

# EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



## **‘A Whore You Are, Madam’, or the Binary that Wasn’t: Female Dyads and Doubling in John Fletcher’s *The Chances* and *Women Pleased***

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It is no surprise to see a courtesan or ‘whore’ figure in an English Renaissance play set in Italy, but there is something curious going on in John Fletcher’s *The Chances* (1617). In this comedy, two female characters with the same name – one a prostitute and thief, and one the play’s romantic heroine – momentarily merge. The resolution of this case in mistaken identity begins with the following exchange:

DUKE Is this Constantia?  
[...]  
WHORE I am Constantia Sir.  
DUKE A whore ye are.  
WHORE ’Tis very true: I am a whore indeed Sir.<sup>1</sup>

Who can resist a chuckle here? Indeed, the woman’s blunt and unashamed response to what we imagine as a devastating sexual insult so surprised me when I first looked at the play that I very slightly misread the passage, which I’ve altered above to reproduce the experience. Here is the exchange as originally penned by Fletcher:

WHORE I am Constantia Sir.

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<sup>1</sup> John Fletcher, *The Chances* in *The Dramatic Works in the Beaumont and Fletcher Canon*, gen. ed. by Fredson Bowers, 10 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), IV pp. 543-645. I here quote 4.3.77-9, emending the text only slightly, as discussed. All quotations will be from this edition, and will hereafter be inserted in the text. My dating of Fletcher’s plays is indebted to Gary Taylor’s overview of the current state of the Fletcher canon and chronology. See the textual introduction to Lewis Theobald’s *Double Falsehood* in *The New Oxford Shakespeare: Critical Reference Edition*, gen. ed. by Gary Taylor, John Jowett, Terri Bourus and Gabriel Egan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

DUKE A whore ye are Sir.

WHORE 'Tis very true: I am a whore indeed Sir.

Only upon re-reading the play weeks later did I notice the seemingly nonsensical, intermediary 'Sir' and consult the *Oxford English Dictionary*, which cites four Fletcherian instances of 'Sir' or 'Sirra' being applied to women, but cannot seem to decide whether this is jocular or just weird.<sup>2</sup> Might the 'sir' be gesturing toward the gender of the actor playing Constantia? A modern production would underscore the irony, or perhaps remove the 'sir' entirely to avoid confusion. Yet my emendation above – 'A whore ye are' – now seems bare, unfinished, in part because of the Latinate syntax, in part because we have already seen the flourish of 'Sir', and this particular character seems to call for some title other than the bald iteration of the speech prefix *Whore*. 'A whore ye are, Ma'am' is getting there.

I begin with this textual idiosyncrasy because the readerly double-take it provoked not only mimics the Duke's double-take in the play, it also seems emblematic of this author. What Gordon McMullan posits as the 'doubleness' of Fletcher's plays I would argue is also stylistic, comprised by the deceptive linguistic simplicity with which the playwright presents 'simultaneity of antitheses'.<sup>3</sup> This notion has feminist implications as well. It is by now a critical truism: misogynist discourse employs antitheses or binaries in totalizing female experience and controlling female behavior. But is that what Fletcher is doing with the two Constantias in *The Chances*? For readers who first encountered Fletcher by way of *The Tamer Tamed* (1609) – a proto-feminist response to Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew* (1590-4) – leafing through his subsequent comedy may prove a disappointment, its pages promising merely clichés about hot-headed Italians, lusty Spaniards, and cunning whores and bawds. It might even seem that the setting of Bologna has enforced a more regressive turn in Fletcher's gender politics in respect to *The Tamer Tamed*: though the main action of Shakespeare's *Shrew* transpires in Italy, Fletcher's 'sequel' deports Petruchio<sup>4</sup> to London for his comeuppance by his second wife, as though English soil were necessary for female empowerment. But not so fast: Fletcher also chose an Italian setting for *Women Pleas'd* (1620), a text that declares its pro-woman stance in its title, and *A Wife for a Month* (1624), whose outspoken and iron-willed heroine has no Shakespearean equivalent. In

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<sup>2</sup> Strangely, the usage of 'sir' here does not warrant editorial comment, although Bowers does justify in a footnote emending Don Gillian to Dame Gillian, because "'Don" is surely a curious title to give a woman' (5.3.121n).

<sup>3</sup> Gordon McMullan, *The Politics of Unease in the Plays of John Fletcher* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1994), p. 260.

<sup>4</sup> I have standardized Fletcher's spelling of the name (it is Petruccio in *Tamer Tamed*) to avoid confusion.

*Women Pleased*, moreover, setting the play in the Italian city-states allows Fletcher to revisit the trope of gender warfare that makes for such subversive stage-action in *Tamer Tamed*, but this time he raises the political stakes by literalizing that very trope – and dramatizing the sexual *and* military triumph of an embattled female sovereign and her strong-willed, crafty daughter.

Fletcher's fascination with foreign cultures is no less obvious than his fascination with women: only two of his sixteen solo-authored plays are set unambiguously in contemporary England. A comprehensive treatment of Fletcher's cosmopolitanism in relation to his gender politics is therefore outside the scope of one essay. However, a feminist cross-analysis of his Italianate plays might shed light on both Fletcher's treatment of ethnic difference, and his continuing quarrel with what is not only the most misogynistic, but, arguably, the most 'Italian' – or, even better, Italianist – of Shakespeare's comedies.<sup>5</sup> As Fletcher's foremost revision of *The Taming of Shrew* manifests in the female solidarity of *The Tamer Tamed*, women's relationships would appear to offer an appropriate litmus test for the proto-feminism of his later plays. This is where the two Constantias of *The Chances* prove exemplary, for it is not the *presence* of two women in contrasting moral and/or social categories that constitutes a binary, but rather the nature of the relationship between these women and Fletcher leaves the latter teasingly ambiguous. This points up a pattern: in contrast to those famous Shakespearean rivals/foils like Katherina and Bianca in *Shrew*,<sup>6</sup> Fletcher's most memorable female characters group themselves as teams or as dyads, a dyad being distinct from a dichotomy in its potential for symmetry, sympathy, even synthesis. Doubling is the most extreme form of dyadism. A double (noun) is a duplicate, but to double (verb) in the sense of to double *as* is to duplicate oneself in a different role. The subversive potential of such self-replication is not obscured but, on the contrary, underscored by misogynistic exhortations against female duplicity. I might also stress that the verb when used in the dramaturgical sense need not entail duplication, in that theatrical doubling need not (indeed, should not) produce a physically identical 'copy' –

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<sup>5</sup> I use the term 'Italianist' to point up a specifically English and generally Anglocentric fantasy about Italian culture. See also Celia R. Caputi, 'A Tale of Two Tamings: Reading the Early Modern *Shrew* Debate from a Feminist Transnationalist Perspective', in *Rethinking Shakespeare and Italy: Cultural Exchanges from the Early Modern Period to the Present*, ed. by Ezna De Francisci and Chris Stamatakis (London: Routledge, 2017), pp. 40-52.

<sup>6</sup> The list goes on: Helen and Hermia (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*), Tamora and Lavinia (*Titus Andronicus*), Cordelia and Goneril/Reagan (*King Lear*), Adriana and Luciana (*The Comedy of Errors*), and Octavia and Cleopatra (*Antony and Cleopatra*). For Virginia Woolf's critique of the latter rivalry, see *A Room of One's Own* (London: Harcourt, 1929: 1981), p. 82.

indeed, it is just this slippage between identification and identity that I wish to posit as the antidote to misogyny's dichotomizing imperatives.

This essay will braid observations about Fletcher's Mediterranean others into a larger argument about his proto-feminism, in showing how his resistance to Shakespeare's Italianism tends to bolster sympathy for his female characters, and how, likewise, his departures from Shakespeare's Italianist plots tend to hinge on female collaboration. Specifically, I focus on female doubling and dyads in *The Chances* and *Women Pleas'd*, two plays whose echoes of *Shrew/Tamer Tamed* (and, in the sub-plot of *Women Pleas'd*, *Othello*) indicate Fletcher's ongoing preoccupation with the themes of gender, power and sexual agency, even while his strategic use of ethnic stereotype underscores the impression that femininity is a 'country' of its own.<sup>7</sup> Ultimately, I wish to prove that in these plays, one woman's standing in for another is ideologically of a piece with women's standing up for and behind one another – whether their mutual enemy be an overbearing native son or a foreign male requiring domestication.

## Part One

An obvious starting-point in discussions of *The Tamer Tamed* is that it begins where most comedies end: in a wedding. Even more remarkably, *The Chances* begins – in terms of what propels the plot – with a child born out of wedlock. This already offers a fascinating twist on the Madonna/whore binary: the 'good' Constantia is an unwed mother, the disgraced sister of Bologna's governor, intriguingly named Petruchio. Joyce Boro, in a compelling discussion of the play's relation to its source, Miguel de Cervantes' *La Señora Cornelia*, makes the case for Fletcher's lesser sympathy toward the heroine in his removal of Cervantes' Marian imagery and comparative emphasis on the mother's carnality and the child's illegitimacy.<sup>8</sup> To me this reading does not show forth a misogynistic Fletcher so much as a theoretically feminist – but above all Catholic – Cervantes. For readers more versed in English analogues, the obvious point of comparison is not Cervantes but Shakespeare, who never found it in his heart to

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<sup>7</sup> Fletcher's third and last play set in Italy, *A Wife for a Month* (1624), partakes of some of the patterns elucidated in this reading, namely, a protective and supportive relationship between two women who *might* have been cast as rivals. I have omitted it from extended analysis here out of concerns for space, and because this tragicomedy does not involve female doubling.

<sup>8</sup> Joyce Boro, 'Blessed with a Baby or "bum-fiddled with a bastard"?' Maternity in Fletcher's *The Chances* and Cervantes' *Novela de la Senora Cornelia* in *The Creation and Re-creation of Cardenio: Performing Shakespeare, Transforming Cervantes*, ed. by Terri Borous and Gary Taylor (New York: Palgrave, 2013), pp. 61-72.

honour an unwed mother with a comedy of her own. Even John Webster's and John Ford's more or less sympathetic depictions of compromised Italian maternity, *The Duchess of Malfi* and *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*, end in the mother's brutal murder by her own brother – a powerful point of contrast with *The Chances*, wherein the heroine's brother vents his rage over the dishonour to his house *not* at his sister (who in fact expects violence), but at the father of her child, the Duke of Ferrara. But returning to Boro's critique, I wish to point out that a more sexualized, earthy Madonna (re-named Constantia by Fletcher, to counter some of that earthiness) means a less dichotomized view of womankind, and that becomes important when the second Constantia (another Fletcherian interpellation) enters in Act Four.

Before she does so, however, readers see the heroine form a relationship with another key female character, old Dame Gillian, called 'mother' by the Spanish comrades, Don John and Don Frederick, who rent lodgings from her. In one of the coincidences to which the title refers, the newborn infant falls into the hands of John, while elsewhere in the streets of Bologna the distressed mother appeals to Frederick for protection, and he takes her home. It is thus the landlady who winds up as the custodian of first the infant and then his mother, though she assumes (to comical effect) that the former was fathered by her tenant and bears no relationship to the latter. In the pivotal third act of the play, the landlady offers 'woman's counsel' to Constantia – in large part in warning her of the lascivious nature of her Spanish protectors – and then tips her off to the presence of the child: 'Bastards [...] he has now in making, multitudes; the last night / He brought home one; I pity her that bore it' (3.4.46-8).

Boro's reading of this episode of 'woman's counsel' rightly points out its Hispanophobia; what is less obvious is Gillian's sympathy toward the unwed mother, with whom she doesn't realize she is speaking, and on whom misogynist discourse would more likely heap the moral blame. The landlady does follow-up her expression of pity with what seems, at first glance, an antifeminist cliché: 'we are all weak vessels' (3.4.49). Notably, however, she does not say 'we women': elsewhere in the play, the trope of the 'leaky vessel' is applied to men – and not just the Spaniards – no less than four times.<sup>9</sup> My point is twofold here: firstly, the sexualization of the 'most incomprehensible whore-master' (3.4.36) who has happened upon Constantia's child

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<sup>9</sup> See *The Chances* 1.3.35; 1.6.5; 3.2.15-17; 3.2.31. Critical attention to the trope of women as 'leaky vessels' is indebted largely to Gail Kern Paster's chapter on city comedy in *The Body Embarrassed: Drama and the Disciplines of Shame in Early Modern England* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), pp. 23-63. For a discussion of this trope's re-gendering, see Celia R. Daileader, 'William Shakespeare, Thomas Middleton, and the Masculine Grotesque', in *The Oxford Middleton Handbook*, ed. by Gary Taylor and Patricia Thomas Henley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 111-222.

diminishes the stigma placed upon the mother of that child; secondly, the purpose of the scene is not to endorse Gillian's ethnic prejudice – which, in fact, she forswears at the end of the play, when the behavior of the Spaniards is proven unimpeachable – so much as to provide Constantia a kind of surrogate mother and co-conspirator against men.

The sexual stereotyping of Don John also serves to highlight, to an attentive critic, the dearth of such stereotypes surrounding the second Constantia, whom Fletcher might have more closely modeled on other Italianate courtesans like Webster's Vittoria Corombona in *The White Devil* or Bellafront in Thomas Middleton and Thomas Dekker's *The Honest Whore*. Italy being infamous for its traffic in sex, the absence of exoticizing effects, or of verbal cues that link Constantia's profession to her ethnicity or birth-place, seems telling.<sup>10</sup> To be sure, this is a good news/bad news observation – Hispanophobia in lieu of Italophobia (and misogyny) – but, given that John and Frederick redeem themselves by the end of the play, the general impression is that Fletcher is using ethnic stereotype merely to embellish his play rather than drive the plot. He is also – more importantly –subjecting *men* and not women to ethnic stereotype, a pattern that recurs in *Women Pleas'd*, as will be discussed below.

Curiously, it is a play set in England, Fletcher's own *Tamer Tamed*, that *The Chances* echoes most powerfully when Constantia-the-whore finally appears. This scene recalling the *Lysistrata*-based, festive, upper-stage female rebellion of the earlier comedy happens also to be the point in the text where the two Constantias most closely correlate. Both women have given the slip to male surveillance, the one with her lover, Antonio's, money and jewels, the other with the Duke's newborn son. The irony of the heroine's disappearance is its timing: her brother Petruchio has made peace with the Duke, who has presented himself as her pre-contracted 'husband', and both men have followed the Spanish comrades to the landlady's house, only to find Constantia and Gillian gone. Eventually, all four men are misled by references to the other Constantia to a house from whence issue the sounds of (mostly female, it seems) merriment. Thence ensues the very same forced entry that is prevented in *The Tamer Tamed*, and the Duke and his consorts arrive at the imbroglio with which this essay began. This point of overlap between *The Tamer Tamed* and *The Chances* deserves more in-depth analysis than this essay permits: perhaps Fletcher allowed the men to breach Constantia's private space because, unlike Maria from *The Tamer Tamed*, she is not a

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<sup>10</sup> Venice in particular was known for its courtesans: see *Othello* 4.2.94 and 3.3.207-8 and Thomas Middleton, *The Roaring Girl* 10.345-49. Aphra Behn would go on to play with the sexual stereotyping of Italians in many of her continental comedies, as when Willmore in *The Rover* praises the 'legal authorized fornication' in which he may indulge in the *bel paese* (Behn, *The Rover*, in *The Rover and Other Plays*, [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995], pp. 1-88; 1.2.114-16).

virgin staging a sex-strike on her wedding night.<sup>11</sup> For the purposes of the argument at hand, the point is the way this scene in *The Chances* theoretically places all the women of the play (the men, seeing an older woman at the window, have mistaken the second Constantia's bawd for the landlady) in the same diegetic, upper-stage space, into which wine bottles are being conveyed, and within which a female singer praises 'sweet liberty' and boasts of being at her 'own command' (4.3.14; 20).

Very likely, the same boy actor played both Constantias in *The Chances* and sang the offstage solos that enchant their confused admirers; the roles of Gillian/Bawd might also have been doubled. I leave to theater historians the perhaps chicken-and-egg question of whether limited casting compelled Fletcher to craft the plot as he did, or whether his artistic motive was the meta-theatrical effect of the doubling. Yet the two Constantias, though not foils, are not mirror-images either: why else would the Duke require the whore to state her name? She shares Constantia's singing-voice, but not her demure discursive style; she shares her name but not her personality. The very uneasiness – to bring McMullan's useful schematic back in focus – of the audience's efforts to link the two women, the instability of their cross-identification, is where *The Chances* becomes more subversive than it at first seems. Fletcher might have scripted an encounter between them to clarify their relationship in one direction or another: they might have exchanged insults or, rather, confidences. Instead, he suggests, via staging and the echo of *The Tamer Tamed*, that Constantia-the-whore might have invited Constantia-the-mother to her party, and the latter might have declined due to (pun intended) a prior engagement.

In Act Five of *The Chances*, the doubling effect continues to force the play's men into divergent tracks. While the second Constantia has been thieving, carousing, and getting arrested, the heroine of the play has been up to some mischief of her own, incited by Gillian: the two have re-located to the house of a reputed wizard, the landlady's kinsman, to which all the men are lured for magical help in their woman-hunt. Here Gillian and her charge, with the help of the bogus magician, stage a faux-conjuring session at the end of which the Duke is finally re-united with his lover and child. The gratuitousness of this little show – in terms of the action of the play – in itself constitutes subversion, while also playing on the doubling theme via a procession of veiled women amongst whom the Duke must pick out his Constantia. Gillian presents two motives for this trick: a requital of unspecified 'pranks' played on her by John and Frederick, as well as a desire to 'secure' the younger woman 'Out of all thoughts of

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<sup>11</sup> *A Wife for a Month* interestingly twists this theme in dramatizing a bridegroom's refusal of sex on his wedding-night, the result of a jealous tyrant's threats to execute the bride if de-flowered.

danger' (5.3.149-50). Apparently, Fletcher suggests, the job of protecting a woman is best left to a woman.

That may be, in part, because the notion of a woman's 'safety' to a man with a claim on her body is of dubious value, as reflected in the language in which Antonio learns of his mistress' arrest. He is told 'your whore's safe, / and all your jewels' (5.3.215-16). When Antonio asks her whereabouts, Petruchio responds, 'Ready to go to whipping.' The comedy ends on a deeply ambivalent note:

ANTONIO My whore whipt?

PETRUCHIO Yes, your whore without doubt, Sir.

ANTONIO Whipt! 'pray, Gentlemen.

DUKE Why, would you have her once more rob ye?

[...]

JOHN The whore, Sir,

Would rather carry pity: a handsome whore.

[...]

PETRUCHIO If we see contrition in your whore, Sir,

Much may be done. (5.3.220-30)

Does Constantia's silence throughout this discussion indicate her uneasy identification with the ill-famed woman? Fletcher, typically, leaves it up to the audience to decide. If the battery of 'whore's is the text's way of reinstating linguistic binaries, Fletcher makes a point of this being an all-male rhetorical act. It is also worth noting that the iteration 'whore' occurs five times out of seven here in conjunction with the possessive pronoun, a formulation that suggests a parallel between Antonio and his mistress. The line 'My whore whipt?' becomes less simply misogynistic than it might at first appear. One might respond, 'A whore ye are too, Sir'.

## Part Two

*The Chances* is an uncomfortable read for a feminist: *Women Pleased* is less so. The play announces its interest in female power and the mother/daughter dyad in its first scene. The sovereign Duchess of Florence and her daughter are both praised as exemplars of justice and virtue, and we learn of Fletcher's Duchess that 'so dotingly the old one loves her young one' (1.1.25),<sup>12</sup> she cannot bear to give her in marriage. It's an

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<sup>12</sup> Fletcher, *Women Pleased in The Dramatic Works in the Beaumont and Fletcher Canon V*, pp. 443-529.



interesting twist on a common theme in early modern drama – that of patriarchal control over a daughter’s marital prospects – and Shakespeare returned to this theme obsessively, above all in his ‘Italian’ plays. There having been an attempt to seize the princess, Belvidere, by a scorned suitor, the Duke of Milan, the Duchess has placed her in a guarded citadel, into which (Romeo-like) access is sought by her beloved, Silvio, despite the threatened penalty of death. Lest this maternal safe-guarding of a daughter appear too severe – a mere mimicry of patriarchal surveillance of daughters and wives – the sub-plot immediately tempers our reaction, dramatizing the household of the usurer Lopez, who routinely starves and deprives his wife and servant, and whose irrational jealousy drives the former to sexual rebellion. Though no mention is made of Lopez’s ethnicity, it can be argued that his surname and characterization betray a vestige of the Hispanophobia discussed above – here again, though, interestingly, the ethnic stereotype is anti-male, and serves to garner sympathy for his wife, Isabella. The latter’s introduction, in fact, echoes *The Taming of the Shrew*, where Katherina complains of Petruchio’s starving her, and he in mock-diligence (but still intending to starve her) offers to prepare her meat.<sup>13</sup> Fletcher’s reversal of this dynamic in *The Tamer Tamed* led him to script the rebellious female feasting discussed above: it seems natural, then, that the playwright wished to explore, in *Women Pleas’d*, the erotic alternative to Maria’s alimentary defiance, when Isabella threatens to ‘give [...] cause’ (1.2.57) to her husband’s jealousy, acting as the anti-Desdemona to the afore-mentioned anti-Kate.

While the naked cruelty of Lopez calls for overt defiance, Belvidere’s circumvention of her mother’s control requires more subtlety. When she and Silvio are caught in each other’s arms, the two plead so passionately, each shouldering the blame for their mutual transgression and willing to lay down life for the other, that the Duchess offers clemency in the form of a mission borrowed from Chaucer’s ‘Wife of Bath’s Tale’: Silvio will have one year to resolve a riddle that, answered correctly, will spare his life and permit his marriage to the princess. In his absence, Belvidere’s show of contrition for her disobedience<sup>14</sup> – and feigned compliance in a politically expedient marriage to the Duke of Sienna – permit her mother to let down her guard and share the answer to the riddle, which the Duchess explains eluded her own father despite two years of study. This ‘secret’ is divulged in the course of a night of ‘counsel’, when mother and daughter

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<sup>13</sup> See *The Taming of the Shrew* 4.3.2-5; 39-40 and *Women Pleas’d* 1.2.46-7; 69-70.

<sup>14</sup> Obedience between fathers and daughters is a common focus in the plays of Shakespeare and his contemporaries: obedience between mothers and daughters is all but invisible. The manner in which the Duchess learns of Belvidere’s change of heart is also note-worthy, being reported to her by another woman: ‘now to your will [...] [she] / Bends her affections, bows her best obedience’ (3.1.11-12). Were this contemporary film, the scene would merit feminist approval via the Bechdel Test, dramatizing a conversation between two women, about, primarily, a woman.

share a bed (3.1.114) – a remarkable moment of woman-to-woman intimacy, and not the only one in the play.

It is also not the only instance in which two women share, in a sense, a bed. One of the most common scenarios surrounding doubling in English Renaissance drama is the bed trick, which generally involves two women duping a sexually misguided male. Lopez, soliloquizing Othello-like over his sleeping wife, discovers a device for leading a lover to her bed and wakes her with his grumbling threats. When Lopez exits to seek his rival, the wife bribes her maidservant to deflect his violence. Unlike Shakespeare's Emilia, who only thinks to be laid down, dying, 'by [her] mistress' side' (*Othello* 5.2.244) out of guilt over her complicity in Desdemona's murder, Isabella's servant quite readily agrees to let Lopez beat her, in the darkened bed-chamber, in Isabella's stead. The surrogate-victim also endures some verbal abuse that might ring a bell: 'Have you put your light out?... / You whore, you cunning whore...' (*Women Pleased* 3.4.92-3; *Othello* 5.2.7 and 4.2.93). Once again, the allusion to Shakespeare is just as significant as Fletcher's departure from the precedent. Isabella is not, tellingly, a 'cunning whore of Florence'. Like the second Constantia in *The Chances*, her sexual transgressions are not linked with her ethnicity or place of birth. Nor are they fatal, for her surrogate or for herself: though Lopez has made liberal use of his 'damned nayles' (3.4.114), the abused servant is well enough to express concern for her mistress' safety when their proper roles are resumed. Lopez then returns to Isabella's chamber with witnesses who expect to find her bloodied, and she is discovered peacefully reading in bed. 'Is this ... That naughty woman you had pull'd a peeces?' (3.4.163-4) an observer asks, calling Lopez's sanity in question. Isabella is exonerated, and her husband forswears his jealousy.

The domestic violence in the sub-plot reflects in microcosm the large-scale violence exploding in the main plot, initiated by another hot-headed male. Having the key to her beloved's salvation, Belvidere follows the lead of the women in *The Chances*, disappearing from the citadel, and inciting outrage in the Duke of Sienna, who has come to dinner to court her. Assuming (not insignificantly) that mother and daughter are in cahoots, he declares war on Florence. The Duchess doesn't blink. 'Since ye are so high and so hot Sir, ye have half arm'd us' (3.3.49), she declares, calling forth her army and putting a price on Silvio's head, whom she blames for her daughter's flight. In *The Tamer Tamed*, Maria's sex-strike gives rise to extended metaphors of siege warfare: in *Women Pleased*, readers witness a literal 'battle of the sexes' between neighboring

duchies.<sup>15</sup> (There is an implied argument, here, about male versus female governance to which I shall return below.)

Though distinct from the martial ladies of *The Tamer Tamed*, Belvidere plays her own role on the battlefield, that of a disembodied voice singing to inspire and comfort Silvio, who has taken up arms in defense of Florence. In her offstage singing, the princess mimics, once again, the Constantias in *The Chances*, though when she enters stage, her appearance jolts expectations: ‘How old she is, and ugly’, Silvio cries (4.2.22). Belvidere’s re-embodiment as the crone of Chaucer’s ‘Wife of Bath’s Tale’ is never termed a disguise – Fletcher leaves open the possibility of magic, and the thirty-line speech in which the ‘old beldame’ lists her powers resembles speeches by the fairies of Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and *The Tempest* (there is even a whiff of Prospero in her reference to her ‘art’ [49]). Like the magic show orchestrated by the women in *The Chances*, Belvidere’s puckish antics in *Women Pleas’d* are gratuitous: she might have helped Silvio in her own persona. But, thematically, her metamorphosis as an aged, powerful, and learned woman (Silvio calls her ‘mother’ and refers to her ‘studies’ [4.4.1]) serves to identify her with the Duchess, who is elsewhere described as a ‘wise woman’ (4.1.60). Doubling as an old woman also allows her to inhabit another version of herself. The shared first syllable of the Belvidere/Beldame dyad becomes the semantic hinge on which these two identities rest: linguistically, both are beautiful, but only the younger self is beautiful to look at (in Italian, *bella+vedere*). When Shakespeare has women disguise themselves, it is invariably as very young men: here the heroine doubles as a much older woman, as what she will one day become.

The riddle itself both teases and thwarts a misogynistic binary reading, asking ‘what thing is that... / For which all women long,’ and answering,

In good or ill,  
They desire to have their will:  
Yet, when they have it, they abuse it,

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<sup>15</sup> Belvidere’s sequestering in the citadel subtly gestures back to Maria’s retreat into a stocked and guarded upstairs chamber in acts one and two of *The Tamer Tamed*. Tellingly, the ghost-character named Petruccio in *Women Pleas’d* is the soldier who ‘commands the guard’ over the princess, and the passage in which he is named betrays Fletcher’s continuing fascination with the ‘taming’ theme and attendant falconry/horsemanship tropes of *Shrew* and *Tamer Tamed*. The soldiers guarding the citadel ‘feel [their] duties *shrewdly*’; one laments, ‘I would this Lady were married out oth’ way.’ and another chimes in, ‘’Tis not her fault [...] she is ready for’t, / And that’s the plague, when they grow ripe for marriage, / They must be slipt like *Hawkes*.’ The metaphor is then turned around, as a soldier complains of having ‘watch’d these three nights’ and thereby being kept ‘tame’ (2.2.1-12).

For they know not how to use it. (5.1.127-41)

In the Chaucerian source, women are said to desire ‘sovereynete [..] over hir husband [..] And for to been in maistrie hym above.’<sup>16</sup> So phrased, the answer plays upon masculinist paranoia about female desire for domination, as opposed to the ‘due equality’ celebrated in the Epilogue to *The Tamer Tamed*. In replacing Chaucer’s rigidly hierarchical schema of marital sovereignty/mastery with a more ambiguous reference to woman’s ‘will’, Fletcher’s answer to Chaucer’s riddle softens its antifeminist implications, essentially offering as a solution to the ‘riddle’ of female desire the tautology that, well, women want what they want. Then, as if shying away from the subversive potential of this non-response to a question the very grammar of which signals its misogyny – presuming that all women want the same thing – Fletcher lets the misogyny creep back in with the final couplet, and the ‘feminine’ (in more than one sense here) rhyme, ‘use it’ / ‘abuse it’. Yet, as Helen Cooper argues, the riddle’s ‘apparent sellout to conventional misogynist views [..] is not supported by the action of the play itself’.<sup>17</sup> It is the men of the play who most egregiously abuse their power: the Duke of Milan by attempting rape; Lopez by starving his wife and servant and beating his wife by proxy; the Duke of Sienna by waging war over (essentially) a broken dinner date.

As in the source, the hag proffers the answer to the riddle in return for a boon – Silvio’s hand in marriage. When Silvio balks, the beldame shows her backbone: ‘Thy word Foole, / Break that, and ile break all thy fortunes yet’ (5.1.189-90) – the insult ‘fool’ echoing the collective female defiance of the ‘breeches song’ in *The Tamer Tamed*.<sup>18</sup> Thence follows yet another moment of female solidarity and a departure from the source, as the Duchess, not recognizing her daughter, throws her authority behind the old woman’s claim. Silvio’s happy ending follows Chaucer closely but also proffers a distinctly Fletcherian word-puzzle. When Belvidere, in her original form, offers the folkloric choice between a wife who is old and virtuous, or one who is young, fair and ‘wanton’ (5.3.62), and Silvio makes the choice that wins him both beauty and chastity, it is in these terms: ‘Into thy sovereign will I put my answer’ (5.3.74). The adjective ‘sovereign’ is significant – does it modify ‘will’ in the sense of ‘the foremost of your

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<sup>16</sup> Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Wife of Bath’s Tale* in *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. by Larry D. Benson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), pp. 116-122. I quote lines 1048-50.

<sup>17</sup> Helen Cooper, ‘The Shape-Shiftings of the Wife of Bath, 1395-1670’ in *Chaucer Traditions: Studies in Honour of Derek Brewer*, ed. by Ruth Morse and Barry Windeatt (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 168-84.

<sup>18</sup> This paean to ‘the woman who wears the breeches’ concludes with toasts ‘to thy fool’ and ‘my fool’ and ‘all fools’ – referring, presumably, to the husbands of the singers (*The Tamer Tamed* 2.5.54-7).

desires' or does the phrase reflect Silvio's reverence for the addressee? Belvidere is, after all, the heir to the throne of Florence: Silvio is merely a 'gentleman of quality', according to the *Dramatis Personae* list. In this final scene, Belvidere's power over Silvio parallels that of her mother over the Duke of Sienna, who is now her prisoner. The daughter – whose very outwitting of her mother proves her superior mind – now inspires the Duchess' imitation, and she in her turn poses the Duke a choice: either pay a hefty ransom and go free, or instead let her choose a wife for him in lieu of Belvidere. The Duke follows Silvio's example and lets the Duchess choose: he is rewarded with 'a fit wife' who is 'in honour every way' his 'equal' (5.3.96-7) – the Duchess herself.

The facility of the mother/daughter swap represents female dyadism at its most subversive. Departing radically from the schematics of the patriarchal 'traffic in women',<sup>19</sup> it is a mother and daughter here who *exchange men*. Silvio – his life earlier forfeit by ducal decree – passes out of the control of the mother and into possession of the daughter, and the Duke – hitherto Belvidere's husband-to-be – becomes her mother's sexual property. Whether the Duchess has had her eye on her daughter's suitor all along is a question the play does not seem to entertain, and this is consistent with Fletcher's general aversion to plots propelled by female rivalry.

*Women Pleased* concludes with the strong sense that the men have been brought in line by the women, and deservedly so. Unlike *The Chances*, which echoes *The Tamer Tamed* in Act Four and then swerves, as I have shown, in a far more regressive direction, *Women Pleased* borrows from *The Tamer Tamed* in Act Five. In the penultimate scene, a chastened Lopez echoes the reformed wife-tamer of that earlier comedy, declaring himself 'new-born' (5.2.106). The intertextual overlap strengthens the reading of Lopez as a cultural outsider in Florence, like Petruchio in Fletcher's England.<sup>20</sup> Yet, as in *Tamer Tamed*, less is made of ethnic or national identity here than gender solidarity. To the injunction 'Come Lopez, let us give our wives the breeches too!' (104) he replies, 'Whilst they rule with virtue, I'll give 'em skin and all,' and Isabella remarks, 'We'll scratch it off else' (5-6), alluding to his attack on her maidservant, but speaking, it seems, for all women.<sup>21</sup> The last lines of the play, spoken by the Duchess, constitute a directive to the 'young men' in the audience to give their

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<sup>19</sup> Gayle Rubin, 'The traffic in women: notes on the "political economy" of sex', in *The Second Wave: A Reader in Feminist Theory*, ed. by Linda Nicholson (New York: Routledge, 1997), pp. 27–62.

<sup>20</sup> Compare Petruchio's 'I am born again' (*The Tamer Tamed*, 5.4.60).

<sup>21</sup> Women's wearing the breeches is a theme in *The Tamer Tamed*: see 1.1.35, 1.2.47, and 2.5.49. Lopez's hyperbolic mention of skinning may also allude to the violently misogynistic ballad, *A Merry Jest of a Curst and Shrewd Wife Lapped in Morel's Skin for her Good Behaviour*, that apparently inspired Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*.

wives ‘their sovereign wills, and pleased they are’ (111-13). Once again, the phrase ‘sovereign will’ invites two alternative glosses between which we need not necessarily choose. Might the sovereign speaker be endowing linguistic sovereignty not merely on the ‘wills’ of the women in the audience, but on the women themselves? Might this be a magnanimous – even a democratic – gesture? This would be much in accord with Fletcher’s noted distrust of political absolutism<sup>22</sup> – and no more radical than writing a comedy designed to ‘teach both sexes due equality’ (*The Tamer Tamed*, 5.4.97).

As it turns out, the issue of hierarchy versus equality is relevant to more than Fletcher’s re-writing of Chaucer’s riddle, returning us to the theoretical problem with which this essay began and its implications for any feminist cosmopolitanist reading of his plays. What distinguishes dyadism from binary thinking? In a word: hierarchy. A dichotomy may appear symmetrical at first glance but the valuation of its two components invariably employs a hierarchical schema, as in the ‘coloured’ versus ‘white’ signs of US segregation. And, as that example underscores, resistance to binarity also lends itself to multiculturalism. Man/woman, English/foreign, us/them. Returning to this essay’s introduction, ‘A whore ye are, sir’ disturbs binarity in applying a title of honor – be it spoken with sarcasm or not – to a denigrated category of person. Moreover, looking at the line in context, the symmetry of the line-endings sir/sir/sir rhetorically undermines the power differential between the Duke and the woman he addresses. If the play ends with the bald reinstatement of patriarchal power, in the prospect of the second Constantia’s punishment, Fletcher’s language – almost, seemingly, despite itself – slips toward ambiguity. Passive voice and active voice startlingly transpose themselves as, rather than being whipped, the woman sentenced gets ‘ready to go to whipping’, and when Petruchio – in a rare exercise of his statesmanship – proffers clemency, it is passively phrased as ‘much may be done’. However I would love to see her name-sake stand up for her, I nonetheless take comfort in the former’s silence. After all, Constantia is not Duchess yet. That promise is in the final line of the play, where the Duke leads her to ‘the full consummation of [his] vow’ (5.3.230). As co-regent of Ferrara, might she not more closely resemble Fletcher’s Duchess of Florence, who intervenes on behalf of a disadvantaged, old woman?

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<sup>22</sup> See McMullan, p. 35 and *passim*. See also John Fletcher, *The Tamer Tamed*, ed. by Celia R. Daileader and Gary Taylor (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), p. 2.

## Conclusion

Fletcher's Italy is not Shakespeare's. There may be a whiff of Shakespeare's Verona in the two 'factions' who clash in Act One of *The Chances*, of Shakespeare's Venice in the aborted cuckoldry plot of *Women Pleas'd*; there may be a touch of Romeo in Fletcher's Silvio, of Othello in his Lopez. But these resemblances have more to do with male than female behavior. Belvidere is no Juliet and, as I have emphasized, Isabella is no Desdemona. Might one go so far as to say that Fletcher's Italian women are, simply, women? Stereotype does not seem to touch them. 'As a woman', writes Virginia Woolf, 'I have no country'.<sup>23</sup> An ex-patriot has, linguistically speaking, left his fatherland – is that what makes the hero of *The Tamer Tamed* such a fit *ex-patriarch*? And while that play is back in focus, it is worth pointing out that, if not much is made of Petruchio's pedigree, no cultural difference whatsoever is ascribed to another import from Shakespeare's *Shrew*, Bianca, Maria's strangely non-Italian and passionately supportive comrade-in-arms, the seeming late sister of Shakespeare's titular 'shrew'.

I have elsewhere explored at length the Maria/Bianca dyad, as well as *Tamer Tamed*'s curiously eclectic and paradoxical linguistic othering of the play's female rebels.<sup>24</sup> But, in concluding, one last word is due to the theme of dyadism. In celebrating Fletcher's female dyads and doubles, and connecting these patterns to his proto-feminism, I do not wish to efface the artistic centrality of male dyads like the Dons in *The Chances* – but seeing men cooperate in a male-authored work is hardly surprising. Indeed, the author's biography itself upholds the power of brotherly bonds, as Fletcher was best known in his lifetime and beyond as one half of the duo 'Beaumont and Fletcher'. Moreover, his relationship to Francis Beaumont was of such intensity that the dyad had a triangular manifestation in the men's scandalous living arrangement 'with one wench between them'.<sup>25</sup> Was this household 'feminocentric'?<sup>26</sup> One might expect no less from the man who wrote the book on women pleas'd.

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<sup>23</sup> Virginia Woolf, *Three Guineas* (London: Harcourt, 1938).

<sup>24</sup> See Caputi, 'A Tale of Two Tamings'.

<sup>25</sup> 'Brief Lives', *Chiefly of Contemporaries, set down by John Aubrey, between the Years 1669 & 1696*, ed. by Andrew Clark, 2 vols., (Oxford: Clarendon, 1898), I, p. 96.

<sup>26</sup> McMullan, p. 35.