to prove his steadiness of hand while “in the midst of his

²³ See chapter three for an explanation and elaboration of this point.

cups” (l. 566). The Mother’s grief is amplified by the suddenness of his death and the manner in which it takes place. Despite her shock, she must think of her duties as a funeral attendant. Her speech anticipates the activities she must perform as a mourner. She says that she will sing “mourning tunes,” pick up the body of her son and “wrap [him] in [her] apron white” (ll. 581-83). She wrings her hands in a conventional gesture of sorrow and suggests that she and her husband return home to grieve in private, “our mourning to augment” (l. 599). Presumably she would be in charge of preparations for the burial. In the period in which *Cambises* was written, and until the seventeenth century,

women were the most frequent and most immediate attendants on bodies in death, carrying out the task of caring for the dying, washing and winding the corpse, watching the body during its period of laying-out, conducting ritual lamentations within the home, serving as almsfolk and mourners at funerals, and donning mourning garments according to cultural rules of relation and class. (Phillippy 4)

The Mother’s apron is the boy’s winding sheet and her “mourning tunes” are the “ritual lamentations” of Phillippy’s list. The Mother’s passage reminds the audience (both contemporary and present-day) of the numerous difficult duties that women had in that time, in their primary funereal roles as burial attendants and mourners.

In addition to the Mother’s anticipation of her heavy role as funeral arranger, she recalls her son when he was alive. She remembers that his delivery gave her “grief in womb,” yet she was joyful “when smart was gone” (l. 587-8). She tells of how she fed him, calmed him, and “daunced [him] upon my knee” (l. 592). As I will argue later in

my thesis, women characters function as memory retainers. When men are killed in battle, women are left to grieve for the dead. Though the circumstances in *Cambises* are different, the Mother performs the same task: she recalls memories of the dead.

The last point of note about the Mother's lament concerns her language and diction. She makes numerous references to body parts in these lines. She speaks of wombs (twice), hands (three times), hearts (five times), arms, eyes, breasts, lips, and knees. This focus on anatomy emphasises her domestic function. As a mother and caregiver the bodies of her children are her particular province. The anatomical references concern both her body and her son's: she relates her own physicality to her child's, thereby making him a part of her. The grief process involves her whole body. Her sorrow – and the violence done to her son's body – is therefore manifested *within* her own body. Her suffering takes place internally, on a physical level. The implication of the Mother's words is that the loss of her son results in a loss of identity on her part. Since she recalls her son in terms of a kind of symbiotic relationship, she laments not only her son, but herself as well. Even if she has other children, she has lost an element of her motherhood, especially considering that this child was an apparent favourite.

Though seemingly a conventional scene in which a mother grieves for her dead son, it might be taken as an instance best described by Kathleen McLuskie: “[t]he most powerful images of women are as a result created out of an adaptation and reworking of familiar notions of what it means to be a woman” (41). Here Preston's skill is that he takes a conventional image of womanhood (more conventional in an era where infant

mortality was extremely high) and adapts it so that the scene takes on issues of feminine identity. The Mother's focus on corporeal composition accomplishes this.

The Mother's emphasis on anatomy also has thematic significance for *Cambises*. Willard Farnham argues that *Cambises* lacks unity and that it is comprised of a "disconnected anecdotal structure" (267). James Myers Jr. suggests, by contrast, that cohesiveness is created through the repetition of an anatomical image: that of the heart, in all of its metaphoric and imagistic connotations. He writes that "the figure of the heart" is repeatedly presented throughout the play and developed to the point that it creates a metaphoric climax parallel to the climax of the play, Cambises' death scene. He concludes that "[t]he overall sequence [of the play], when appraised from the perspective afforded by the metaphor of the heart, is logical, ironic, and climactic" (376). Myers focuses on both comic and serious scenes, but he neglects to mention the central part of this particular scene, where the Mother laments that her son's death "wold make [her heart] in two to part" (l. 584). Myers' neglect of this scene is surprising. Indeed, not only does this scene occur at the literal (i.e. mathematical) centre of *Cambises*, but one might also call it the figurative "heart" of the play. In this scene it becomes apparent what is at stake when a tyrant rules a country: unnatural death and cruel punishment. The Mother embodies domestic concern; like Widow England in *King Johan* and Blanch in *King John*, she and other women are the ones who have to face the aftermath of murder and destruction as mourners and keepers of the dying and the dead.

In comparison with the Mother's scene Otian's lines are very different in terms of both intent and effect. So too are the Mother's and Otian's respective reactions,

especially considering that one witnesses the death of a family member while the other does not. Even though Otian witnesses the execution and flaying of his father, his initial speech (ll. 427-32) is what I would call formal: it dwells on a child's duty to his father. Otian speaks only as a subject, from the position of a lord to his king, and from a son to his father. The Mother's initial speech (ll. 573-77) on the other hand immediately reveals her as a grieving mother and wife. Even the body of Otian's lament (ll. 445-54) is largely repetitive and lacks the lexical and imagistic depth of the Mother's lines in her sorrow-stricken speech (ll. 579-99). He reiterates four times the shock he has at seeing his father in this state, in similar terms each time (ll. 448; 451; 452-3; 465-6). In contrast to the Mother's lines, Otian's words are mostly synonyms ("woful," "unhappy," "doleful"; "teares," "greefs," "sighes"), which repeat his feelings of grief, but do not depict his sorrow. Otian's lines describe the scene as it occurs: "unhappy hour, that looving childe should see:/ His father deer before his face, thus put to death should bee" (ll. 451-2). However, Otian's words do not add anything to our understanding of the parent and son's previous relationship, unlike the Mother's speech. This does not mean that Otian's lines lack emotional impact, just that they appeal to a different aspect of the audience's sympathy. The viewer is impressed with the image of the stoic façade that the son must wear in the face of a traumatic event.

In contrast with the Mother's scene, Otian takes away a lesson from what he has witnessed. He says, "O King, to me this is a glasse, with greef in it I view:/ Example that unto your grace, I doo not prove untrue" (469-70). The implication is that Otian still focuses on his duty as a subject after watching this horrid deed. Just as the Mother

anticipates her duty as a mourner so too does Otian anticipate his formal duty as a judge, as his father's replacement. However, the difference between them is that the Mother is not emotionally restricted by her position as subject as Otian is. The Mother has no significant role in Cambises' court, unlike Otian, who is now the highest judge in the realm. Otian must curb his emotions in front of his king in order to show his strength and firmness as a member of nobility. The Mother does not have this political role; hence she does not have to check her emotions. In Renaissance history plays and elsewhere women generally are allowed by virtue of their gender to grieve openly, mingling their public role with their private function. The ability of the Mother to exist outside political authority allows her to possess not only greater rhetorical power than her male counterpart but also greater dramatic interest. This is the reason for the difference between their speeches.

Having gestured toward the liminal function of the "weeping woman" – discussed at greater length in chapter three – my next example follows curiously against this pattern. The Queen's position as a grieving woman does *not* protect her from political retribution. In scene ten, King Cambises delivers an anecdote about two sibling dogs placed in opposition to a lion for sport. When one dog is attacked, "With force to Lyon he did run, his brother for to help:/ A wunder great it was to see that freendship in a whelp" (II.1026-7). The Queen weeps when she hears this, since prior to the scene Cambises has had his brother Smirdis tried and executed for treason, without evidence. The Queen cries, "When one [whelp] was like to have repulse the other yeelded help./ And was this favour showd in dogs to shame the royall king?" (1033-4) She goes on to

elaborate the irony of the king's anecdote. The king responds by calling her a "wretch" and a "cursed caitive vicious and vile," (1044; 1041), before ordering Murder and Cruelty to have her executed.

The Queen's criticism of the king (1032-40) stems from her personal reaction to her husband's speech and her desire to redress his crime through his edification. She encourages the king to see his fault so that it may not be repeated in future: "In all assayes it was your parte, his case to have defended:/ And who so ever had him misused, to have them reprehended" (1038-9). Her effort to affect political proceedings fails horribly. Interestingly, she begins her complaint while weeping, mourning the execution of Smirdis and the unnatural circumstances of his death. However, unlike the scenario with the Mother – who criticises the king overtly, though not in his presence – the Queen's critique is obviously more overt. In contrast to the earlier scene, the Queen's tears do not allow her to lament and comment on the action without punishment. The important thing to note here is that the phenomenon of liminal women characters, who are able to comment on the action of the play from within and without, is used by playwrights of this era to suit their own purposes. Preston breaks with convention by having a female character whose position as a mourner does not protect her from the politics of the play. He breaks convention in order to emphasise the cruelty of Cambises: with the king, no rules of the social order are unbreakable. The representation of Cambises as one who bucks dramatic conventions makes him an even greater tyrant.

Cambises' cruelty is also manifested in his promise "that flesh of thine these hands of mine, in peeces small could tere" (l. 1059). This passage spurs the Queen into her defense:

For tender loove unto your grace, my woords I did so frame:

For pure loove dooth hart of king, me violate and blame.

And to your grace is this offence, that I should purchase death?

Then cursed time that I was Queen, to shorten this my breth.

(ll. 1064-7)

This speech focuses not so much on her feelings at the prospect of her immediate death, but on vows and duty. In this respect, the Queen's lines parallel Otian's language of duty in the earlier scene. She explains that the reason for her initial weeping was for "tender loove unto your grace." She cites her relationship as wife and queen, referring to two of her identity markers, as Otian speaks of himself as son and subject in his pleading to the king. This is the first part in the Queen's three-part defense. When her appeals, first as his wife and then as his queen, do not sway the king, the two lords jump to her defense, each citing different reasons for sparing her life.

Seeing that the Queen's personal relationship with the king will not save her, the First Lord tries to use his own political status to change the king's mind. He reminds Cambises of the Queen's obedience and her devoted nature: "Let mercy yet abundantly the life of Queen preserve:/ Sith shee in moste obedient wise, your graces wil dooth serve./ As yet your grace but while with her, hath had cohabitation" (ll. 1078-80). The Second Lord tries another approach: he focuses on the Queen's appearance: "For beautie

bright dame nature she, a large gift did dispose" (l. 2085). However, the lords' subjection and duty to their king override their power to help the Queen: "With hevvy harts we wil doo all your grace dooth say" (l. 1112). Rather than encouraging the audience to submit to the power of a bad king, as Armstrong argues, this scene allows the viewers to watch first hand the cruelties of a dictator. This is one of the play's functions that is frequently overlooked.

The Queen's exiting lines (ll. 1121-26) display acceptance of her impending execution. Yet more than illustrating "the precepts of contemporary moralists" about how Christians should behave toward tyrant rulers, the speech's "intent" is mostly poetical. More so than many other passages in *Cambises*, "the Queen's farewell lines... have a melodic ring" (Johnson 27). The greater part of her lexis revolves around courtly apparel – her "train," her "happy sporte," and the "Ladies of the Court" – as well as her material possessions: her "brodered gardes," and "all the facions new." In this speech, the fourteen-syllable line doesn't sound so awkward. In other parts of the play, the "fourteener" makes for strange grammatical constructions. Note this example from scene one: "My grace dooth yeeld to this you talk, to be this now it shall" (l. 55). The queen's speech sounds more natural, since it is not designed as dialogue or to further the plot. It is an elegy – a poem commemorating her loss of courtly activities – and therefore has a specific poetic function.

Each line is more or less consistently stressed with seven stresses per line; only the last line varies from this pattern:

/ / / / / / /
The Court and all the courtly train, wherein I had delight:

/ / / / / /
I banished am from happy sporte and all by spightful spight.
/ / / / / /
Yet with a joyful hart to God a Psalm I meane to sing:
/ / / / / /
Forgiving all men and the king of eche kinde of thing.

(ll. 1123-26)

The last line is an emphatic end to both the Queen's lament and to the scene. Note the use of soft "A" and hard "O" sounds throughout the speech. The placement of vowels mostly in stressed syllable indicates a well-planned piece of poetry; Preston knew how to emphasise particular meanings through language. The soft "A"s and hard "O"s seem to signify the Queen's acceptance and forgiveness; they give the passage a quiet rhythm broken only by the hard "I"s and "E"s ("I," "spight," "meane," "eche"). These vowels are more strident sounds and give the passage a feeling of dignity.²⁴ They suggest that the Queen is not passive, as Armstrong suggests (297), but merely out of options; her forgiveness of the king is a dramatic device used to emphasise Cambises' wanton brutality. The obvious patterning of her farewell indicates a formality, in the sense of solemnity, though one not devoid of emotional force. The emotional impact of this nearly final scene is more apparent considering the psalm that the Queen sings after these lines, intended as both a musical interlude and as punctuation of the Queen's exit.

This punctuation is immediately countered by Ambidexter's irreverent entrance.

He parodies the assumed audience reaction, weeping ostentatiously:

A, A, A, A, I cannot chuse but weep for the Queene:

²⁴ Since the "A" and "O" sounds originate at the back of the mouth, they are quiet and of lower pitch; the "I"s and "E"s, on the other hand, are made at the front of a more closely-shut mouth and hence are higher-pitched (i.e. "strident").

Nothing but mourning now at the Court there is seen.

Oh, oh, my hart, my hart, Oh my bum will break:

Very greef so torments me that scarce can I speake.

(ll. 1127-30)

Ambidexter's lament also parodies the Queen's weeping in the previous scene. A good actor would change Ambidexter's facial and body gestures from one line to the next, seeming serious at one time and comic at another. Then would Ambidexter suit his name: one who "with bothe hands finely can play" (l. 151). Similarly, after the Mother's lament in scene five, Ambidexter appears with a comic bit about his "cosin Cutpurse," warning the audience about pickpockets (ll. 603-4). In both this scene and the one mentioned above, the tragic tension of the previous scene is relieved through laughter. Ambidexter therefore represents a tonal opposition to the "wailing women" characters, whose function it is to bring gravity to the play.²⁵ Moreover, the brevity of Ambidexter's comic scenes is contrasted with the lengthy lamenting scenes. The implication of this dramatic technique is that comedy is made to seem much more fleeting than tragedy. The comic scenes are entertaining and very important to the play; however, the tragic scenes provide its emotional grounding. The 1570 title page advertisement, "The lamentable tragedy" of *Cambises* (Johnson 45), provides the main dramatic intention of the play: the comic scenes only emphasise the tragic immediacy of the rest of its action.

²⁵ It is no coincidence that the comic female characters – Meretrix and Marian-may-be-good – are the only characters that frighten the Vice. Women are therefore set in opposition to Ambidexter for both purposes in the play: to lighten its tone *and* to give it melodrama.

Considering all this, the Mother's lament functions as the literal and metaphorical heart of the play, while Otian's and the Queen's sit on either side of this centre. Otian's and the Queen's laments are more formal in the sense that they focus on duty owed to the king and to family relations. By having each formal scene on either side of the Mother's, like a dramatic triptych, Preston gives the play a textual and tonal balance. The "apparent lopsidedness" (Kaplan 105) of *Cambises* is only one perception: the long opening scene functions as a separate act, so different it is in tone and subject matter from the rest of the play.²⁶

The implications of the Mother's lament being the centre of the play have not been fully spelled out. It is not too much to compare her to Mistress Quickly in *Henry V*, though the Mother doesn't have a comic function. Mistress Quickly represents the "heart" of that play as well. She also represents the domestic side of the play that is forgotten in all of the posturing of soldiers and in the king's declarations of war. Like the Mother, Mistress Quickly looks after the dead; she stays by Falstaff's side while he is dying and presumably looks after his body in death. While he lies dying, the Mistress recounts, Falstaff "cried out, 'God, God, God!' three or four times. Now I, to comfort him, bid him 'a should not think of God; I hop'd there was no need to trouble himself with any such thoughts yet. So 'a bade me lay more clothes on his feet...' (2.3.18-23). Queen Katherine also represents the domestic side of *Henry V*, but Mistress Quickly is the only woman to lament (ll. 117-20) and she views the action of the play both as a

²⁶ Here I differ from Johnson in terms of the division of scenes. The second part of the play really begins with Otian's entrance. Though the scene of Sisamnes' execution (including Otian's lines) could be read as morally didactic, in terms of emotional impact the play's second part really begins with the son watching his father's death.

woman and as a lower member of society, as the Mother does. Both lamenting female characters speak honestly and without fear of retribution from the king (since he is not present). The Mother says, “Is this the joy of thee I reap (O king) of Tigers brood?/ Oh tigers whelp hadst thou the hart, to see this childes harts blood?” (ll. 593-4). Mistress Quickly suggests the cause of Falstaff's illness: “The King has kill'd his heart” (2.1.88). In both cases the women speak without self-censure. Mistress Quickly's lines above are in prose while the Mother's are in verse, but in terms of emotional impact, neither one is restrained by notions of obligation. The only duties that they have to face are those of mourner and funeral attendant.

Numerous critics have cited the influence of *Cambises* on Shakespeare's plays and on later Elizabethan theatre in general. Some have noted a parallel between Preston's play and the play performed by Bottom and the others in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Craik xii; Kaplan 103). Others have noted the reference to *Cambises* in *1 Henry IV*: “Give me a cup of sack to make my eyes look red, that it may be thought I have wept, for I must speak in passion, and I will do it in Cambyeses' vein” (2.4.384-7).²⁷ Though cited here in jest, this quotation also illustrates that even in Shakespeare's time, nearly forty years later, *Cambises* was still being performed. The play must have been well known for such a reference to be understood by a common audience. Preston's play was indeed a part of an Elizabethan dramatic and cultural context. T.W. Craik points out that *Cambises* “follows the [English] native tradition” through its “mingling of serious events with boisterous comedy” (xi). Though it is not the first play in which this occurs, one

²⁷ See Hill and Craik.

could argue that *Cambises* participates in a tradition that was to become much more sophisticated in Shakespeare. Important as these points are, my endeavour has been to show that Thomas Preston's *Cambises* is a play worthy to be studied on its own, apart from its participation in the evolution of Elizabethan theatre. For not only does *Cambises* have a large place within a wide dramatic spectrum, it also has complexity in its own right, a sophistication that has often been disregarded.

This complexity owes a great deal to the roles of Preston's female figures of woe. *Cambises'* wailing women are rhetorically, thematically, and dramatically central to the play. Preston proves that Renaissance history plays can rest entirely on stock characterisation and not result in stale or static drama. *Cambises* also shows that the conventional representation of women does not necessarily equal the disparagement of women, as Vanhoutte suggests in her article, mentioned previously (65). What *Cambises* needs is a critic to look at *all* its stock characters, including the comic women: Marian-may-be-good and Meretrix. Then we might see that, in addition to the integral function of wailing women, *Cambises* owes its artistic sophistication, not an artistic handicap, to its conventional characterisation.

“To me and to the state of my grief let kings assemble:”

Grieving Women, Memory, and History in Shakespeare's *King John*

Thanks to feminist criticism, numerous scholarly advances have been made in a heretofore largely overlooked area in Shakespeare – women's roles in the history plays. Previously, female presence in the histories was ignored simply because there was not as much of it as in the comedies, romances, and tragedies. Unsurprisingly, in a play like *King John*, where all the women characters disappear by the fourth act, relatively little attention has been given to their political and dramatic functions. To my mind, the relative absence of women in the histories indicates that when women *are* present, their rhetorical, thematic, and dramatic power is both foregrounded and emphasised. In addition to the problem of overlooked female characters in the history plays, a literary critical stigma exists with regards to the representation of women itself. Some critics believe that women's roles are somehow “conventional” or “stereotypical” in Shakespeare's histories. Generally speaking, modern critics – like Harold Bloom and Herschel Baker – tend to assume that Shakespeare's art lies in creation rather than in imitation, in innovation rather than in following convention. As a result, they often examine the ways in which Shakespeare resists dramatic conformity instead of the ways in which he follows English dramatic tradition. Following this trend, some critics of women in Shakespeare's histories also imply that the conventional and stereotypical representations of women in these plays lack power – in both a dramatic and political

sense. These critics, in my view, unduly restrict and narrow what is defined as power for women characters in Shakespeare's histories.

Unfortunately, though feminist criticism has done much to redress the neglect of women in Shakespeare studies, many feminist critics insist that women characters' power lies solely in their individuation and in their resistance to an oppressive patriarchy. This perspective also restricts what is regarded as "important" in terms of how women are characterised. These are the points with which I take issue. It is my contention that history play characterisation does not have to be innovative to be powerful. Neither do female characters have to prove their individuality or react against the dominant power structure in order to have dramatic significance.

Herschel Baker's work provides an example of the type of stigma attached to female characters in Shakespeare's history plays, particularly those who inhabit the role of the "wailing woman." He describes Lady Constance's speech in *King John* 3.4 (beginning "I defy all counsel, all redress" [ll. 23-36]) as the "[m]ost conspicuous" of her lamentations. He writes that "[King] Philip's comment on this appalling woman's rhetoric (which has endeared the role to many actresses) is one that every reader will endorse: 'You are as fond of your grief as your child' [l. 92]" (806).²⁸ Baker then contrasts Constance's rhetoric to that of John and Hubert in 3.3, which he describes as being "tight" and "alive with drama" (806). He implies that Constance is an appalling woman because of her overflowing emotion. Moreover, he suggests that actresses prefer this role because of their own inclination towards hyperemotionality; they are not drawn

²⁸ I interpret Baker's "appalling" as a modifier for "woman" and not "rhetoric," since the meaning of the latter ("appalling rhetoric") could have been implied without the inclusion of "woman's."

to drama that is “tight” and “alive.” The other implication of Baker’s assertion is that both Philip and the audience react to Constance’s speech in the same way, that her outburst is merely that – a show of hysterical feeling, full of dramatic, but somehow not “real” emotional potential.

Later on Baker writes about the Bastard character, “one of Shakespeare’s grand creations” (807):

Most of the characters are insulated, as it were, in a rhetoric appropriate to their rank and function, and therefore it is hard to distinguish, say, Constance, from the wailing woman or Pandulph from the papal legate; but Faulconbridge is nothing but himself. (807)

Baker suggests that a character must be individual, “alive,” a “self,” as opposed to a stock character, in order to be valued.

This point of view is not isolated to Baker, of course. The typical twentieth (and early twenty-first) century mode of evaluation of dramatic characters emphasises individuality and dynamism. Harold Bloom, in *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*, arguably represents an extreme case of this late twentieth-century privileging of individual characterisation. Harold Bloom cherishes Faulconbridge because he is “Shakespeare’s first character who speaks with a voice entirely his own,” who “speaks his own highly individualised language, combines heroism with comic intensity, and possesses a *psychic interior*” (xiv; 51; my italics).

However, Renaissance writers took a different view of innovation and imitation. Though writing about translation, Reina Green’s argument can easily be adapted to

dramatic characterisation, since the fundamental idea is applicable to the arts generally. She writes that the twentieth-century view of translation as a second-rate form of writing “stems from a romantic concept of authorship and fails to take into account the stress humanists placed on the value of both translation and imitation in writing” (2). Shakespeare did not “create” characters; his skill rested in how he interpreted specific types of stock characters and how he played with their characterisation.

Feminist critics have, for the most part, followed in these footsteps even as they have refocused attention on female characters, like *King John*'s Constance, Elinor, and Blanch, which have otherwise been largely dismissed by Shakespeare criticism. Three scholars serve as my examples of this trend: Juliet Dusinberre, Virginia M. Vaughan, and Phyllis Rackin. All three discuss female subversion within *King John*.

Dusinberre writes of subversion in terms of embarrassment, that the female characters gain power through their ability to shame the men who are in positions of power over them. According to Dusinberre, female characters can embarrass male characters either verbally or through their places as controllers of patrilineage: women alone hold the truths of paternity. Dusinberre describes Elinor's dramatic power in terms of her ability to thwart convention, calling the first scene between Châtillon and King John a “conventional hostile interchange between the representatives of two centres of power” which is “displaced by a new contender for power, the woman,” Elinor (41). Dusinberre thus values Elinor because of her apparent ability to subvert the patriarchy and “embarrass” men.

Virginia M. Vaughan views Constance in a similar way, arguing that in 3.1, “Constance’s unbound tresses visualize her passionate struggle against the restraints of patriarchy” (69). She makes much of Constance and Blanch’s lack of legal and political power. To say that unbound hair represents rebellion is an interesting idea, but Vaughan’s argument doesn’t take into account an equally plausible dramatic interpretation of the scene. These lines seem more a representation of Constance’s loss of composure, of her inability to conform even to the conventions of dress and appearance, than a staging of her conscious or unconscious repudiation of the patriarchy. That is not to say that Vaughn’s argument is invalid, just that it overlooks an essential aspect of the scene.

Phyllis Rackin writes both of female subversion and of individualisation of women characters. She believes that in *King John* “women’s roles are more various and prominent than in any of Shakespeare’s other English histories, and their subversive power to undermine the masculine historical project is most fully revealed” (330). Interestingly, Rackin connects the subversive power of *King John*’s female characters to their “various and prominent roles.” Along the same lines, she later writes that in *King John* the female characters “for the first time, are sharply individualized, and they play more important and more varied roles than in any of Shakespeare’s other English histories” (338). There are two problems with the above statement. First, her claim is suspect: *Richard III*’s Margaret and the *Henriad*’s Mistress Quickly, for example, could be considered individualised characters and play important roles in their respective plays. But second, and more importantly for my argument, Rackin’s assertion is based on what I

take to be a faulty premise: that innovative, individualised characterisation is more noteworthy and valuable than conventional characterisation.

Ironically, all three of the above critics make the same assumption as Herschel Baker – by privileging individualisation – even though their arguments are vastly different from his. The women characters in *King John* do not have to be read in terms of how they break the conventional patterns of female characterisation – or the patterns of male dominance within the power structure that the play describes – in order to be considered substantial figures. My study resists Baker's claim, which seems to imply that the roles of Constance and the other women are not worthy of examination. But it also resists the assertions of DusiBerre, Vaughan, and Rackin, who claim that women are only interesting insofar as they actively resist conformity, either as political agents within the world of the play or in terms of the ways in which their characterisation is innovative.

There is little doubt that Elizabethans went to the theatre expecting to see the various character types with which they were familiar – characters like the *senex iratus*²⁹ or the “angry father” and the *miles gloriosus* or “braggart soldier.”³⁰ These were types that had come down from ancient Roman times in the comedies of Plautus and Terence (Richards and Richards 22). That stock characters were popular in the early modern period is proven by the longevity of improvised Italian theatre – the *commedia dell'arte* tradition. The *commedia dell'arte* “flourished for well over two hundred years, from...

²⁹ One can argue that Leonato in *Much Ado about Nothing*, Lord Capulet in *Romeo and Juliet*, Gloucester in *King Lear*, and the Duke of York in *Richard II* are variations on the *senex iratus*.

³⁰ I.e. Cassio in *Othello*, Hotspur in the *Henry IV* plays, Bardolph, Pistol and Nym in *Henry V*.

the mid-sixteenth century through to the mid-eighteenth century” (Richards and Richards

1). Although the amount of influence that the *commedia dell'arte* had on Shakespeare's play writing is a debatable issue,

the sheer number of references in the Elizabethan and Jacobean drama to comic *lazzi* [set-pieces] and figures like Pantalone and Zanni suggests that the performance characteristics and techniques of the Italian improvising players were familiar enough to English playgoers for such references to be immediately meaningful. (Richards and Richards 263)

One can then speculate that since stock characters were familiar to the Elizabethan playgoer and since a renewed interest in ancient Roman types found its way into drama of the time, people went to the theatre to be entertained by characters already well known to them.

While conceding Shakespeare's use of stock characterisation, however, many critics follow a twentieth-century appreciation of invention. G.R. Hibbard, for example, writes that Pistol in *2 Henry IV* and *Henry V* parodies the high-flown language of Shakespeare's earlier plays and the heroic language of Christopher Marlowe's. Pistol also represents a variation on Plautus' *miles gloriosus*. As Hibbard notes, “All good parody springs from a tension between adverse criticism of the thing parodied and affection for it” (6). Shakespeare's skill, then, owes much to a tradition of conventional characterisation. The love of the character, from the Elizabethan perspective, stems from an appreciation of what Pistol represents. Pistol “was popular with theatregoers then because they, unlike their modern [twentieth-century] counterparts, knew what he was

talking about, realised what he stood for, and recognised the lines which he so gloriously misquotes and garbles” (4). Though Hibbard emphasises the innovation of Shakespeare’s Pistol and the playwright’s “revolutionization of the theatre,” his analysis also shows us that Shakespeare clearly depended on the audience’s memory of and desire to see the older forms of drama and characterisation.

Kathleen McLuskie, whom I have quoted previously in the Introduction, agrees with this perspective and provides an excellent defense of the female stock character in Shakespeare. She mediates the problem of innovation versus imitation by suggesting that “[p]art of Shakespeare’s achievement is in taking conventional patterns and creating the illusion of idiosyncratic characters, making, as it were, their own story” (38). McLuskie explains the problem of female characterisation in a way, perhaps, that many other feminist critics might find difficult to accept. She writes,

For however much women might want to resist the conventions of the ways they are stereotyped in the social world, in the theatre meaning has to be constructed in terms of familiar conventions. The most powerful images of women are as a result created out of an adaptation and reworking of familiar notions of what it means to be a woman, which are not necessarily the same as fully realised characters. (41)

Far from seeing conventional representations of women as a detriment, McLuskie views the “illusion” of individualised figures as serving a specific purpose. Conventional representations of women assist Shakespeare in questioning and critiquing gender,

identity, and the notion of “what reality, if any, lay behind performances on the stage” (37).

The theatrical “creation” of women – from conventional notions of womanhood – results in numerous issues in Shakespeare centring on identity. In order for characters to lose their identities, they must have a recognisable identity – a stock identity, for example – to lose, especially in a dramatically recognisable and appreciable fashion. In *King John*, for instance, Constance and Blanch’s loss of identity is closely related to their construction as women. Their subsequent loss of cherished things (a child, a husband) is implicated in their becoming women of woe. Their identities are wrapped in conventional issues of loss; what is at issue in this play is not just their lack of status – as mother or as wife – but the assumption of their identities as figures of loss.

As Constance and Blanch lose their political influence and their family relations, they become figures of sorrow, adding to their roles as memory-retainers and storytellers.³¹ To maintain these roles, they must inhabit the margins of the action, but these roles are types of power in themselves. There is a pattern in the history plays in which the women, as they lose their political power and personal relationships, gain dramatic power. A similar process occurs to Richard II, who loses his identity as king and husband: Richard has to reconcile the fact of being “un-kinged” (5.5.37) with his continued legitimate right to rule. As he loses everything he possesses, the king gains rhetorical and dramatic interest, as exemplified by the abdication scene in 4.1. Here Richard wrestles with the idea of being a king and yet not king, just as the women in

³¹ The role of “memory-retainer” has been defined earlier by Widow England in *King Johan*; at the end of the play England functions as “national memory,” forced to eulogise the spirit of her dead king.

other history plays must come to terms with being women and yet deprived of all relationships that make them women.

An interesting phenomenon occurs when women lose (or anticipate losing) their identities and disappear from Shakespeare's *King John*. When women die or pass from the stage, the play becomes unbalanced, rather like an ill-humoured body. The figures of speech turn from images of inundation to images of raging fire. There is a sense of battle – between the king and his lords, between the elements and humours, and between John and his own body. As a result, the play takes on a sort of cosmic significance. That women have a part in this process, via their absence or presence, indicates that they have an important function within the play as a drama and as a historical tale telling.

Before I examine *King John* though, I would like to take a look at the quintessential “wailing woman” scene in all of Shakespeare's English history plays. A discussion of 4.4 in *Richard III* sets up many of the issues considered in the following chapter. I begin with a critical examination of Jean Howard and Phyllis Rackin's discussion of this scene in their seminal book on women in Shakespeare's histories.

Oddly enough, when discussing *Richard III*'s “wailing women” passages in their book, *Engendering a Nation: A Feminist Account of Shakespeare's English Histories*, Howard and Rackin reduce the scene to a short mention. They speak of the play in terms of masculine power and of women characters' relatively subjugated position:

[The play] ends with Richmond's appropriation of the moral authority of bereaved and suffering women to authorize his victory. To serve that purpose, the female characters must lose their individuality and become an undifferentiated

chorus of ritual lamentation, curse, and prophecy that enunciates the play's providential agenda. (116)

For feminist critics, Howard and Rackin seem quick to dismiss the power inherent in female community by privileging individuality and reducing the roles of women to mere political authorisation. Writing about women solely in terms of patriarchy and the subversion of power, Howard and Rackin totally discredit the emotional and theatrical force of *Richard III*'s women. In the paragraph prior to the above quotation, for example, Howard and Rackin write that

the female characters in *Richard III* are confined to domestic roles and domestic settings. This domestication of women represents a movement into modernity; it adumbrates the rising barriers that were to confine respectable women within the household, defined as a separate, private sphere. (116)

However, the authors go on to say that the wailing, cursing women “authorize” Richmond's victory and enunciate “the play's providential agenda.” They contradict themselves: if the women are in fact relegated merely to the realm of the domestic, as Howard and Rackin have argued, how can they authorise Richmond's advancement in the public realm? And, as we will see in *King John* in the case of Blanch, women can evidently retain their position in the private sphere while holding influence in the public sphere.

The final error I see in Howard and Rackin's *Engendering a Nation* occurs when they discuss women in terms of dramatic power: “the women [of *Richard III*] are deprived of theatrical power and agency, both of which are appropriated by Richard”

(108). To say that the women lack theatrical power in particular seems absurd, since 4.4 provides actors (or in Elizabethan terms, boys) with some wonderfully intricate and powerful rhetoric.

It is for this rhetorically adept scene in *Richard III* that Shakespeare keeps old Queen Margaret around nine years after the time she actually left for France, historically speaking. Critics have often written about Margaret's warrior/adulteress turned harridan: a ghost of her husband Henry VI's reign that haunts the rule of the Yorkists and curses them. She functions as a figure of memory and history, as well as an embodiment of woe, though by this scene her woe has hardened into a very visceral sort of grief, bitterness, and anger. The language of the scene "has been cited by some critics as an example of Shakespeare at his worst: stiff, stilted and almost incomprehensible. Surely the truth is otherwise.... The only language appropriate to the moment is plain, dignified and ritualised" (Pitt 157). But is the language *that* ritualised? It seems that Queen Elizabeth's lamentations begin that way:

Ah, my poor princes! ah, my tender babes!

My unblown flow'rs, new appearing sweets!

If yet your gentle souls fly in the air

And be not fixed in doom perpetual,

Hover about me with your aery wings

And hear your mother's lamentation!

(4.4.9-14)

This invocation to the spirits of her dead children seems fairly straightforward in terms of a rather common rhetoric of grief: her apostrophe to her dead children, her elegaic language, and her regret at their early demise. The Duchess then chimes in with her own apostrophe, “Edward Plantagenet, why art thou dead?” (l. 19), and Elizabeth speaks of her children as lambs and asks God the reason for her suffering, while the Duchess lapses into stale, oxymoronic expressions: “Dead life, blind sight, poor mortal-living ghost,/ Woe’s scene, world’s shame, grave’s due by life usurped” (ll. 26-7). Having described this language as “stale” and “typical,” I do not mean to devalue the power of the characters’ grief. Though not ravishingly beautiful poetry, the exchange between Elizabeth and the Duchess serves to establish a base-line emotional tone; Margaret’s violent and somewhat disturbing language thus provides an effective counterpoint to the elegaic tone of the earlier part of the scene.

Margaret’s words both produce her own sorrows – “If ancient sorrow be most reverent,/ Give mine the benefit of seniority” (ll. 35-6) – and devastate the other grieving women. She tells Elizabeth, “From forth the kennel of thy womb hath crept/ A hell-hound that doth hunt us all to death” and urges her to

.... see what now thou art:

For happy wife, a most distressed widow;

For joyful mother, one that wails the name;

For one being sued to, one that humbly sues;

For queen a very caitiff crown’d with care.

(ll. 47-8; 97-101)

These lines are jarring, particularly the last, which is dominated by the alliteration of a harsh, cracking, hard “c” sound. In this scene Margaret functions as a figure of history – she is the only one old enough to remember the players of the Yorkist/Lancastrian wars. Margaret is the longest-lived of Shakespeare's historic creations, appearing in four plays: the *Henry VI* trio and *Richard III*. Both she and the Duchess go over the death tally of sons lost in the factional enmity. Margaret then recalls other deaths:

Thy Clarence he is dead that stabb'd my Edward,
And the beholders of this frantic play,
Th' adulterate Hastings, Rivers, Vaughan, Grey,
Untimely smothered in their dusky graves.

(ll. 67-70)

Their discussion reminds the audience of the great loss wrought by the wars, both physical and emotional. Women are left to count the dead; they function no longer as mothers or wives – they lose that aspect of their identities – and in the end they take it upon themselves to remind others of the horrors of political corruption and war, with cursing. Elizabeth laments, “My words are dull, O, quicken them with thine!” and Margaret replies, “Thy woes will make them sharp and pierce like mine” (ll. 124-5). Here the women's historical function is directly related to their function as women of woe and loss. Most women in the history plays are given “agency” through their ability to grieve both publicly and privately. Though not always given “real” power in terms of changing a play's course of action, their place on the margins of political power

structures allows them to obtain dramatic and theatrical power – something of equal importance.

Women are therefore liminal figures. They stand both inside and outside political power structures, on the threshold between them. They are outside the system insofar as they lack power to confer land and title rights. Neither do they have much power to effect war or peace. They can sue for it, but they cannot affect it themselves. Yet women have political power inasmuch as they are needed for dynastic marriages within the patrilineal system and can recall the histories of past rulers. They are also key figures in the inherently flawed patrilineal system, even while being denied equal power in court. As we shall see, women hold the secrets of legitimacy and can therefore subvert the system. Women in *King John*, Blanch and Constance in particular, voice concerns that the men in power cannot. In their ability to articulate grief publicly, women offer knowledge of their “otherness” – of their suffering and of the costs of war.

In the “wailing women” passage in *Richard III* it is obvious that women figures have a particular function and that men could not take their place in figuring memory, history, and woe, since all three purposes of character are integrally related to gender. Women do not fight and die in wars, and so are always the ones left over to remember the lost. It has already been mentioned that because of woman's place generally being outside “real” positions of power, women are freer to express more domestic concerns, ones that are directly affected by decisions made in the political realm. Women “dramatize the private emotional costs of the men's public, political conflicts” (Howard and Rackin 140). This is especially true of Margaret, who enjoys a particularly liminal

position in the play as a “ghost” (Howard and Rackin 116). In her soliloquy at the beginning of 4.4, she hopes the “consequence” of the feuding and of *the play itself* “Will prove... bitter, black, and tragical” (ll. 6-7). She hovers at the margins for the first exchanges between Elizabeth and the Duchess, interjecting responses to comments made either to God or in apostrophe. She counsels the women on their rhetorical effect – their cursing – and there is a double meaning to her words “this frantic play” when describing the recent deaths and executions. By creating a metatheatrical significance for the play, Margaret *literally* dramatises the “private emotional costs of battle.” Her grief makes it possible for her to speak as one outside the action of the play, rather like a chorus. So she also curses from the standpoint of one outside the play; her words are doubly significant, in a prophetic way. Not only does she predict a tragic end for the play, she also foresees historical repetition. Various plots of intrigue and the succession problem were issues for Elizabeth’s court; hence the audience would have known that the final accession of Henry VII at the end of the play would not resolve all England’s political crises. Margaret’s functions as a character are at once dramatic, metadramatic, and political, pointing to the world outside the play. These functions are directly related to her position as a liminal figure within (and without) the play.

In addition to this, and particular to the passage I have been describing in *Richard III*, the maternally felt loss of sons and the shameful burden of bearing bad or malevolent sons can only weigh on the women. Margaret repeatedly mentions child bearing in her lamentations and execrations: she tells Elizabeth that Richard crept from “the kennel of thy womb” and “Thy womb let loose to chase us to our graves” and “this carnal cur/

Preys on the issue of his mother's body" (ll. 47; 54; 56-7). In a social system in which a great deal of pressure is placed on women – even Elizabeth I – to create strong and moral sons, these women are examples of a failed biological imperative.³² In *King John*, Constance curses Elinor for her "sin-conceiving womb" (2.1.182). Here, woe is a particular type of suffering created by motherhood. And as we will see further in *King John*, the problem of weak sons and the pressure to produce greatness creates situations where women expend emotional energy in fighting or grieving, and this gives them dramatic power.

Blanch is often considered a character who has limited importance and function within *King John*. Jean Howard and Phyllis Rackin, despite articulating Blanch's thematic importance, do not address Blanch's part in an implicit critique of male power. They see her only as a "blank page awaiting the inscription of masculine texts" (122). However, Blanch's lines suggest that the public, male-controlled arena forgets, in the heat of war, the damage committed against the private and largely female-controlled arena. Blanch, though arguably a figure of domesticity, illustrates the relevance of the domestic in the political arena, showing that the two realms of "public" and "private" are not mutually exclusive. Dubbed by Howard and Rackin "the archetypically feminine... medium of exchange between men" (122), Blanch's marriage and hence her fate are indeed controlled by the male nobility around her (though, significantly, Elinor is also in favour of the match – 3.1.468-79). However, Blanch's vocal articulation of woe suggests

³² The Queen faced a similar pressure in her dealings with the succession problem. There was great public concern about this issue. *King John* participates in the cultural anxiety surrounding the desire for strong male heirs.

that her victimisation is not a passive one. Her emotional rhetoric shows up the bloodthirsty men around her, illustrating their neglect of the personal and private realms.

Neither should Blanch's role of peacemaker be diminished. Though she may be helpless to stop the bloodshed in front of Angiers, she is at least given a voice that brings a domestic aspect into the theatre of war:

Lewis. Father, to arms!

Blanch. Upon thy wedding-day?

Against that blood that thou hast married?

What, shall our feast be kept with slaughtered men?

Shall braying trumpets and loud churlish drums,

Clamors of hell, be measures to our pomp?

(3.1.299-304)

Here Blanch continues the rhetoric of Philip and Pandulph from earlier in the scene and so also functions to continue the theme of the making and breaking of oaths and vows. King Philip speaks of his oath, newly formed with England: "This royal hand and mine are newly knit,/ and the conjunction of our inward souls/ Married, in league, coupled, and link'd together/ With all religious strength of sacred vows" (3.1.226-9). In comparison with Blanch's speech, the French king's words sound ironic, since we know that in this play vows are constantly being made and broken. Hence Pandulph's line, "It is religion that doth make vows kept" (3.1.279), rings even more ironically. Blanch's speech is key in highlighting the hypocrisy of Pandulph and the political factions. If Philip just begins to articulate his concern over having to choose between a political versus a religious oath

(ll. 239-52), then Blanch figures the endpoint of Philip's dilemma. Her repeated rhetorical questions and more overtly graphic, war-centred language emphasise what is glossed over by Philip and Pandulph's previous speeches. Her language appeals directly to the senses, where theirs is more ostentatious and stylised. She brings material and spiritual factors to the fore, describing political dissension in terms of blood, slaughtered men, braying trumpets, churlish drums, and the "clamours of hell." Pandulph merely talks in abstract terms of oaths, rebellion, and the Church;³³ Philip is more imaginative, speaking of "slaughter's pencil," of "hands lately purged of blood," and a marching "bloody host" (ll. 237; 239; 246). Yet neither Philip's words nor Pandulph's oration describe the true stakes of war as clearly as does Blanch's brief speech. Blanch collapses the lines between politics and war (the public) and the domestic and personal (the private). In a larger context, Blanch identifies the hypocrisies of an English politics in which the "good of the nation" comes at the expense of the nation's people, especially young men, making a country of widows.³⁴

Politically, Blanch can be interpreted as a figure of failed peacemaking. The play is inscribed in a history – dating from Anglo-Saxon times and beyond – in which politically motivated marriage was a tradition and a norm. McLuskie describes this tradition as women's "literary and social destiny" (38). The role of peacemaker was often a significant power that women could possess (though not the only way women

³³ Hibbard writes that Pandulph's speech here, "subtle and sophisticated," is a "caricature of the dialectical method." All rhetorical dazzle, Pandulph "succeeds because he produces the better argument" (136). However, he does not, I might add, necessarily produce the best version of the truth.

³⁴ Blanch's speech here has the same function as William's speech in *Henry V* (4.1.134-46). Williams offers a dissenting voice on the eve of Agincourt, reminding his companions (and the disguised king) of all that is lost in war. He tells of men dying in battle, crying "upon their wives left poor behind them" (l. 139).

could wield power; Elinor, for example, holds sway over John and his political decisions). Blanch's inability to assist in the peacemaking process – a result of the intervention of Pandulph, the papal legate – means that not only is the peace process between England and France subverted, but so is the literary and historical tradition of politically motivated matrimony. So, not only must Blanch grieve the potential loss of her new husband, but she also carries the burden of being unable to achieve her political function of ensuring peace between two monarchs and their respective kingdoms.

However, it would be wrong to view Blanch's role within the play as one of total failure. Her powerful interjection in act three could be read as the hysteric outburst of a newlywed bride or the voice of reason among the overly heated passions of the French and English factions. But her function is not purely one or the other; most importantly, Blanch is a much-needed reminder of all that is at stake in a bloody war. In essence, she brings emotions and domestic interest back to the scene of the quarrelling. As we shall also see with Constance, Blanch inhabits the patrilineal system of power while being able to assert an outside viewpoint that men of political power cannot, namely, that defending a nation's honour leaves behind grieving widows and a land depopulated of its young men.

As an observer of the action, as one who is affected by the political events around her but who is in no position to change them, Blanch has the opportunity to reflect on her own relative position within the events. Her situation brings her to ruminate on her relationships and consider the dilemma of partisanship:

The sun's o'rcast with blood; fair day adieu!

Which is the side that I must go withal?
I am with both, each army hath a hand,
And in their rage, I having hold of both,
They whirl asunder and dismember me.
Husband, I cannot pray that thou mayest win,
Uncle, I needs must pray that thou mayest lose;
Father, I may not wish the fortune thine;
Grandam, I will not wish thy wishes thrive:
Whoever wins, on that side I shall lose;
Assured loss before the match be played.

(3.1.326-336)

Blanch is in a position in which she can express no hope, and therefore defines her wishes and prayers in terms of negatives (“I cannot pray that thou mayest win”). She carries on the image of the handclasp from previous speeches by Philip and Pandulph (3.1.224-252; 258-61). There are multiple references to family relations in this speech, which emphasise that those involved in war are not just names and titles, but people who have identities beyond the political realm. Notably, Blanch addresses the two kings, not in the manner of political allegiance, but as kinsmen. She does not owe her loyalty in terms of king and country, but as a woman fearing the loss of her family. She defines herself in terms of familial relationships and so she anticipates becoming nothing but a cipher, for a battle will tear her family and herself apart. Constance will go through a

similar process as she loses her son, the only thing that defines her as a mother and as a woman since she is already a widow.

Importantly for the theme of the play, Blanch here figures the ambivalent tensions at work between individuals and the state. Jean Howard and Phyllis Rackin write,

[t]his image of dismemberment makes Blanch the human embodiment of the many divisions that characterize this play – of the divisions among female characters, of the division of the English throne between John's possession and Arthur's right, and especially of the divided allegiances that perplex the audience as they struggle with the ethical and political ambivalences that make *King John* the most disturbing of Shakespeare's English histories (124).

Indeed, Blanch asks, "What motive may/ Be stronger with thee than name of wife?"

Constance replies, "His honor. O, thine honor, Lewis, thine honor!" (3.1.313-314; 316).

Here we have an example of the "divided allegiances" and personal dilemmas that Howard and Rackin describe; Blanch is as divided between loyalties as are the citizens of Angiers.

I would suggest that in addition to being thematically significant, Blanch's lines are particularly important in her rhetorical interest as a woman of woe. Her ordeal of dismemberment has great emotional potential, and appeals to the audience in a way that the dramatisation of political divisiveness cannot. Her language contrasts a great deal with that of Lewis in the previous scene. He talks of love in abstract and conceit-riddled terms (which the Bastard predictably mocks): "I do protest that I never lov'd myself/ Till now infixed I beheld myself/ Drawn in the flattering table of her eye" (2.1.501-3). But

Blanch later figures love in more violent and visceral terms. She describes her marriage in terms of bloody battle images and then figures herself as being dismembered by the warring factions. Blanch's understanding of the domestic meaning of love is much more moving than Lewis' poetry.

Though Blanch fails to alter the course of action away from war, her dramatic and emotional potential serves as a reminder to the audience, as well as to the other characters, of the human interest that becomes lost in the making of "official" history.³⁵ If we assume that the function of the history play is to make the past relevant to the audience – to revivify and complicate the reader/viewer's understanding of history – then the female characters are essential in creating a sense of dramatic reality apart from the highly abstract language of the state.

The concern for succession and the prospect of bearing morally decent sons is another aspect of womanhood that brings emotional relevance to this history play. After hearing about the marriage between Blanch and Lewis, which should subvert the war between the English and French and deny Arthur's chance at the throne, Constance cries,

If thou that bid'st me be content wert grim,
Ugly, and sland'rous to thy mother's womb,
Full of displeasing blots and sightless stains,
Patch'd with foul moles and eye-offending marks,
I would not care, I then would be content.

(3.1.43-8)

³⁵ That Blanch is a very recent bride created by a politically motivated match does not affect the intention of her scene, which is emotionally and dramatically centred.

As in the “wailing women” scene in *Richard III*, Constance here indicates the importance of bearing a perfect son. She says that her woe is contingent upon her bearing a “fair” boy, deserving of a crown, but denied the power “Nature” has promised him. Where grief in the “wailing women” scene in *Richard III* revolves around the birth and success of the Duchess’ prodigious spawn, here woe is created by the failure of “That strumpet Fortune” to reward “great birth” with a “crown” (3.1.61; 50). Both scenes emphasise the potential of children and the specific grief that can be felt by mothers if that potential is fulfilled in horrifying ways or left unfulfilled.

Women in *King John* are markers of history: they both offer exposition of the past and help to revivify the past by describing it in striking terms. Blanch’s first lines in the play recall the glorious past of Richard Coeur-de-Lion, the ghost of good kingship who hangs over the action of the entire play. She remarks about the lion skin that Austria wears to commemorate his victory over Richard I: “O, well did he become that lion’s robe,/ That did disrobe the lion of that robe!” (2.1.141-2).

Elinor, too, recalls Richard I’s past. When the Bastard Faulconbridge appears at court to debate his legitimacy, Elinor is the first to remark upon his real parentage: “He hath the trick of Cordelion’s face/.... Do you not read some tokens of my son/ In the large composition of this man?” (1.1.85-8) And later she exclaims that the Bastard is “The very spirit of Plantagenet!” (1.1.167) Lady Faulconbridge confirms the Bastard’s parentage (1.1.253). In all these cases, women function as reminders of the past. As Nina Levine writes, “by their presence alone, these women remind the audience of what patriarchal history would deny – that bloodlines depend on mothers as well as fathers and

that patrilineal inheritance may therefore be undermined by an unfaithful wife” (138). I would add that not only do women hold the key to an inheritor's real parentage and bloodlines; their role as patrilineal gatekeepers allows them a particular function in history. They conjure up spirits of the past in physical artefacts – as in the lion skin of Cordelion and in the Bastard himself – and lay out the historical background for the play. Moreover, Marsha Robinson writes that *King John* is a play in which historiographic models – such as the recollection of a glorious dead king and idealised past – are challenged. If Blanch and Elinor recall Richard I as being a valiant warrior, then the Bastard recalls a less idealised figure, invoking “Richard's sexual conquest of Lady Faulconbridge as a mock-heroic version of his fabulous conquest of the lion” (32). Robinson argues that the Bastard here parodies a more conventional method of remembering the past; however, this doesn't negate the lines of Blanch and Elinor. If anything, the women represent one side of the struggle between conflicting historiographic models, another example of the divisions and ambivalences that characterise this play.

Constance does not so much recall the past as she reflects the connection between grief and history that is often found in Shakespeare's history plays. Harold Bloom makes an interesting point: “Nietzsche, like Montaigne a psychologist almost of Shakespeare's power, taught that pain is the authentic origin of human memory” (11). In the histories, women do not always suffer the most, but they do suffer in a particular way. If loss is one of the most intense of human emotions, then for many female characters in the histories, their position as figures of loss invariably relegates them to positions of

memory. Characters such as Constance constantly tell the tales of their woes and construct a history of them; note that woe generally implies the telling of tales.

Constance cries to Salisbury,

.... I will not go with thee.

I will instruct my sorrows to be proud,

For grief is proud and makes his owner stoop.

To me and to the state of my great grief

Let kings assemble; for my grief's so great

That no supporter but the huge firm earth

Can hold it up. [*Throws herself on the ground.*] Here I and sorrows sit;

Here is my throne, bid kings come bow to it.

(3.1.67-74)

There are definite similarities between this speech and Richard II's speech, "For God's sake let us sit upon the ground/ And tell sad stories of the death of kings" (*Richard II* 3.2.155-6). When sitting on the ground, the tellers of sad tales cannot be brought any lower. Sitting is a symbolic gesture.³⁶ Constance has been denied power both in not being able to prevent the war that would permanently bar her son from the throne and in not being able to prevent her son from being taken by the English. Having been kept from political power Constance figures her grief in political rhetoric. Her grief becomes the "state" to which kings themselves bow. Her throne is the entire earth; when she

³⁶ Note also that the ladies in the "wailing women" scene in *Richard III* sit together. Though it is not specified that they sit upon the ground, their woe is certainly connected to the creation of an oral community.

throws herself on the ground, Constance at once humbles and elevates herself, metaphorically. She de-thrones and re-thrones herself in one action, giving herself figurative and rhetorical power even as she admits her state of lack. In taking the visual and verbal spotlight, Constance gains dramatic and rhetorical interest. As noted earlier, Richard wrestles with the idea of being a king and yet not king. Similarly, Constance must come to terms with being a woman and yet deprived of all relationships that make her a woman. Richard loses everything – his queen, his throne, his dignity (as trash is thrown upon him during Henry Bolingbroke's victory parade) – and in the process gains dramatic interest. It seems as though for Richard being deprived of his power and personal relationships makes him a better poet and orator; the possession of political power is inversely proportional to rhetorical and dramatic interest. He commands the abdication scene while Bolingbroke and the rebelling lords can only stare on; Constance similarly commands the attention of Pandulph and Philip, ignoring their chastisements while expressing her sorrows. This is not to say that Richard and Constance totally lack dramatic interest prior to their respective falls, just that their renewed dramatic and rhetorical power is intimately and specifically related to their loss and woe.

Perhaps Constance's most stunning speech is the one in which she imagines herself wedded to death; surely this is the most extreme form of woe we have encountered yet:

Death, death. O amiable lovely death!

Thou odoriferous stench! sound rottenness!

Arise forth from the couch of lasting night,

Thou hate and terror to prosperity,
And I will kiss thy detestable bones,
And put my eyeballs in thy vaulty brows,
And ring these fingers with thy household worms,
And stop this gap of breath with fulsome dust,
And be a carrion monster like thyself.
Come, grin on me, and I will think thou smil'st,
And buss thee as thy wife. Misery's love,
O, come to me!

(3.3.25-36)

This speech's sounds alternate between harsh stops ("detestable bones," "vaulty brows," "gap of breath") and hissing fricatives ("stench," "rottenness," "lasting night," "buss thee as thy wife"). The result is raw and almost animalistic, a speech full of tension and seething with angry sorrow. Yet Constance also borrows the form of conceit-riddled love poetry, creating a paradoxical juxtaposition of the desire for everlasting love and everlasting death. Constance domesticates the sublime and hyperbolises her grief, making Death a "lovely" husband and her misery an eternal bond, a marriage that makes her one with Death and sorrow. Her anaphora (a poetic device she will also use in her next speech) allows her description to become incrementally more detailed and horrifying as the audience remains in suspense, waiting to find out how disturbed is her picture of deathly matrimony. Not only does she lament the loss of her son; she refutes the generative and productive function of her life more generally. She no longer defines

herself as a mother (or a widow) but instead as a partner and equal to Death, a “carrion monster.” Grief subverts her entire potential as a woman.

When Philip tells her she is “as fond of grief as [of her] child,” Constance deftly turns his chastisement into a justification: “Grief fills the room up of my absent child,/ Lies in his bed, walks up and down with me/... Stuffs out his vacant garments with his form;/ Then have I reason to be fond of grief?” (ll. 93-4; 97-8) Here she literally materialises her grief, giving it the very shape and form of her lost son. She is fond of Arthur, not foolishly, as Philip implies by the word, but in a manner fully in keeping with contemporary definitions of maternal roles.³⁷ The most interesting thing that happens in this scene is that Constance anticipates losing her role as an embodiment of memory – as Geoffrey’s widow and as keeper of the patrilineal bloodline. She begins her grieving process by rematerialising her son – “building” him again out of words and images – in the form of pure emotion, but soon after she reflects on his utter disappearance from her life:

But now will canker-sorrow eat my bud,
And chase the native beauty from his cheek,
And he will look as hollow as a ghost,
As dim and meagre as an ague’s fit,
And so he’ll die; and rising so again,
When I shall meet him in the court of heaven

³⁷ See McPherson for an idea of sixteenth-century maternal roles. Note that Philip’s use of the term of “fond” begins the theme of folly and madness that carries through the rest of the scene, into Constance’s “I am not mad” speech.

I shall not know him; therefore never, never

Must I behold my pretty Arthur more.

(3.4.82-9)

The lines move from images of natural beauty to images of sickness and decay to the absolute loss of the powers of recognition.³⁸ She fears her sorrow will make her forget and she *does* die “in a frenzy” (4.2.122), apart from her senses. Though Constance says, “I am not mad. This hair I tear is mine,/ My name is Constance, I was Geoffrey’s wife.... too well, too well I feel/ The different plague of each calamity,” she knows that grief will destroy her mind (ll. 45-6; 59-60). For without a centred sense of herself, Constance cannot function; she fears becoming a cipher, as John does when he dies in misery, surrounded by rebelling lords and lacking his royal power (missing as well his powerful mother). Grief detaches her from who and what she is; perhaps this is why so many characters in the play warn against excessive woe. So Constance’s increasing lack of identity occurs in three stages. The first stage occurs when she is present with Arthur in the play, defined as his mother and Geoffrey’s widow. Her second stage occurs after Arthur’s abduction, where she replaces real relationships with abstract ones – she desires becoming the bride of Death and the mother of grief. Here she has to be “fond” of grief because, in her mind, grief has literally *become* her son. The third stage occurs when she anticipates totally losing Arthur, even from memory: “When I shall meet him in the court of heaven/ I shall not know him” (ll. 87-8). Since Constance works to install her son on the English throne out of memory of her lost husband Geoffrey, her identity is inextricably

³⁸ John will continue this rhetoric of sickness in his final scenes.

bound with past history and memory. When she loses her last remaining personal relationship, she fears total loss of self. Just as the Bastard goes through stages of different identity and function, “from country madcap to spokesman for England,” so does Constance (Curren-Aquino 239). However, where the Bastard’s process of becoming makes the main figure of political significance, it is Constance’s process of *unbecoming* that makes her a tragic figure of loss.³⁹ Far from being at a dramatic disadvantage because of her lack of political power, Constance becomes a central figure of thematic, rhetorical, and theatrical import.

After the women pass from the stage – with Constance and Elinor dying and Blanch simply disappearing – excessive grief seems to well up and unbalance the rest of the play’s action. Grief is often figured in hyperbolic and humoural terms. When Salisbury comes to tell Constance about Blanch and Lewis’ marriage, she divines bad news: “Why holds thine eye that lamentable rheum,/ Like a proud river peering o’er its bounds?” (3.1.22-3) When Arthur fears for his life, he animates the iron with which Hubert would put out his eyes: “The iron itself, though red-hot,/ Approaching near these eyes, would drink my tears,/ And quench his fiery indignation/ Even in the matter of mine innocence” (4.1.61-3). He adds, “the fire is dead with grief” (1.105) indicating that even the element itself is moved to pity by Arthur’s words. This last scene is pivotal in the sense that it rhetorically figures the elemental and humoural battle between fire and water, choler and melancholy, anger and woe.

³⁹ One might also argue that the Bastard’s ascension from cynical wit to royal confidant is inversely proportional to his dramatic interest. In the final scene, as I will discuss later, he seems reduced to spouting clichés and stale conceits about the future security of the nation.

When John hears of his mother's death and is warned that more bad news will follow, he tells the Bastard, "Bear with me, cousin, for I was amaz'd/ Under the tide; but now I breathe again/ Aloft the flood" (4.2.137-9). Metaphorically significant, both French and English sides lose ships to sinking (5.5.12-13; 5.6.39-41). As the imagery of tears and water floods the stage, so do images and themes of fire. Lords Bigot and Salisbury are so angered by Arthur's death, killed, as they suppose, under John's order, that their eyes become "as red as new-kindled fire" (4.2.163). Lewis accuses Pandulph: "Your breath first kindled the dead coal of wars/ Between this chastis'd kingdom and myself/ And brought in matter that should feed this fire" (5.2.83-5). Count Melune describes his life bleeding away after being wounded in the battles "even as a form of wax/ Resolveth from his figure 'gainst the fire" (5.4.22-5).

The implication is that once the women leave the stage, the humours of the play become unbalanced. Not only does the play's action seem to go into a tailspin; so do the state and the king's very body. When women aren't around to embody woe, grief "peer[s] o'er the bounds" of the play's confines (3.1.22-3). Indeed, the image of the river overflowing its banks is repeated at several points in the play. With the women gone, men's tempers flare out of all proportion. When women disappear from the action, the play takes on a sickly aspect.

Significantly, King John dies of a *fever*, the result of his melancholy humour growing dangerously out of proportion (Draper 72). John's humour is figured differently earlier in the play, as a different sort of melancholy, one that is vengeful and dangerous. Draper writes that "[a]s the causes of melancholy were diverse, so were the types of the

disease,” and so melancholy could be expressed as duplicitous and murderous urges (70). Draper points out John's conversation with Hubert, wherein he orders Arthur's death, as an example of the dangerous melancholic humour.

At the beginning of act five, John's rhetoric mirrors the state of his country and prefigures his own decline. After submitting to the Pope's power for and intercession with the French forces, John tells Pandulph,

Now keep your holy word. Go meet the French,
And from his Holiness use all your power
To stop their marches 'fore we are all inflamed.
Our discontented counties do revolt;
Our people quarrel with obedience,
Swearing allegiance and the love of soul
To strange blood, to foreign royalty.
This inundation of mistemp' red humor
Rests by you only to be qualified.
Then pause not; for the present time's so sick
That present med'cine must be ministered,
Or overthrow incurable ensues.

(5.1.5-16)

In keeping with the prior language centred around fire, John describes the French troops' movement into England as an “inflammation.” John addresses Pandulph as a physic, urging him to minister a “cure.” Like a human body, the land is out of balance,

“inundated” with “mistempered humours.” John fears an “overthrow incurable,” a phrase that has both medical and political implications. For the English king, present time itself is “sick.” This passage combines language of the religious, political, and medical realms, illustrating how dissension in one area can spread out of containment and infect others.

John therefore urges peace and reconciliation with the religious orders in an attempt to heal the sick time of the present. But it is too late; the English lords rebel for what they think John has done. The land has refuted its king. Soon, John himself will figure the land in its sickness and its choleric fever. Where legend, chronicles, and John Bale's *King Johan* tell of King John's death by poisoning, Shakespeare leaves the cause of John's fever up to speculation. Poison is mentioned several times (5.7.9; 35; 47), but the exact circumstances of John's illness are left unclear. By staging John's death in this way, the playwright allows for various interpretations of the fever: whether caused by a poisoning monk, by a guilt-ridden conscience, by Providence, or by mere bad luck, Shakespeare does not let the audience know for sure. However, considering the repeated rhetoric of fire and water, raging heat and watery inundation, it is a fair guess that John's woes are created by dissension on multiple planes.

The tensions amongst the humours and elements are represented in juxtaposition in one of John's final speeches:

P. Hen. How fares your Majesty?

K. John. Poison'd – ill fare! dead, forsook, cast off,

And none of you will bid the winter come

To thrust his icy fingers in my maw,

Now let my kingdom's rivers take their course
Through my burn'd bosom, nor entreat the north
To make his bleak winds kiss my parched lips
And comfort me with cold.

(5.7.34-41)

As with Constance, John's loss brings on a frenzied sort of melancholy. In this final scene, John embodies the physical tensions of the land and physically identifies with his kingdom; he entreats the rivers of his land to wind "Through my burn'd bosom." Once again, there is reference to water breaking from its boundaries. Yet he finds the same physical support in those around him as the lords who have rebelled against him: "I do not ask you much,/ I beg cold comfort, and you are so strait/ And so ingrateful, you deny me that" (ll. 41-3). Interestingly, John never seems to mirror his land as closely as when the state is in general decline. Why? As in *Richard II*, only crisis brings the king nearer to understanding his ill-fated choices, in this case, John's decision to have Arthur killed. Any element of tragedy in a play is evoked by an ultimate realisation that comes once the protagonist can do nothing to resolve his problems. Usually this realisation comes as the character is declining towards death.⁴⁰ If it is tragic that John has the opportunity to see his evil doings only when it is too late, it is even more tragic that he dies before reaching a complete understanding of his deeds.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Besides the case of Richard II, one can also think of Edmund's dying speeches in *King Lear* (5.3.199-202; 244-8), though the sincerity of his words is often an issue.

⁴¹ Note that Richard II does come to an understanding of his deeds and that his tragic interest is created by his inability to change his circumstances, being "un-kinged."

The play ends somewhat unresolved: Prince Henry ascends to the throne, and the Bastard is by his side, but we do not know what sort of ruler Henry will be. Neither do we know the fates of the rebelling lords; we do know that they can no longer be trusted, since they move from the English side to the French side and back again. The fate of the land lies in limbo. It is tempting to regard the ending and Henry's ascension as the resumption of order, but disturbingly, with the women gone, the audience realises that the play is left severely unbalanced.

What does it mean that the storytellers, the historical markers, the figures of embodied memory, and the domestic characters have all disappeared from the play by the fourth act? Why are the women wiped away? The consequences are drastic; the play falls apart. John proclaims that as a result of his mother's death, "How wildly then walks my estate in France!" (4.2.128) Thus, Elinor's death has political implications. Historically, the deaths of Elinor and Constance occurred years apart. However, in the play Constance is made to die within days of Elinor: the effect is one of impending doom, where signs are seen and prophecies made that portend evil: "they say that five moons were seen to-night; four fixed, and the fift did whirl about/ The other five in wonderous motion.... Old men and beldames in the streets/ Do prophesy upon it dangerously" (4.2.182-6). That the wars symbolically cause the destruction of memory – and hence the women who embody it – seems plausible. Indeed, in the same scene John tells Hubert "I had a mighty cause/ To wish [Arthur] dead, but thou had none to kill him" (ll. 205-6). He goes on to deny that he gave Hubert a direct order to kill Arthur, an assertion that the audience knows is false. One thinks that had Elinor been present, neither the order nor

the denial would have taken place, since she was the only one who knew or admitted openly to John that “strong possession much more than your right” is what keeps him on the throne. She likely would have known that doing anything to harm the young heir would affect John’s “strong possession.” The absence of women at the end of *King John*, particularly a character as powerful as Elinor, creates a foreboding tone in the final scenes. The audience is left with the feeling that without women to mark history, and stand behind the king, the past may be doomed to repeat itself.

Elinor may not be given many scenes in which she grieves, but given her strong presence in the first three acts of the play, her abrupt exit – her silencing – is profoundly felt. As audience members, we are just as shocked as John when he discovers her death: “Withold thy speed, dreadful occasion!/. . . . What? mother dead?” (4.2.125; 127). Yet he does not grieve as the women have previously; his woe is reduced to two or three non-consecutive exclamations (4.2.124-8; 181). There are very few points in the play where things appear to be going well, but after the exit of all the women, the action worsens. There is the warrant for Arthur’s death that John secretly gives to Hubert, the rebellion of the lords, the actual death of Arthur, the wars, and the poisoning of John. It is too much to say that these things take place as a direct result of the women’s exits, but it seems no coincidence that problems with John’s “memory” occur afterwards and that the humours of the play seem in so much disorder. John’s convenient lapse of memory occurs less than one hundred lines after he hears of his mother’s death. He tells Hubert, “Why urgest thou so oft young Arthur’s death?/ Thy hand hath murdered him” (4.2.204-5). However,

the audience knows that this was not the case in 3.3; though not articulated explicitly, his terse exchange with Hubert makes clear John's wishes for Arthur's demise.

Without the women to perform their various historical, political, and emotional functions, the play is left on shaky ground, typified by the funeral in the last scene:

P. Henry. I have a kind soul that would give thanks,

And knows not how to do it but with tears.

Bast. O, let us pay the time *but needful woe*

Since it hath been beforehand with our griefs.

This England never did, nor never shall,

Lie at the proud foot of a conqueror,

But when it first did help to wound itself.

.... Nought will make us rue,

If England to itself do rest but true.

(108-114; 117-18; my italics)

The Bastard says that now is a time for "needful woe," but presumably not the woe of the "wailing woman," who always seems to get shouted down by others around her. One is tempted to read the Bastard's lines ironically, as a play with ceremonial language: this is what one would expect to hear after the death of a king. Ironically, one would expect these lines after the death of a strong or legendary king, not spoken about a king like John. Marsha Robinson might say that these lines represent a return to the old historiographic method, in which the dead kings are glorified and their faults glossed over. However, this theory is incongruous with consideration of the Bastard's previously

shown personality: with his inclination toward irreverent humour and with his position as a bastard. Yet things have changed. Ironically enough, though illegitimate in lineage, the Bastard is the most capable contender for royal power, having proven himself in battle and as John's consultant. He must take over as the one who articulates the official political position of the state. However, as audience members, we are left with a feeling that the state is not stable, but full of ambivalent power struggles and many divisions. His lines are not soothing at all. The Bastard's words ring hollow against the previous mood and action of the play. One is left to wonder how England is "to itself... rest but true" when there are no more women to remind the new generation of past horrors, no more women to lament the woeful events of history.

Conclusion

One thing we can glean from studying the conventional representation of the wailing woman is a greater understanding of the stereotype's significance in social history. For decades, in literature and in society, women functioned as "professional mourners." It was culturally expected of them to vocally mourn the loss of loved ones. But at the time, the performance of grief was not necessarily viewed negatively. It was not until the beginning of the seventeenth century that a woman's expression of "excessive" grief was frowned upon. Kathryn McPherson notes the proliferation of handbooks in this period that advocated moderate grieving, citing Samuel Hieron's *A Help Unto Devotion*, "which was in its eighth edition by 1616" (425). These handbooks belonged to a prescriptive genre of literature that "addressed how parents, especially mothers, should behave when their children died" (McPherson 424-5). But by the end of the seventeenth century, the undertaking profession had been taken over exclusively by men (Phillippy 4), distancing women from the rituals of death and from their traditional roles as funeral attendants.

For whatever reason, women lost that particular societal role, but maintained the reputation as being overly emotional and in need of male regulation. When the pragmatic reason for expressive grief was lost or forgotten, women's woe was seen as superfluous and excessive. Instead of as being viewed as a result of centuries of cultural convention, women's expressive grief became "naturalised." Moreover, women's woe was seen as a negative aspect of the "female psyche." One need only look at the relatively recent

academic studies in “hysteria” to see how this aspect of psychology has come under attack.

I hope that my study may have suggested the sociological applications of examining female character types or stereotypes. Equally or perhaps more importantly I hope to have forwarded a cogent criticism of twentieth-century attitudes towards stock characterisation, particularly attitudes towards the woman of woe as a dramatic device.

Since women in Renaissance history plays often form a “tableau” of performative grief, some critics, like Herschel Baker for example, consciously ignore wailing women scenes, labelling them stereotypical or static (Baker 807). Yet the fallacious equation of “conventional” with “static” is a notion that is assumed by more critics than Baker. Feminist critics, who attempt to resurrect interest in the often-overlooked area of female dramatic characterisation, tend to make the same mistake. Feminist critics – with the exception of Kathleen McLuskie – value instances of female individuation, where female characters reveal their significance only to the extent that they oppose or subvert the patriarchy. As I have noted, feminist critics often assume that conventional images and portrayals of women merely reinforce masculine power structures.

This narrow view of stock characterisation’s potential, particularly that of the woman of woe, is antithetical to what is purportedly the intent of feminist criticism. Instead of increasing the potential depth and interest in female characters, feminist critics often discredit their dramatic power, even as they highlight an area that needs more attention. My thesis has thus attempted to redress this problem in feminist criticism. It

refocuses attention on female characters in Renaissance history plays while emphasising their rhetorical, thematic, and dramatic power, in addition to their political functions.

A comparison between England and Constance illuminates the various ways in which the woman of woe stock character can be interpreted in different ways, to distinctly different effects. Where Widow England must be unchanging and static in her role as a stable nation, for example, it is Constance's evolution into a character of woe, dramatised by the loss of family relations, that is central to her theatrical and dramatic significance.

The dramatic impact of England in Bale's *King Johan* depends upon her unchanging nature as a woman of loss and sorrow. She enters the play clearly as a poor wailing woman and exits as the same. As noted before, Bale equates truth and divine partiality with simple and non-changing appearances. Hence, John never sways from his religious path, never appears as anything less than a king, and England never doffs her widow's weeds nor swerves from her fervent anti-Catholic views. Widow England's loss – God's exile and the disappearance of the "true" church – must already occur by the beginning of the play's action. If the audience were allowed to see the genesis of England's widowhood, it might receive an impression of the nation's instability. She constantly reminds others of her loss and of the corruption of the Catholic church from the beginning to the end of the play. Thus the loss of the "true" church, occurring before the beginning of the play, is key in creating England's role as a kind of "national memory"; she embodies and evokes the political and religious crises of the nation. According to Bale's eschatological view of history, the nation's state of loss must be

portrayed as an always-immediate issue, always a possibility at any point in the future. The threat is essential to the propagandistic nature of the play.

King John's woman of woe, Constance, is dramatised to different theatrical effect. Her dramatic function and rhetorical power are closely related to her *development* as a wailing woman. Shakespeare situates Constance's plight in relation to the play's overall theme of shifting identity. Rather than using the woman of woe toward nationalistic ends, Shakespeare makes Constance the emotional and thematic centre of the play, similar to the Mother's emotional centrality in *Cambises*, though in this case Constance's thematic significance is slightly more complicated. It might be theorised that through Constance Shakespeare questions and critiques gender, as McLuskie suggests, wondering "what reality, if any, lies behind performances on the stage" (37).

As I've noted earlier, McLuskie also writes that the "most powerful images of women are... created out of an adaptation and reworking of familiar notions of what it means to be a woman, which are not necessarily the same as fully realised characters" (41). Only by making Constance and Blanch overtly conventional characters can Shakespeare critique a role to which women are relegated in society; they exist in relation to others, usually men. Shakespeare critiques female dramatisation by illustrating its fragility. Shakespeare dramatises the costs of this social relegation in terms of female suffering. There seems to be no place on the stage for a woman who has lost all of the relationships that constitute her identity. After being caused great emotional pain due to the loss of their integral relationships, neither Constance nor Blanch stay very long in the action after they lose their husbands or children.

Richard III's Margaret may be an exception to this rule, since she lasts through four history plays. However, Margaret is more of a ghost, as I've suggested, more significant as an ethereal revenant than a childless widow. She exists only to comment on the action of the play, to devilishly spur the grieving women to cursing, and to curse those that have put her in this state. Her losses take away her feminine identity, as they do with Constance and Blanch, but she is transformed where they are not. It seems that the only alternative to death for childless or husbandless female characters is to exist in a curious state of limbo, functioning as neither man nor woman, hovering on the boundaries of the play, much like a Fool.

So in contrast to the nature and dramatic intents of Bale's always-widowed England, the changeability of the wailing women in Shakespeare is integral to the major theme of identity loss and to a critique of gender dramatisation. England's character in *King Johan* is theatrically immutable; by contrast, for Constance and Blanch to have dramatic interest, their women-of-woe narrative must unfold on-stage. England must be a stock character to reinforce the nature of the state and its continuing crises; Constance and Blanch must be stock characters to illustrate the fragility of feminine identity within a patriarchal structure. These two widely varying interpretations of the same stock type illustrate the multiple potentialities for the type's dramatic development.

To discredit conventional characterisation simply because stock characters lack "individuality" – an emphasis that begins with late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century Romanticism – is anachronistic and far too dismissive an attitude. So too, the political bent observed by feminist critics is far too limiting. For whatever reason,

formalism – and aesthetic criticism more broadly – has ceased to garner much respect in late twentieth-century and early twenty-first century criticism. I hope that the future of feminist criticism is not so insular, for there is great potential in re-examining the dramatic roles of women – including stock women types – with an aesthetic eye.

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