

Truth and Effect in *The Duchess of Malfi*

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I

The first part of this essay is an exercise in scepticism. Webster's reputation has struggled through a great deal of detraction, to arrive at the point where a critic can confidently proclaim *The Duchess of Malfi* "a dramatic work of art that is a brilliant piece of artistic craftsmanship."¹ Most of the old charges have been swept away as uninformed, or irrelevant, or mistaken. Webster has been placed in the context of artistic conventions and historical pre-occupations needed for a proper appreciation of his work. We know now that the play is informed by complex patterns of thought and imagery; that features of the action once supposed merely bizarre or morbid, like the tableau of wax figures and the dance of madmen in Act IV, are to be understood in a tradition of masque, ceremony and ritual from which they draw meaning. We can relate Webster's themes to the serious intellectual concerns of his age. We know better than to require realism of action or character analysis. We recognize that the poetry is no superadded adornment but the very life of the play. And we are perhaps less ready to take a high moral tone, or to demand that the playwright take one. In all of these ways, recent criticism has been better able to do Webster justice, and estimates of him have gone up accordingly. On the whole, I think the new views are right; I find the play more impressive, more coherent and intelligent, than its hostile critics would lead us to expect or than I myself once thought; and its faults seem to me now less pervasive, less far-reaching or significant than would justify the wholesale conclusions to which they have sometimes given rise. Nevertheless, I continue to think that it does have faults, that they are serious, that praise of Webster's craftsmanship needs to be tempered by apposite discrimination, and that arguments from history or elaborations of pattern should be rigorously tested. Some of the old criticisms still have force, I think, though I would offer different reasons for them.

In the welter of adverse commentary on the play, the main charges have been poor construction, uncontrolled sensationalism, and lack of moral coherence. Of the three, sensationalism is the key: this is what disrupts the action most seriously, and most acutely brings up

¹ Nigel Alexander, "Intelligence in *The Duchess of Malfi*," in *Mermaid Critical Commentaries: John Webster*, ed. B. Morris (London, 1970), p. 96. All quotations from *The Duchess of Malfi* are taken from the New Mermaid edition, ed. Elizabeth M. Brennan (seventh impression, 1977).

the question of Webster's artistic sincerity. His relish for the grotesque, and his eagerness to work on the feelings of the audience, lead him to create peculiarly localized intensities, impairing dramatic continuity and undermining his larger claims on the imaginative assent of the audience. The essential point — which has become a commonplace — was made long ago when Charles Kingsley complained that Webster "was thinking and writing of...not truth, but effect."² Many others have made the same charge, most notably William Archer, whose forcible comments have come to seem representative of the attacks on Webster. As Archer summed it up, "we cannot help feeling from time to time that the poet is writing for mere momentary effect."³

Critics now seldom take Archer seriously.⁴ Webster's defenders have brought against such attacks a variety of arguments both subtle and learned. Archer is grossly insensitive, makes egregious errors, misunderstands theatrical conventions, and lacks proper historical perspective. To take just one instance, the notorious absurdity of Ferdinand's delayed revenge, of which Archer makes much, can be easily accounted for by the familiar Elizabethan stage-device of double time. Robert Ornstein indeed converts Webster's use of it into a triumph: "The simultaneous rush and delay of Ferdinand's revenge is a remarkable bit of artistic legerdemain."⁵ One needn't find it all that remarkable to agree that he has a point.

A larger matter is raised by Ralph Berry. He takes Archer to stand for the more recent critics hostile to Webster, and argues that they misunderstand the plays because of "a simple distaste for the concerns and stylistic traits of the era that Webster represents."⁶ The critical issues this raises go far beyond the limitations of Archer's, or anyone's, tastes. As well as difficult questions about how to characterize the artistic traits of a whole era without over-simplification and indiscriminate abstraction, and the more particular question of whether Berry does this satisfactorily for Webster's period, there is the problem of whether what is typical of an era can constitute a defence of its practices or of any particular work. Without going into such complexities here, we can at least agree that a general distaste for the concerns and methods of an era is likely to get in the way of a fair appreciation of individual works. We need not

2 Charles Kingsley, from "Plays and Puritans," repr. in *John Webster: a Critical Anthology*, ed. G.K. and S.K. Hunter (Harmondsworth, 1969), pp. 62-3.

3 William Archer, "Webster, Lamb and Swinburne," repr. in *John Webster: a Critical Anthology*, p. 84.

4 See, for example, T.B. Tomlinson, *A Study of Elizabethan and Jacobean Tragedy* (Cambridge, 1964), p. 132.

5 Robert Ornstein, *The Moral Vision of Jacobean Tragedy* (Madison, 1960), p. 130.

6 Ralph Berry, *The Art of John Webster* (Oxford, 1971), p. 5.

ourselves relish the more extreme effects of baroque art in order to do justice to Webster, but we should certainly have enough historical sense to temper the expectations we bring to him. Besides, the development of drama since Archer's time has surely done more than enough to broaden (I don't say, to justify) theatrical canons of the present day. Critics have not been slow to regard Webster as an existential thinker, and to link his methods with the theatre of cruelty and the theatre of the absurd.⁷ Webster our contemporary carries not much conviction, I think, but the attempt to see him that way at least suggests some helpful analogies and shows how limiting the standards brought against him have been.

When all this is said, however, Archer's main point (or Kingsley's) still seems to me worth considering. The qualifications Archer gives it (that Webster's lapses are sporadic, "from time to time") is important: the attack isn't wholly sweeping, for all its gusto, and can't be answered merely by proving it wrong in some instances. I can't think of a convincing answer to Archer's description of Bosola's part in the plot. He calls it "a glaring example of constructive inefficiency," and his explanation is telling:

this paid spy...is a member of the Duchess's household for three years, and watches her producing a surreptitious family, without ever discovering who the father is. Can there be the least doubt that Webster ought to have made the brothers leave their sister unwatched until scandalous rumours reached them? (p. 95)

Such questions would perhaps be less troubling in a theatre than Archer supposes, and obviously Webster needed to introduce Bosola into the action from the start. His sinister presence at the Duchess's court, the threat he poses and the acerbic note he contributes to the general harmony there, are more important than his role as Ferdinand's watchdog. But such reasoning only mitigates what must still be recognized as at best an indifference to plausible or economical plotting.⁸ Whatever imaginative webs the play may be weaving, its construction in this sort of thing is undeniably loose. Nor, on a more important matter, can I think Archer altogether wrong in finding the last act of the play an anti-climax:

With the death of the Duchess, the interest of the play is over; for Antonio is admittedly a shadowy character as to whose fate we are very indifferent; and though we are willing enough to see Ferdinand, the Cardinal, and Bosola punished, we could quite well dispense with that gratification. (p. 96)

Archer misses something important here. He is too concerned with

7 See, for example, M.C. Bradbrook, *English Dramatic Form* (London, 1964), p. 103; J.R. Mulryne, "The White Devil and The Duchess of Malfi," in *Stratford-upon-Avon Studies I: Jacobean Theatre* (London, 1960), pp. 148-152.

8 See, for example, Mulryne, p. 219.

plot and character, with the resolution of action and of moral questions, to see that Webster's interest lies elsewhere. For Webster, the interest of the play is not over with the death of the Duchess because it has never centred solely in her. In keeping the last act for the final deterioration of Ferdinand and the Cardinal, and for Bosola's too-tardy spiritual revolution, he sustains the play's concern with the processes of corruption. And the last act has its share of splendid things. Yet Archer is surely right to feel a loss of dramatic force after Act IV. The torment of the Duchess is too intense, her death has too much moral weight, and carries with it too much sympathy to allow in the audience an equivalent strength of response to the prolonged intrigues and reversals of the final scenes.

Points of this sort are often admitted by Webster's defenders, but lightly dismissed as trivial or mechanical. J.R. Mulryne, for example, criticizes Act V for the insertion of material not supporting the forward momentum of the action, the childish quality of some of its minor scenes and the excessively leisurely development of its main events. He adds that similar complaints could be directed against other parts of the play, but concludes that "the tragedy easily survives all these faults." It does so, he says, "only by virtue of the superb control of tone and atmosphere elsewhere" (p. 219). If I correctly take the force of that "only," it's meant to balance "easily" in the earlier part of the judgment. All the same, the claim of easy survival seems to me too easily made. What Mulryne calls "the agreed failure" of the play's final act demands more thorough accounting before the final balance is struck. And it's important to notice that the kind of loose construction to which this discussion has been pointing does more than relax tension at the wrong moments. It also lends itself to factitious heightening.

In his well known study of audience awareness, *Shakespeare's Comedies*, Bertrand Evans distinguishes three ways in which a dramatist can handle the relative understanding of the action possessed by the audience and the participants: "He can keep the audience less informed than the participants, equally aware with them, or more aware than they."⁹ The third way, Evans argues, is Shakespeare's; and he deduces so much of Shakespeare's power from this method that he is hard put to it to find merit in those plays (such as *Troilus and Cressida*) where Shakespeare does something different. I am not arguing for the innate superiority of one method, but it's worth noting that where certain crucial lapses occur in *The Duchess of Malfi* they do so partly because Webster has withheld information from the audience. Evans points out that the first way of

9 Bertrand Evans, *Shakespeare's Comedies* (Oxford, 1960), p. viii.

handling relative awareness — when the audience is less aware than the participants — has always been a favourite of mystery writers and authors of Gothic tales. In Webster's case it's not always easy to be sure just what the participants know even about their own intentions, but it's at least certain that the audience is being kept from knowing to increase dramatic suspense. That's not illegitimate in itself; it becomes so when the suspense proves unresolved, capricious, or when it works against the play's deeper effects. This is what I mean by factitious heightening.

An example of unresolved heightening occurs in the earlier part of the play, when the Duchess gives birth to her first child. In the various alarms of the night, Antonio despatches Delio to Rome on most urgent business, telling him "My life lies in your service" (II.ii.64). The nature of the service, and how or whether Delio performs it, we never learn. The action is simply discontinuous. It looks as though Webster felt the need in this scene to create as much suspense as he could, as much suggestion of bustling activity and looming danger, and vaguely projected some of this into the departure of Delio — later simply neglecting to take it up. The lapse, often noticed, may be small in itself, but as a sign of Webster's dramatic concern here it seems peculiarly revealing. It comes in a sequence of small agitated movements, none of them leading to much — Bosola's trick with the apricots, the rumour of an intruder in the Duchess's quarters, Antonio's stratagem about the theft of her jewels, the dire predictions of the horoscope. The play here seems whipped into a froth of excitement without substance. It's this, I think, rather than Ferdinand's delayed revenge, that makes this part of the play so unsatisfactory: it has lost sight of its own more serious purposes.

Still more deeply troubling instances occur in Act IV. In this act, according to Ralph Berry, there should be a wide separation of awareness between the Duchess and the audience. "The primary purpose of the wax works and the dead hand," Berry assures us, "is not to horrify us; it is to horrify the Duchess" (p. 19). This strikes me as a bit curious. Presumably it is Ferdinand's primary purpose to horrify the Duchess, but does that make it Webster's too? I shall argue later in this essay that Webster does something to alert the audience to the possibility of deception, distances the horror just sufficiently for them to endure it, yet not so much that they quite see through it. For unless he meant to horrify the spectators — not in the same degree nor in exactly the same way as the Duchess is horrified, but enough to arouse powerful emotion and to let them feel they share this emotion with her — Webster must stand convicted of a serious theatrical miscalculation. It seems very clear, however, that

horrifying the audience is part of his intention. After the Duchess has left the stage, Ferdinand explains at some length that the figures are made of wax. The explanation is wasted on Bosola, to whom it's ostensibly addressed, since he has stage-managed the whole business. It can only be the audience which needs to be told, and the explanation, whatever temporary relief it may bring them, amounts to an admission that the dramatist has played on the audience the same trick Ferdinand played on his sister.

The objection to this sort of thing is not, as Archer urged and as Berry supposes, to the use of waxworks *per se*, to mechanical aids or spectacle; nor is it to the arousal of horror as such. The real objection, I suggest, is to the gratuitous way in which the audience's feelings are played on. Berry attempts to argue against such an objection that the effects are acceptable if given a meaning, if moving the audience is not merely an end in itself. "One has to distinguish," he writes,

between means and ends, and relate the sensational event to the pattern of the play. So we can justify the killing of Edward II as an obscene but artistically legitimate comment on his vice; and the blinding of Gloucester as a necessary embodiment of the play's theme of seeing and blindness. (p. 18)

This is all very well in theory. It doesn't apply too well to Webster's play. A proper analogy would not be with the blinding of Gloucester, it would be with a scene in which the audience were told after the event that Cornwall had only pretended to put out his eyes.

What Ferdinand has told the audience, nobody tells the Duchess. In the following scene (IV.ii.), her despair is such that she fears for her sanity. Not the slightest hint appears that she knows of the deception, knows or even hopes that her younger children are still alive. It is inconceivable that she should not refer to the cruelty of the trick, or to her joy at finding the children alive, unless she remains deceived. She wishes to hold conference with the dead, but expresses no thought of the living. Her stoicism, her indifference to the torments and indignities leaped on her, we see to arise directly (although not solely) from her feeling that nothing precious in her life remains. And yet, at the moment when she is to be executed, Webster puts into her mouth these lines:

I pray thee look thou giv'st my little boy
Some syrup for his cold, and let the girl
Say her prayers, ere she sleep.

(IV.ii.200-202)

This fond motherly concern is no doubt meant — the author's intention seems unmistakable — to be infinitely touching. It is also inexplicable, on any realistic account of the Duchess's character and situation. Realism, of course, isn't to be expected: the inconsistency

of having the Duchess give instructions for the care of children she believes to be dead is only a more extreme form of the same thing as having her expect a child to pray before it has learned to prattle. Only two scenes earlier, she had told Bosola that though her children were not yet old enough to talk she intended that curses should be their language (II.v.111-4). Of their kind, such inconsistencies are meaningless. Webster's audience isn't to be thought of as keeping check of the details involved. But the Duchess's last-minute solicitude presents a special case, and critics have felt constrained to justify it. Sundry explanations have been offered: she suffers from an extreme lapse of memory; or the stage-direction about the wax figures should mention only one child, the eldest who is in Milan with Antonio; or the Duchess has gone into another room between scenes and found her younger children still alive.¹⁰ To a sceptical eye, these explanations range from the unsupported to the absurd, and that generally level-headed critics have felt impelled to make them is surely significant. It suggests to me that they were aware of responding to an effect at once powerful and unrelated, and were more concerned to legitimate than to analyse it. But such attempts to rationalize the effect are worse than absurd, they can only be made in an absence of respect for the tragic moment. If the Duchess has forgotten the death of her children she really has lost her wits, and all her noble calm and courage become unmeaning. The tragic effect is ruined. If she has not been induced to believe the younger children dead, her own contempt of life becomes puzzling, and less sympathetic, because she has still something very important to live for. If she has found the younger children alive in another room, and thus discovered the trick, would she not suspect that the rest of the display might be a trick too? On this hypothesis she would have reason to think Antonio and their first child alive, reason for hope rather than despair. It seems more sensible to recognize the lapse as Webster's, to admit that he is writing here for merely local effect. If the consequence of that admission is a judgment of the play as a whole nowhere near as damning as Archer's, nor is it as easily put by as recent critics suggest. T.B. Tomlinson, for example, argues that "mistakes, like the Duchess's 'syrup for my children' speech, are corrected by the clear-sightedness with which Webster constantly surprises" (p. 151). If, however, we ask what the mistake signifies—if, that is, we see it not as a mistake but rather as the expression of one strong impulsion in the play—then the idea of correction no longer seems tenable. Competing with other impulses—with, for one, the attempt to face the extremes of mental suffering with full conscious-

10 See Elizabeth M. Brennan's critical note to IV.i.55 s.d. in her edition, p. 11f.

ness, in the person of the Duchess — the play's tendency to work up gratuitous emotion, exemplified here, betrays a radical uncertainty. Uncertain of his attitude to the audience, uncertain of his own artistic purpose, Webster from time to time relaxes his grip on the subject to score a moment's sensation.

Some recent defenders of the play have argued spiritedly against the strictures of the realists, finding meaning and design where Archer and his successors could see only incoherence. Ralph Berry, for example, makes a thoughtful case for reconsidering Bosola's role. He regards Bosola's shape-shifting, his moral inconsistency and variety of poses, not as evidence of careless or confused characterization but as a deliberate and formalized portrait of a man struggling to come to terms with his own identity (p. 144). If this view seems too much in the manner of modern existential philosophy and psychology to attribute it to Webster, D.C. Gunby's has the opposite defect of making too specific Webster's reflection of the thought of his age. Gunby considers Act V a "carefully organized" demonstration, at all points, of "the guiding hand of providence."¹¹ Bosola, he argues, acts as the agent of providence: "He is one through whom God works both to save and to destroy" (p. 202). Antonio's death, which to Bosola seems a catastrophic mistake (and to some of us an almost equally dreadful bit of melodrama), is really meaningful. "Bosola dies confused and lost," but we know better. Interpreted by the doctrines of the Church of England, his various perfidies and inadvertencies prove him to have been all along "the unwitting instrument in assuring the triumph" (p. 203) of the better cause. G.K. Hunter makes a different sort of case, free from the sorts of philosophical or theological constraints evident in the other two. For him, Bosola (like the rest of the cast) is at once self-divided and divided from others: "mind is no longer in contact with mind through the common bond of shared presuppositions."¹² Webster's construction by its very discontinuities brilliantly creates a picture, otherwise incommunicable, of a shattered and self-divided world:

Webster organizes action, no less than words, so that the natural progression from intention to conclusion is lost in the mist of misinterpretation which separates man from man. (p. 261)

These arguments bring out at least the possibility of kinds of interest in the play which it would be a pity to deny. If I find them not very convincing, it's not because I fail to see a certain amount of

¹¹ D.C. Gunby, "The Duchess of Malfi: a Theological Approach," in *Mermaid Critical Commentaries: John Webster*, pp. 201-2.

¹² G.K. Hunter, from "English Folly and Italian Vice: John Webster," repr. in *John Webster: a Critical Anthology*, p. 260.

design in the play. It is rather that I think they make too schematic and complete what Webster left as a mixture of half-formed insights and theatrical devices. The fallacy of imitative form comes in handy when critics want to present inchoate visions as visions of chaos. Modern criticism has been adept at finding patterns in Webster (as where not?), but the recognition of Webster's opportunism, of the impure motives within his work, leaves a shadow of suspicion over all such interpretations. That is its real critical importance: without leading us to oversimple condemnation, as it did with Archer, it cautions us against a correspondingly oversubtle justification of every apparent weakness in the play.

II

Between these alternatives, there is room to consider Webster differently. I have suggested that he should be seen as veering uneasily between unreconciled impulses, wanting on the one hand above all to move, amaze, or frighten the audience, wanting on the other to realize his subject to the full and apprehend it in imaginative wholeness. The disclosure of the artificial figures provides a good example. The scene is carefully engineered to create a maximum of shock and dismay in the audience. On a darkened stage, Ferdinand holds out to his sister a hand for her to kiss. She naturally believes it to be his, and is surprised by its coldness. The audience is almost as little suspicious as she, for they have been given no hint of his ghastly stratagem. At the moment when she cries out in horror, he calls for lights, and the audience simultaneously sees and hears her declare that he has left with her a dead man's hand. Immediately, the traverse is drawn to reveal the bodies. The whole action is calculated step by step to reach a crescendo, and can achieve it only by surprise. Webster couldn't afford to let the audience know Ferdinand's plans in advance: that would have sacrificed what he evidently saw as the play's most tremendous theatrical coup. Yet for the sake of that effect he has been obliged to sacrifice something finer and more interesting. The scene is composed of splendid ironies which an unadverted audience is almost bound to miss and the scene's onrush of emotion hardly allows to be seen in retrospect. This is a difficult matter to discuss with certainty: just what complexities a theatre audience can take in, what it intuits or apprehends subliminally, how it combines retrospection and premonition with attention to the immediacies of the ongoing action, can't be laid down by rule. But if Webster had wanted the spectators to feel the full force of irony in this scene he needed only to allow them a glimpse of Ferdinand's intentions. The

ironies are there rewardingly enough for a reader (or a spectator the second time around), but in a mere reading (or repeated viewing) the whole paraphernalia of horrors falls coldly on the senses. Webster can't have it both ways.

When Ferdinand tells his sister

I come to seal my peace with you

(IV.i.43)

she understands it, as he means her to, as an offer of reconciliation. His second, private, meaning is that he wants his own peace, release from his jealous torments: he has come to have her killed. When he holds towards her a hand to which, he tells her, she has vowed much love, she again feels no suspicion. He intends that moments later she shall suppose it torn from Antonio's mutilated corpse, and his words are secretly loaded with bitter reproach:

the ring upon't
You gave.

(IV.i.44-5)

She thinks it a ring given by her to him. It has been suggested that in reality it is her wedding ring,¹³ which the Cardinal has torn from her finger, but that can't be Ferdinand's point. He wants her to suppose, when the bodies are revealed, that it is indeed a wedding ring — not hers but Antonio's (and the audience can be counted on to recall the scene, unknown to Ferdinand, in which she gave it). This anticipation supplies the next lines with the cruelest of his double meanings. Each phrase sounds to her (as it will do to the audience) a promise of renewed love and care. He is building up her trust and hope to the limits, before the ultimate betrayal. The audience, which moments before had heard him curse her, may be more wary; but the audience has learned how abruptly his moods can change and lacks the necessary foreknowledge to see through his lulling words. Only at the Duchess's horrified outcry does his duplicity become manifest, and then, as horror mounts on horror, attention is drawn forward: the audience can't be expected to retain enough of his speech to realize its true intent. Each phrase which had sounded so reassuring was also meant by Ferdinand as a threat, a savage prediction of his planned ferocity:

I will leave this ring to you, for a love-token:
And the hand, as sure as the ring: and do not doubt
But you shall have the heart too. When you need a friend
Send it to him that ow'd it: you shall see
Whether he can aid you.

(IV.i.47-51)

13 Brennan, p. 64.

SYDNEY STUDIES

It is all an elaborate and deadly joke. He is leaving the hand with her, literally; equally literally, he proposes to have the heart out of Antonio's body (he has asked for it once before — see III.v.34-6). He intends her to feel how isolated she is, friendless, utterly bereft.

In themselves these lines seem to me very fine. Their equivocal menace expresses with precision and economy the nature of Ferdinand's hatred, expresses it more persuasively than his raging because here it is so calculated, purposive, controlled. He feels that he has been defied, and wants her to feel his power:

do not doubt
But you shall have the heart.

He feels that he has been supplanted, and wants her to feel the error of allying herself to another:

you shall see
Whether he can aid you.

Yet in the dramatic context the force of the passage goes almost unused. Irony is subordinated to surprise.

In a notable essay on the second scene of Act IV, Inga-Stina Ekeblad has argued that the masque of madmen inserted into the scene "is part of a larger structural unit — a more extensive masque."¹⁴ This extended masque is Webster's scene itself, its realistic representation of the Duchess's anguish and death counter-pointing a more conventional structure with the entry of the masquers, their dances and revels, the intrusion of disguised figures, the presentation of gifts, and so on. Miss Ekeblad shows, convincingly, that the scene is constructed so that dramatic reality and masque interact, reality following the pattern of the masque "in the manner of a poetic analogy" (p. 220). What she demonstrates so well with respect to this scene, however, is itself part of something more extensive. Through much of the play there is a similar interaction between the represented events and theatrical convention. Asked at the end how Antonio came by his death, Bosola answers

In a mist: I know not how;
Such a mistake as I have often seen
In a play.

(V.v.93-95)

This isn't quite the familiar use of theatrical metaphor that it may seem: the point, I take it, is that in life itself there is something as arbitrary, as inaccessible to explanation, as in the most unthinking

14 Inga-Stina Ekeblad, "The 'Impure Art' of John Webster," repr. in *John Webster: a Critical Anthology*, p. 205.

conventionalities of art. The play involves a partial dissolution of the barrier between reality and its imitation in art, and this occurs at two levels. As Miss Ekeblad examines it, the process takes place at the level of Webster's own creations but there is a second level, within the structure Webster creates, at which the characters, especially Ferdinand and Bosola, echo their maker's art and seek to recreate the reality they inhabit. They construct a play of their own devising, impose it on the credulity of the Duchess, then transform it into veritable reality by performing it in grim earnest, and find themselves overtaken by the roles they have chosen to play.

Webster's technique in Act IV may be explained by contrast with the familiar device of the play within the play. Where that depends for its effectiveness upon the audience's full awareness, and clearly distinguishes the levels of reality, Webster's peculiar tactic is to keep the audience in the theatre as uncertain of the distinction as are the victims of deception on the stage. He shows art (Ferdinand's fearsome creation) overwhelming reality in a brutal enactment of the wishes it projects. This is to put in another way my earlier statement that the same trick played on the Duchess is played on the audience. When the artificial figures are displayed, Bosola, identifying the dead man's hand as Antonio's, announces it thus:

Look you: here's the piece from which 'twas tane.

(IV.i.56)

Understood one way, "piece" falls on the ear with intolerable coldness; nothing could more indifferently suggest the lifelessness of the figure. Understood a shade differently, it hints at the artifice of the whole tableau. Then he says

He doth present you this sad spectacle

(IV.i.57)

where both "present" and "spectacle" hint at an element of theatrical unreality. The Duchess in her immediate response, though fully persuaded of the authenticity of what she sees, underlines the equivocal suggestions by calling the spectacle "an excellent property for a tyrant" (IV.ii.65-6). Further on, she sums up her despair by making the analogy explicit:

I account this world a tedious theatre,
For I do play a part in't 'gainst my will.

(IV.i.83-4)

Her sense of an enforced role persists into the next scene, when she tells Cariola

...Fortune seems only to have her eyesight,
To behold my tragedy.

(IV.ii.36-7)

SYDNEY STUDIES

Here, still, the expression has for her the force of analogy: believing that her husband and children are dead, she sees herself as one forced to play her part to the end. For the audience, the terms of the comparison have fused. It has been aware, since the end of the previous scene when Ferdinand came on stage to crow "she's plagu'd in art," that although her anguish is utterly real its cause is delusion. She remains deluded to the very instant of death, returning from darkness just long enough for Bosola to relieve her of that deception and replace it by another:

Yes, Madam, he is living,
The bodies you saw were but feign'd statues;
He's reconciled to your brothers: the Pope had wrought
The atonement. (IV.ii.344-7)

This is to me one of the most troubling moments in the play. Bosola means it kindly, and goes on to castigate his guilty conscience; but I can't think this a moment for us to be more concerned with Bosola than with his victim, and I could wish that Webster had allowed the Duchess to die quite undeceived. It may be that the false consolation Bosola offers should be felt as an inadvertently cruel irony — that much at least it proves in the event. But it looks very much more like another attempt, on the playwright's part, at pathos, and I hope it won't seem unfeeling to say that pathos here is indecent. Once more, Webster relaxes his grip on the subject to work upon the feelings of the audience: it's as if he can trust neither the audience nor himself fully to face the bleakness of his tragic vision.

III

When Macbeth says "To know my deed, 'twere best not know myself" he recognizes the disjunction that shapes his tragedy. Between his familiar sense of what he is and the self revealed by his action there is a gap his imagination dare not cross. Shakespeare here makes explicit a kind of insight which informs Webster's handling of evil in *The Duchess of Malfi* but never comes to full consciousness in any of the characters. Bosola comes closest to realizing it when, after the waxworks display, he refuses to see the Duchess again in his own shape. This, however, is neither direct self-analysis nor recoil from unbearable self-knowledge. It's from her eyes rather than his own that he seeks concealment. To see in his adoption of a succession of roles a conscious attempt to escape from himself, or find his true self,¹⁵ or reconcile his contradictory impulses,¹⁶ would give to his part

¹⁵ Berry, p. 141.

¹⁶ Michael Best, "A Precarious Balance: Structure in *The Duchess of Malfi*," in *Shakespeare and Some Others*, ed. A. Brissenden (Adelaide, 1976), p. 173.

an awareness I think misplaced. The symbolic function of his several impersonations is all that really matters, and the question of how his real self is related to these assumed roles doesn't occur to him. The attention of the play is directed elsewhere.

Bosola comes to no turning point, no moment of self-discovery, and to the end of the play the motives he is made to express remain not merely unclear but ad hoc. After the death of the Duchess, sorry and guilty for his part in it, yet angry and disappointed because of Ferdinand's refusal to reward him, he posts to Milan resolved to enact "somewhat" worthy of his dejection. In Milan, he offers to serve the Cardinal and is commissioned to kill Antonio. Learning through Julia of the Cardinal's complicity in the murder of the Duchess, he determines to help Antonio to safety. Overhearing the Cardinal's plan to kill him, he expresses some moral indignation, strikes first, in the dark, killing Antonio by mistake; hunts down and stabs the Cardinal; is stabbed in turn by Ferdinand; and in a final gesture gives Ferdinand his death wound. Asked by Roderigo how all this came about, he says it is revenge for a strange assortment of grievances: the death of the Duchess; the death of Antonio (by Bosola's own hand); the neglect of his deserts by the Arragonian brothers; and the death of that unlikely creature he'd had no scruple in using, lustful Julia. In this bundling together of reasons Webster seems to me to show some concern to tidy the play up at its end, but no very formed sense just here of Bosola as a character and no great interest in expounding (or allowing him to find) a psychological rationale for his actions.

I make this point not because I think it a defect in the play but to suggest that it isn't quite the sort of play a large and growing critical literature would make it appear. The play presents characters who are sharply individuated, complex personalities, actuated by different values and attitudes, and capable of metamorphosing (as Ferdinand notably does) from one mental condition to another by the unfolding of tendencies present from the start. But the tragedy is built up from oppositions which appear as *given*; it explores no underlying causes. As J.L. Calderwood has justly observed, a certain haziness of motivation may be deliberately built in: although the Duke and the Cardinal offer elaborate reasons why their sister should not remarry, their arguments have no logical grounds and their motives remain unclear.¹⁷ Of course, it's possible for critics to extrapolate, and both Bosola and Ferdinand have been subject to interesting analyses; but it's worth noting that the Cardinal has an

17 James L. Calderwood, "The Duchess of Malfi: Styles of Ceremony," repr. in *John Webster: a Critical Anthology*, p. 268.

equal share in their crimes, without the histrionics, and Webster evidently thought it not worthwhile to let him offer any excuses at all: his wickedness is simply a datum. No character in the play is prone to the kind of nervous inward self-exploration, tracing the secret sources of action, to be found for instance in *The Changeling* or, differently, in *Hamlet*; and despite (it's tempting to say, because of) the scores of apothegms studding the play, no character is afforded a profound moral illumination.

Instead of Macbeth's terrible sense of self-division, the evildoers in *The Duchess of Malfi* perform an endless series of displacements. Different from each other as they are, the Duke, the Cardinal and Bosola are alike in an essential respect. All three are afflicted by melancholy, a despair for themselves that turns into a hunger for the destruction of others. Fear of death becomes loathing of the flesh because it is mortal. Revulsion from the body and its clamorous appetites turns into contempt for the enjoyments of others. A profound conviction of their own sinfulness transforms itself into a desire to punish, to expiate in the sufferings of others the guilt of their own thoughts and actions, to create in the external world the hell of their own inward suffering. All of this happens unconsciously: they are vouchsafed no insight into the process, for themselves. But Webster's insight is very clear and conscious, and he makes it explicit in the play. It is given to the Cardinal to utter: he can see in another what he fails to see in himself. When Ferdinand stumbles upon the idea (though with a characteristic distortion, the Cardinal instantly repudiates it. Ferdinand says

I do think
It is some sin in us, Heaven doth revenge
By her.

(II.v.65-7)

In typical fashion, he inverts the matter: their own sin, in his mind, remains vague, the Duchess's is specific, and he projects on to Heaven the revenge (the self-punishment) he craves. But he has come close enough to the bone to draw from the Cardinal a total refusal to comprehend what elsewhere he has understood full well. To Ferdinand he replies

Are you stark mad?

(II.v.67)

but in the previous scene he had already explained precisely what Ferdinand is groping towards. The Cardinal can't make the connection with himself, but there is good reason to credit Webster with the irony of making this most rational and calculating of his villains unwittingly anatomize himself. When Julia has become his mistress she

asks naturally for the usual reassurances in this kind of situation:

You have prevailed with me
Beyond my strongest thoughts: I would not now
Find you inconstant.

(II.iv.6-8)

The Cardinal replies:

Do not put thyself
To such a voluntary torture, which proceeds
Out of your own guilt.

(II.iv.8-10)

She is puzzled, but he explains:

You fear
My constancy, because you have approv'd
Those giddy and wild turnings in yourself.

(II.iv.10-12)

Later events prove this true of Julia: her turning to Bosola, an indiscretion giddy and wild if ever one was, costs her her life; and it's a grim but incidental irony that by then the Cardinal's constancy has worn thin and he is looking for ways to be rid of her. Her fear of betrayal is as well founded as Ferdinand's fear that the Duchess will wish to marry again and the Cardinal's surmise that she might do so secretly. Yet the Cardinal is also right to call it a voluntary torture: whatever his inconstancy might be, Julia's jealousy arises from her own feelings of insecurity, her own bad conscience. In the same way, Ferdinand's possessive repression of his sister reflects his own self-suppression, his sense of some sin in himself. Critics have made much of the suggestion that Ferdinand is driven by an incestuous passion for the Duchess. I would agree that there is a suggestion of the kind. But to make of it the central explanation of his behaviour seems a distortion, exaggeration of a single symptom in a malady much more diffuse. His torments, and the torments he inflicts on his sister, proceed out of a guilt lying so far back that neither he nor we could locate its origins. Webster shows no interest in retrospective analysis: his concern is with the complexity of the given, with the process by which Ferdinand's condition (however arrived at) works itself out. The Cardinal in his own way goes through the same process. The least thoroughly created and most conventionally conceived of the three, he shows fewer signs of the process than Ferdinand or Bosola, but he too is tormented by a guilt he can't allow to become specific. What he fears to recognize in himself, his imagination externalizes as a nightmare thing armed with a rake.

Voluntary torture: the phrase perfectly answers to our sense of something factitious in the melancholy of Bosola and the Arragonian

brothers. Their sufferings seem at once genuine and wilful, self-inflicted and indulged, whipped-up as if to compensate by their intensity for what they lack in conviction. In the Cardinal, this can seem like ordinary hypocrisy, as when he complains that the Duchess makes religion her riding hood. Hypocritical of course it is, but more than that: it is in keeping with the process the whole play dramatizes that he should feel a genuine indignation when his sister appears to do in a small way what he does constantly and in greater ways. Ferdinand is like the rascal beadle, lashing in his sister the hot lusts of his own tormented imagination. What he mistakes for righteous anger is the excitement of imagining her sins, and when he seems deliberately to be working up his rage he is really — or it would be more adequate to say, he is also — indulging his enflamed desires. I am trying to suggest that in the furnace of his mind rage and desire have fused — he is not satisfying one in the name of the other, he burns with a single passion. That passion seeks a double consummation, expressed in the superb equivocation of his outburst:

Go to, mistress!
 'Tis not your whore's milk, that shall quench my wild-fire
 But your whore's blood.

(II.v.47-9)

“Quench” — there's no need to spell out the double entendre, but some stress should be given, perhaps, to the sheer physicality of the image.

One important quirk the three men have in common is their generalized contempt for women. This shouldn't be mistaken for the conventional masculine assumption of superiority. It masquerades as that, but goes much deeper. They transfer to women all that they fear or despise in themselves, and in the mortal condition; and they transfer to the Duchess, bring to a focus in her image, all that their attitude to women in general has accumulated. Ferdinand and the Cardinal do this explicitly.

Cardinal: Curs'd creature!
 Unequal nature, to place women's hearts
 So far upon the left side.

Ferdinand: Foolish men,
 That e'er will trust their honour in a bark,
 Made of so slight, weak bulrush, as is woman,
 Apt every minute to sink it.

(II.v.31-6)

Bosola's example is more subtle. His railing against the old lady early in the play is no irrelevant intrusion: it is a rehearsal for the Duchess's death scene. The brothers turn the Duchess into an ab-

straction — woman — and so escape the necessity to consider her as herself, a real person deserving of their love and understanding. Bosola moves from a merely symbolic confrontation — the old lady is not a person at all, to him — to a real encounter with someone whose unique selfhood he can't deny. When he attempts to make his broad easy contempt for woman (for, indeed, no less than human life) specific to the Duchess, the reality of her presence, and above all her death, forces him to abandon his pose. It comes to him not as a moral discovery, not as anything like a conscious recognition of his error, but simply as a reversal of feeling. It's as if from under his long refusal to admit to himself the goodness and beauty of life, from under that life-hatred which is his refuge from failure, some inextinguishable instinct emerges into the daylight.

He comes to her significantly disguised as an old man, and opens his attack in the same terms he had turned upon the old lady. Then, it had been the horror of mortal corruption which he sought to enforce on unwilling ears:

Though we are eaten up of lice, and worms,
And though continually we bear about us
A rotten and dead body, we delight
To hide it in rich tissue. . .

(II.i.59-62)

Now, he would go through the identical motions:

Thou art a box of worm seed, at best, but a salvatory of green mummy:
what's this flesh? a little cruded milk . . .

(IV.ii.123-5)

The Duchess responds, however, not only by insisting upon her personal identity — “Am not I thy Duchess?...I am Duchess of Malfi still” — but with the gaiety of an unbreakable spirit — “Let me be a little merry” — that firmly places this “dismal preparation,”

This talk, fit for a charnel.

(IV.ii.161-2)

When she is dying, it is to that spirit in her that he calls, awakening too late to the love of life in himself which she represents:

She stirs, here's life.

How much that means! Not simply — though of course in the forefront of his mind — that there is yet life in her body; as well, that for him she *is* life, that he holds in his arms the embodiment of what value life can ever have for him. His cry isn't that of a lover: it's rather that he identifies in her (as her brothers do too) all the vitality he desires and shrinks from:

Return, fair soul, from darkness, and lead mine
Out of this sensible hell.

(IV.ii.336-7)

The mechanism working through Bosola, Ferdinand, and the Cardinal, is a kind of projection: they are enabled not to know themselves by casting out their devils and having them enter the Duchess. Ferdinand makes this process take place in the real world, not merely in his mind, by forcing her into a drama of damnation.¹⁸ His first imagining had been of Hell itself:

I would have their bodies
 Burnt in a coal-pit, with the vantage stopp'd
 That their curs'd smoke might not ascend to Heaven:
 Or dip the sheets they lie in, in pitch or sulphur...

(II.v.67-70)

This is beyond his means. In Act IV the torments he devises for her are spiritual: to mortify her by degrees; to drive her to madness; and, by bringing her to despair, to damn her soul. Throughout this process he guards himself from knowledge of what he is doing. He sees her only in darkness, and acts through intermediaries — Bosola, servants, executioners. He is a dramatist whose imagination slakes itself in the wildest possible effects, but he can give it such complete liberty of action only by dissociation from his sense of himself. When it is over, he tells Bosola, who has played out for him his outrageous fantasies,

For thee, (as we observe in tragedies
 That a good actor many times is curs'd
 For playing a villain's part) I hate thee for't.

(IV.ii.281-4)

Thereafter, his refuge from self-knowledge is in madness; but between the process of projection and the final onset of madness there is this lucid interval. For a few moments he is able to know both his deed and himself, when Bosola forces him to look at the reality his imagination has produced:

Bosola: Fix your eye here.
Ferdinand: Constantly.
Bosola: Do you not weep?

(IV.ii.255)

It is perhaps the most curious irony in this ironical play that its most celebrated line should express the true outcome of an intended effect:

Cover her face. Mine eyes dazzle: she di'd young.

18 For extended treatment of a similar argument, see Calderwood's very interesting essay.