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Feminine Endings in *The Duchess of Malfi*

Ladan Niayesh

AUTHOR'S NOTE

The final version of this article particularly benefited from exchanges with Anne-Marie Miller-Blaise, whom the author would like to thank here.

- 1 The starting point of this article was exchanges with colleagues and students over the many metrical irregularities of *The Duchess of Malfi*. Irregularity appears as early as the play's first line, "You are welcome to your country, dear Antonio", which at best scans as an iambic pentameter with the addition of an extra weak syllable if we decide to contract the first two words as "You're". Technically, that extra weak syllable at the end of the line is referred to as a "feminine ending", an appellation which according to the *New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* first appeared in the troubadour poetry of the fourteenth century. Originally deriving from the declension of adjectives in Occitan, the feminine and masculine endings—the latter corresponding to an extra stressed syllable at the end of a line—survived the decay of inflectional systems in Old French and Modern English, so that their current uses in prosody appear not to be in any way determined by grammatical genders.
- 2 Despite this opening caveat, it is worth noticing that feminine endings frequently appear in early modern literary versification in contexts of indeterminacy and hesitation, sometimes with specifically gendered implications. The case of Shakespeare's Sonnet 20—"A woman's face with nature's own hand painted"—comes to mind, with its systematic recourse to feminine ending on all fourteen lines of the poem. Hovering between a masculine and a feminine status, that extra syllable could be interpreted as the additional member that makes the "fair youth" male, while the fact that this should be a weak syllable somehow unmans him. Equally connoting unmanning and weakness of resolve, the feminine endings of the first four lines of Hamlet's "To be or not to be" monologue in

the play that bears his name can be read as a gesturing towards the feminine, for a male hero whose next test of resolve will be a confrontation with Ophelia at the end of the same monologue.

- 3 The overall frame in which Hamlet's resolution is tried is that of the tragedy, that often very patriarchal pattern in drama in which the violence of the final bloodshed frequently connotes the forceful penetration of a female or feminised body. This pattern is most apparent in tragedies explicitly involving the sacrifice of a female heroine, such as *Romeo and Juliet* in which Juliet stabs herself with Romeo's phallic dagger, or *Antony and Cleopatra* where the death of Cleopatra bitten on her breast by the snake is accompanied by such orgasmic exclamations on her part as "Husband, I come" and "O Antony!".
- 4 If such is the dominantly patriarchal frame of a theatrical medium primarily written by men and in the early modern period acted entirely by men as well, we can wonder what space is left to feminine agency in general, and in Webster's play in particular. Is there any such thing as an independent feminine pattern outside being—as in prosodic terminology—a mere weak counterpart to the male agent that gives the stress and leads the way? My contention is that a paradoxical space does open up for the feminine principle in the very course of its elimination and its ending. What I want to explore here is that space of the feminine ending: to what extent is the ending different for the women of the play? Why is it different? And what does that difference also tell us about the scenario retained for the men?
- 5 In two critical works written within a few years' interval—"The Space of the Feminine in *The Duchess of Malfi*" and "*The Duchess of Malfi: Tragedy and Gender*"—Judith Haber explores the play's games of proliferation that, she underlines, go against our conventional expectations of a neatly defined tragic arc of action, that is to say one that would single out an exemplary hero or an exemplary pair of heroes and climax in their violent deaths. Haber considers such a type of tragedy "inescapably masculinist and aristocratic—and wholly fantasmatic" (Haber 2010, 237). That view of action is represented in Webster's play by the champions of patriarchy, chief among whom Duke Ferdinand, exhibiting as early in the play as Act 1, scene 1 the phallic symbol of his "father's poniard" (1.1.321) to threaten the Duchess if she attempts to escape the law of the father by remarrying. This fantasy of virile violent action accompanies Ferdinand throughout, yet always remains a fantasy, never fulfilled by him. For example, when first learning through Bosola that his sister is remarried, Ferdinand's reaction is a fantasy of violent invasion of her land, a symbolic rape of sorts: "Would I could be one, / That I might toss her palace 'bout her ears, / Root up her goodly forests, blast her meads, / And lay her general territory as waste / As she hath done her honors!" (2.5. 17-21). Later his intrusion into her bedroom in the mirror scene carries further this fantasy of violent penetration of her innermost self. On that instance too, he exhibits the phallic poniard, exhorting her to "Die then, quickly!" (3.2.71), a line that plays on the early modern double-entendre involved in "dying", that is to say falling dead and having an orgasm. But neither the Duchess's sexuality, nor her death follow such phallic, assertive and immediate linearity. The closest Ferdinand will come to his virile ideal of drawing blood quickly and definitively is the fantasised battlefield where he sees himself on horseback—in a fashion recalling the precedent of Shakespeare's Richard III—in his last moments in the play when he attacks his own brother (5.5.46ff).
- 6 Opposed to that violently virile logic of tragic fulfilment, what Haber calls "the space of the feminine" (Haber 1997) in *The Duchess of Malfi* is all but linear. That space of the

feminine is perhaps best emblematised in the play by the reproductive interiority that the Duchess's own rounded body provides as she undergoes the cycle of her multiple pregnancies. Hers is a space of generation and life, which she opens up within herself to resist the homicidal impulses of her brother. The rotundity associated with her body extends to the safe space she tries to build for herself and her beloved Antonio with her arms as she embraces him: "All discord, without this circumference, / Is only to be pitied and not feared" (1.1.456). This passage in particular and the rounded shape she creates with her arms clearly go against the linear logic of tragedy and the standard cathartic emotions associated with it, that is to say pity and fear. Here, fear is denied while pity is pushed out of the circular theatrical frame defined by the Duchess for her play-within-the-play with Antonio. The same circularity is evoked with the round, hollow shape of the ring she puts on Antonio's finger in the wooing scene (1.1.403). In that instance, the sexual associations of the image recall the womb into which she is ready to take Antonio.

- 7 All along the play, the logic of daggers and violent penetration will be on the side of the self-proclaimed and failing heroes of this would-be revenge tragedy, from Ferdinand to Bosola and even the Cardinal. Theirs is the fantasy of cutting through flesh and fragmenting bodies. The best materialisation of such tendencies in the play is the dead man's hand that Ferdinand gives to the Duchess in 4.1, or the dug up human leg he carries over his shoulder in his wolf-madness: "One met the Duke 'bout midnight in a lane / Behind St Mark's Church, with the leg of a man / Upon his shoulder" (4.2.13-15). Accordingly, all male figures dying in the play die of a violent stab shattering their physical integrities: Bosola mistakenly stabs Antonio in the dark (5.4); Ferdinand wounds both Bosola and the Cardinal, completing in that the stabbing work already started by Bosola; and Bosola stabs Ferdinand in return (5.4). All this produces a reflexive pattern in which the male protagonists mirror each other in their deaths. In her suffering, the Duchess briefly considers a similar manner of body-shattering death for herself: "Like to a rusty o'ercharged cannon, / Shall I never fly in pieces?" (3.5.101-102). But such a process of violent fragmentation will accompany neither her death nor those of any of the other female victims of the play. Indeed, Julia dies poisoned (5.2), while the Duchess and Cariola are strangled (4.2). All three thus keep their physical integrities in death. The Duchess's body, which was so much fetishised and objectified by Ferdinand, does not get desecrated by the men, but is "bestow(ed) upon (her) women" according to the practice of the time and her explicit dying wish (4.2.215). If the deaths of the men in this play follow a scenario of sudden fragmentation, the scenario for the ending is clearly different for the women. Contrary to the men, they keep their insides to themselves, following what Lisa Hopkins considers to be a feminine "ethos of interiority" characteristic of the Websterean heroine (Hopkins 131). Though the wedding ring earlier presented by the Duchess to Antonio is replaced in the scene of stranglings by an executioner's noose, the round space of the feminine is still there, even if it is no longer a space for living and procreating, but one for dying, as is shown by the exchange between Cariola and her executioner: Cariola: "I am contracted / To a young gentleman." Executioner: (*showing the noose*) "Here's your wedding ring." (4.2.233-4)
- 8 Comparing these two sets of deaths—men's deaths by stabbing and dismembering, and women's deaths more internalised, through either strangling or poisoning—we find two gendered patterns repeating themselves. Both are patterns of loss of life and the physical self, but like the classical gendered myths of Narcissus and Echo, they follow different logics in their processes of reflexive self-destruction.

- 9 Living “in a culture that privileges the visual sense over all others”, writes Peter Doyle in *Echo and Reverb* (Doyle 39), we tend to focus on Narcissus and his visually reflexive exploits, neglecting, rather like the mythological character himself does, the alienated aural complementarity of Echo, that seemingly weaker female presence that remains, howbeit in disembodied form, while Narcissus falls over himself like Duke Ferdinand over his own shadow in Webster’s play (5.2), and disappears in the water without leaving a trace.
- 10 Reminders of the Narcissus pattern follow the whole trajectory of the male protagonists in *The Duchess of Malfi*. Early examples include Bosola’s comparison of the Aragonian brothers to “plum trees that grow crooked over standing pools” (1.1.48-9), as if they were grotesquely bending to watch their own images. At the other end of the play, we find the Cardinal similarly looking at his own reflection in the fishponds of his garden and seeing a distorted version of himself armed with a rake, which ironically recalls the crosier of his episcopal office: “When I look into the fishponds in my garden, / Methinks I see a thing armed with a rake / That seems to strike at me.” (5.5.5-7). That murderous, self-destructing other is of course soon to materialise in the shapes of Ferdinand and Bosola in the same scene as all three kill each other in the scuffle, definitely leaving no echo behind, as is confirmed in Bosola’s last speech in the play: “We are only like dead walls or vaulted graves / That, ruined, yields no echo.” (5.5.95-6) Having lost both their physical and moral integrities, they offer no intact surface capable of sending back any message and resonating with us in their pointless deaths.
- 11 Quite different is the Echo pattern, both in the myth and in Webster’s play. The myth is summed up in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, as quoted in the 1567 Golding translation available to Webster and his contemporaries: “Her body pines to skin and bone and waxeth wondrous bare. / The blood doth vanish into the air from out of all her veins, / And nought is left but her voice and bones. The voice yet still remains; / Her bones, they say, were turned to stones” (Ovid 107).
- 12 Famously and unconventionally dying a full act before the end of the play bearing her name, the Duchess is that undying voice that keeps resonating both inside the plot and with us up to the end. A brief resurrection at the end of the strangling scene helps bring in additional notes to the character and enriches the overall impression she leaves behind. Although dying before everyone else, she is given more dying line options than all of them: she is “Duchess of Malfi still” in her public persona (4.2.131), the housekeeping wife worried about her children’s cough syrup and bedtime prayers (“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”, 4.2.190-2), the lover calling out “Antonio!” as she briefly comes back to life (4.2.333), and the voice of the penitent asking for “Mercy!” at the last (4.2.338). Or is it the last? Even as she comes back as a mere echo sending back Antonio’s words to him in the ruined abbey scene (5.3), she manages to provide an ironically modified or reinforced meaning at every word uttered by Antonio, such as his “Thou art a dead thing” that she sends back to him with a change of subject into object. Finally, her last word in the play will be neither the earthly-minded exclamation “Antonio!”, nor the eternity-minded “Mercy!”, but the still ironically proliferating “more” in “Never see her more” (5.3.43).
- 13 See her more, we definitely do not, except in the vague and fleeting light that Antonio discerns over her tomb, but reverberations of her being remain with us and with the characters up to the end, in that vast echo chamber that the play bearing her name

actually is. Even the very last name and presence mentioned in the play, that is to say a personified Nature, is conjured up as an explicitly female reference through the feminine pronoun traditionally associated to it: “Nature doth nothing so great for great men / As when she’s pleased to make them lords of truth” (5.5.116-17).

- 14 Following the logic of the round shape of the Duchess’s pregnant body teeming with life, the undying echoes that she leaves behind while her father’s tragic line is cut with her brothers’ deaths, suggest that the final word, or at least the final single syllable staying behind, is definitely on the side of the feminine. This ultimately gives us a paradoxical play in which the very last line—“Which nobly, beyond death, shall crown the end”—still explores the residual presence of what like Echo refuses to die, a line that technically ends on the word “end”, but is still reaching “beyond death”.

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ABSTRACTS

This article takes as its starting point a convention in prosody that stylistically pushes the feminine and femininity to the margin of the poetic line and excludes them from the metrical norm. Extending that principle to the play, it offers a reflection on the way endings are made distinct for female and male protagonists, and thereby paradoxically opens a space for the feminine and femininity within the text, even if that space can only be reached in loss and death.

Cette réflexion part d’un point de prosodie qui d’emblée fait stylistiquement de la femme et du féminin l’élément surnuméraire poussé en bout de vers et exclu de la norme métrique. Appliquant ce principe à la pièce toute entière, l’article s’intéresse à la manière dont celle-ci aborde la fin du principe féminin et de la féminité, et comment elle établit une distinction entre la mort au féminin et un modèle masculin de mise à mort. C’est par ce moyen, conclut-il, que la

pièce affirme paradoxalement une spécificité et une voix féminines, même si ce n'est que dans la tragédie et la mort.

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Keywords: Echo, Feminine, Gender, Masculine, Narcissus, Patriarchy, Prosody, Tragedy, The Duchess of Malfi, John Webster

Mots-clés: Écho, Féminin, Genre, Masculin, Narcisse, Patriarcat, Prosodie, Tragédie, La Duchesse d'Amalfi, John Webster

AUTHOR

LADAN NIAYESH

Université Paris Diderot

LARCA UMR 8225

Ladan Niayesh is Professor of English Studies at the University of Paris Diderot – Paris 7 and a member of LARCA (UMR 8225, CNRS). Her research interests are mainly in the areas of alterity and travel in early modern drama and other literary forms. She is the author of *Aux Frontières de l'humain : Figures du cannibalisme dans le théâtre anglais de la Renaissance* (Honoré Champion, 2009), and has edited *Mandeville and Mandevillian Lore in Early Modern England* (Manchester University Press, 2011). Her latest publication is an edition of *Three Romances of Eastern Conquest* (Revels Plays Companion Library, Manchester University Press, 2018). She currently edits the material on Muscovy and Persia for the collective edition of Richard Hakluyt's *Principal Navigations* contracted with Oxford University Press.

Ladan Niayesh est Professeur d'études anglaises à l'Université Paris Diderot – Paris 7 et membre du LARCA (UMR 8225, CNRS). Ses intérêts de recherche sont l'altérité et le voyage dans le théâtre et d'autres genres de la première modernité. Elle est l'auteur de Aux Frontières de l'humain : Figures du cannibalisme dans le théâtre anglais de la Renaissance (Honoré Champion, 2009), et a dirigé Mandeville and Mandevillian Lore in Early Modern England (Manchester University Press, 2011). Sa publication la plus récente est une édition de Three Romances of Eastern Conquest (Revels Plays Companion Library, Manchester University Press, 2018). Elle travaille actuellement à une édition du matériau concernant la Moscovie et la Perse pour l'édition collective des Principal Navigations de Richard Hakluyt (à paraître chez Oxford University Press.