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John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* (1614): the aesthetics of instability

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Abstract:

My contention in this paper is that Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* conforms to no predefined aesthetic code. The complexity of the technique of characterization, the fascination for dismembered bodies, and the use of exuberant and at times very stilted imagery, bespeak the fluidity of identity, a deep interrogation on the value of death and the co-presence of fixed and evanescent meaning. The play's structural pivot is uncertainty as to the value of all moral and aesthetic categorizations.

Critical assessments of *The Duchess of Malfi* have long discussed the merits and demerits of the play judged by some as a great poetic achievement only second to Shakespeare's, and by others as a complete dramatic failure for its gross structural inconsistencies and lack of verisimilitude. Building upon Rowland Wymer's and Inga-Stina Ewbank's insightful contributions¹, I would like to suggest

¹ Rowland. Wymer, "*The Duchess of Malfi*." *English Dramatists: Webster and Ford*, 1995. Inga-Stina Ewbank, "Webster's Realism, or, 'A Cunning Piece Wrought Perspective,'" 1970. For complete bibliographic information about these papers see Works cited.

that the play should be understood in terms of its patently complex aesthetics and that its pivotal structural device is fluctuation, not only in the way Webster constructs his characters, but also in the presentation of the giddy world which Duke Ferdinand's court epitomizes, and in Webster's use of visual, unstable rhetoric.

1.Character construction: mirrors and foils

It has been claimed that *The Duchess of Malfi* repeats many of the themes and situations of *The White Devil*, first performed in 1612 (Wymer, 52). The Italian setting, the corruption of the Catholic church and the attempt to fashion one's individual life in a world of destruction are common to both plays. Yet, as contended by Rowland Wymer, one of the main differences between the two texts lies in the way Webster constructs his characters. More so than *The White Devil*, *The Duchess of Malfi* suggests emotional and psychological complexity in the strategy of characterization. The play presents two symmetrical trios of male and female characters, the Cardinal, Ferdinand and Bosola on the one hand (with Antonio acting as a foil for them), and the Duchess, Julia and Cariola on the other hand (with the Old Lady of II, and 2 as an allegory of the chaos of the world). But within each of these groups, the similarities are strongly balanced by telling differences.

The Cardinal and Ferdinand are first introduced by Antonio who spies on them as intriguers and poisonous predators, as suggested by the animal imagery that defines them. According to Antonio, "the spring in [the Cardinal's] face is nothing but the engendering of toads" (1, 1, 152-3)², and Ferdinand uses the law to his benefit as if it were "a foul cobweb to a spider" (1, 1, 171). The two brothers' characterization is amplified by Antonio who reveals that they are both affected by an excess of melancholy, one of the four humours

² References are to the Norton text, ed. Michael Neill (New York and London : Norton and Co, 2015).

defined by classical and Renaissance medicine as cold and dry like the earth. But the symptoms of the disease are not the same in the two brothers. In the case of the Cardinal, melancholy manifests itself in the form of jealousy and solitariness. Bosola's incidental comment on travellers who return as "arrant knaves [...] because they [carry] themselves always along with them (1, 1, 42-3) is obviously meant to apply to the Cardinal who is entirely focused upon his secluded self. When Bosola comes to kill him at the end of the play, and nobody comes to his rescue, the Cardinal aptly compares himself to a young hare, an animal which Renaissance mythographers viewed as symbolic of loneliness³: "Shall I die like a leveret / Without any resistance? Help, help, help! / I am slain" (5, 5, 44-6). In *The Anatomy of Melancholy* Burton diagnoses solitariness as one of the signs of a diseased mind and reports Hippocrates' description of the melancholy man as unable to "endure the light, or to sit in lightsome places [...] and daring not to come in company for fear he should be misused" (Burton, 387). Burton completes his description by adding that melancholy men "will diet themselves, feed, and live alone" (Burton, 396).

Ferdinand's melancholy, on the other hand, is of an altogether different nature. The fit of lycanthropia he suffers from transforms him into a hybrid creature roaming about Saint Mark's Church at night in a frenzied rage, and attempting to catch his own shadow on the ground, to the bemused eyes of Malatesta and the Marquis of Pescara (5, 2, 37). Burton identifies lycanthropia not as melancholy but as raving madness: "Aetius and Paulus call it a kind of melancholy; but I should rather refer it to madness as most do" (Burton, 141).

As for Bosola, he too is portrayed as a melancholy figure, and again there are many differences with the Cardinal's and Ferdinand's affections. An embittered reviler portrayed by Antonio as "the only

³ See for instance Joannis Pierii Valeriani, *Hieroglyphica* [1556], Liber XIII, « De Lepore ».

court gall” (1,1,23), Bosola is fond of dark secluded places where he can work in close designs, as implied by the image of the moth eating a piece of cloth (“want of action/ Breeds all malcontents: and their close rearing,/ Like moths in cloth, do hurt for want of wearing,” 1, 1, 78). Bosola is the prototype of the Jacobean malcontent, dressed in black like Hamlet, a garb that Antonio considers inappropriate because of his new position as the Duchess’s provisor of the horse:

I do understand your inside.

[...]

Because you would not seem to appear to th’world

Puffed up with your preferment, you continue

This out-of-fashion melancholy. Leave it, leave it. (2, 1, 82-4)

The metaphor suggests that Bosola’s melancholy is perhaps just affectation, like Hamlet’s or Jaques’s in *As You Like It*, but simulation serves him as a front to observe the world around him and pass sardonic judgements on human behaviour. Bosola is an eye debunking courtly life as a breeder of hypocrisy, deformity and vice.

Bosola also shares some of the traits of the Machiavel who, as a spy to Duke Ferdinand, unscrupulously accepts to do anything to gain his ends:

Oh, this base quality

Of intelligencer! Why every quality i’th’world

Prefers but gain or commendation.

Now, for this act I am certain to be raised.

And men that paint weeds to the life are praised. (3, 2, 314-7)

But Bosola’s cynicism is heavily balanced by his moral evolution in the course of the play. At the moment he strangles the Duchess in a horrific display of cruelty, he weeps and appears as a penitent

murderer poignantly describing his victim's body lying on turtles' feathers:

Oh, she's gone again! There the cords of life broke.

Oh, sacred innocence, that sweetly sleeps

On turtles' feathers, whilst a guilty conscience

Is a black register wherein is writ

All our good deeds and bad. (4, 2, 339-44).

The elegiac tone and the feeling of remorse sit rather awkwardly with his function as murderer and Bosola's moral development in the final acts of the play shows him to be what Rowland Wymer calls "a mobile signifier" (247). So the characterization of the male figures is expressive of a world of artifice, disease and delusion, but each of them appears as a series of variations on similar motifs and it would be difficult to conclude with Catherine Belsey that "they [resolve] into figures in a pattern (Belsey, 117).

The trio of female characters (the Duchess, Julia and Cariola) is built on the same technique of perspectives. Although they belong to three different social classes (the Duchess is an aristocrat, Julia is a courtesan and Cariola is a lady-in-waiting), the three of them are submitted to male authority and are killed by men. But Cariola is an entirely submissive figure who cannot accept to live without her mistress whereas the Duchess and Julia attempt to lead a sexual life of their own, outside the normative codes of the patriarchal society, albeit unsuccessfully.

Julia is a lustful pleasure seeker who changes affections several times in the course of the play. She is the Cardinal's mistress (she claims to have been Delio's previously, 2,4,46), and she falls in love with Bosola in a somewhat melodramatic scene where she first threatens him with a pistol:

Bosola: Come; come, I'll disarm you,
And arm you thus. [*Takes her pistol and embraces her*]
Yet this is wondrous strange.

Julia: Compare thy form and my eyes together,
You'll find my love no such great miracle.
Now you'll say I am a wanton. (164-7)

The love exchange between the two reverses the conventions of courtly love as it is the woman who woos the man, and the pistol, an overtly sexual symbol, testifies to a reversal of gender roles.

Like Julia the Duchess is “not [a] figure cut in alabaster” (1,1,442), and she too proposes to her suitor. But she is forced to do so as court conventions do not permit that Antonio, her steward, should speak first. Although she is dominated by sexual desire, she is also a loving wife and a caring mother, far from the “lascivious whore” Lisa Jardine considers her to be after her marriage with Antonio (Jardine, 72). And as has often been observed, her fortitude and calm compliance with death turn her into a paragon of stoicism completely detached from the contingencies of the world:

Tell my brothers,
That I perceive death, now I am well awake,
Best gift is they can give or I can take.
I would fain put off my last woman's fault:
I'd not be tedious to you (4, 2, 209-13)

The iteration of the first person pronoun five times within four lines, together with the strong stresses on “they” and “I” in a very regular iambic pentameter(211), shows that the Duchess adopts the composed voice of the determined, self-assured victim who freely accepts to die at Bosola's hands. Her dignified death appears as the moment when she can eventually assert her autonomous self outside all the constraints of the world.

Contrary to Catherine Belsey's view that the figures of the play are patterned on "antitheses whose function is to identify and define" (Belsey, 125), I would like to argue that character construction in *The Duchess of Malfi* relies on an elaborate system similar to that of a mirror cabinet producing contrasted effects of reflection and distortion. Each character is made of a succession of images that the spectator has to take in without being able to reconstruct a complete picture and the technique commands that he constantly accommodate his gaze. Identities are unstable, they are full of "wild turnings" (2, 4, 12), in the words of the Cardinal addressed to Julia, just like the world they inhabit.

2. The giddiness of the world

The Duchess's remarriage is perceived by Ferdinand as a threat to the stability of the dukedom. Ferdinand realizes that the Duchess is not going to conform to the role he and his brother have planned for her. Brian Chalk has brilliantly shown that Ferdinand and the Cardinal attempt to monumentalize the Duchess into the figure of the obedient widow only to realize that she is not prepared to play the game. They discover that her marriage to Antonio "shatters the illusion of fixity that [their] sister provides for [them]" (Chalk, 390). As a result Ferdinand is intent to set the world right again, and his obsession finds expression in his perverted desire to control the Duchess's face with a compass: "I would then have a mathematical instrument made for her face that she might not laugh out of compass" (1, 1, 131-2). But the greater threat to the stability of Calabria is the two brothers' evil designs.

After the Duchess has given birth to a third child, Ferdinand has behaved suspiciously and Antonio is worried that things might soon turn worse, because "those houses that are haunted are most still/ Till the devil be up" (3, 1, 23-4). Ferdinand's court is hellish and the devil lurks close by, possibly in every one of the palace's inhabitants, as

suggested by Bosola's retort to Ferdinand's proposal that he spy on the Duchess:

Bosola: It seems you would create me
One of your familiars.

Ferdinand: Familiar? What's that?

Bosola: Why, a very quaint invisible devil—in flesh,
An intelligencer.

[...]

Take your devils,
Which hell calls angels! These cursed gifts would make
You a corrupter, me an impudent traitor;
And should I take these, they'd take me to hell. (1, 1, 251-9)

Bosola feigns to refuse the Duke's money which he considers a devilish payment for a hellish job. In medieval iconography, the devil is often represented as holding a mirror, as in Hieronymus Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights* (c. 1550) where a mirror is placed on a devil's bottom and a lady sitting just in front sees frightening images reflected in it. The devil's mirror deceives by creating illusions and collapsing all ordinary distinctions. In this respect it opposes the *Christus speculum* topos in which, according to Calvin's commentaries on Paul's epistles, we may without deception contemplate our own election. In the medieval European imagination, the devil is a protean figure who embodies metamorphosis, counter nature and the world upside down.

In the passage quoted above, the money offered is presented as a gift whereas Ferdinand is just bribing Bosola. A gift is a special commodity given without an explicit agreement for reward. In *Nicomachean Ethics* (book VIII, 13), Aristotle considers the gift as the most virtuous expression of what he defines as "friendship of pleasure," because "it is noble to do well by another without a view to repayment" (143). But in Bosola's view, the bribe signifies treachery

and turns Ferdinand into a corrupter. In the barter economy set up by the Duke, the gift demands a counter-gift (spying), that is a form of repayment which contradicts the value of pure gratuity. Bosola explicitly compares the Italian court to hell where devils are called angels, and debunks a situation in which doing evil is considered a sign of gratitude while generosity leads him to become a villain:

I would have you curse yourself now, that your bounty,
Which makes men truly noble, e'er should make
Me a villain. Oh, that to avoid ingratitude
For the good deed you have done me, I must do
All the ill man can invent! Thus the devil
Candies all sins o'er, and what heaven terms vile
That names he complimentary. (1, 1, 264-70)

The Italian court is a place where good and evil are no longer defined by antithesis, rather they encroach upon one another, which generates indistinctness in the system of values. There definitely is something rotten in the dukedom of Calabria and the numerous references to corpses, skeletons and dismembered bodies, together with the masque of the madmen (4, 2) are signs that the world of *The Duchess of Malfi* is disordered, depraved, “rotten and rotting others” has Bosola has it (4, 2, 304). In this respect, the Old Lady’s pockmarked, painted face (2, 1; 2, 2) sets off the Duchess’s purity, but it also reduces humanity to the level of putrefying flesh and allegorizes a nightmarish world inhabited by dereliction, destruction and death.

In *The Duchess of Malfi* death is spectacularly dramatized in a succession of striking visual tableaux. The spectator is shown the Duchess and Cariola being strangled by Bosola (4, 2) and Julia kissing the poisoned bible offered by the Cardinal (5, 2). The concluding scene of the play stages the death of Antonio stabbed by Bosola, and the Cardinal, Ferdinand and Bosola killing one another in an

ostentatious display of murders somehow reminiscent of the final scene of *Hamlet*.

Unsurprisingly death has been looming from the very beginning of the play. In the wooing scene between the Duchess and Antonio (1, 1), the will the Duchess means to write is the occasion for Webster to establish a connexion between death and love: a will gives instructions for what should happen after the person's death but the Duchess reveals her desire (will) and her sexual drive. Right from the beginning of the play the language of love is inflected with references to death. When the Duchess is delivered of her son (2, 3), Bosola hears "a woman shriek" (1), which he interprets as the sound of an owl:

List again!

It may be 'twas the melancholy bird,
Best friend of silence and of solitariness,
The owl, that screamed so. (7-9)

In many classical and medieval bestiaries, the owl is a bird of night portending death. Later in the scene, Bosola picks up the horoscope ill-fatedly dropped by Antonio and reads that the child's life will be short: "Mars being in a human sign, joined to the tail of the Dragon, in the eighth house, doth threaten a violent death. *Caetera non scrutantur*" (2, 3, 61-3). These references show that the Duchess's married life is fated to end in disaster. Finally, the connexion between love, life and death is symbolically amplified by the madmen in the dirge they sing to torture the Duchess in her prison:

Oh, let us howl some heavy note
Some deadly, dogged howl,
Sounding as from the threat'ning throat
Of beasts and fatal fowl.
As ravens, screech-owls, bulls, and bears!

We'll bill and bawl our parts,
Till irksome noise have cloyed your ears
And corrosived your hearts.
At last, whenas our choir wants breath,
Our bodies being blest,
We'll sing like swans, to welcome death,
And die in love and rest. (4, 2, 60-71)

The madmen's song, sung "to a dismal kind of music," is supposed to offer a prefiguration of the Duchess's oncoming death, but it fails to move the Duchess. As shown by Catherine Belsey, the masque reveals "the transformation not of the Duchess but of Ferdinand" himself (131) and functions as a reflection of the world of hell and death he has created around him.

Death is one of the great structural motifs of the play to which all human experiences are finally reduced. Significantly, life and death are both described by echoing topographical images and references. When the Duchess enters her married life at the beginning of the play, she confesses to Cariola that she is stepping into an uncharted territory with no hand to guide her: "I am going into a wilderness/
Where I shall find nor path nor friendly clew/
To be my guide" (1, 1, 349-51). The wilderness is a waste land, uninhabited and uncultivated. As an echo to the Duchess's remark, Julia gently embraces death in the final act of the play, visiting like Mortimer in Marlowe's *Edward II*, a yet unknown country she cannot even name: "I go, I know not wither" (5, 2, 289).⁴

A morbid anxiety about dismantled bodies and putrefying flesh hangs over the world of *The Duchess of Malfi*. After Ferdinand has given the Duchess a dead man's hand to kiss (4, 1, 43), Bosola

⁴ In Marlowe's *Edward II*, Mortimer Junior reports to Queen Isabella that Mortimer « scorns the world, and as a traveller/ Goes to discover countries yet unknown » (5, 6, 64-5). *Edward II* was published in 1594 and Webster may have used it as a source of inspiration.

presents her with a fearful image of the final destruction and absolute depravity of the flesh:

Thou art a box of wormseed, at best but a salvatory of green mummy. What's this flesh? A little crudded milk, fantastical puff paste. Our bodies are weaker than those paper prisons boys used to keep flies in—more contemptible, since ours is to preserve earthworms. (4, 2, 115-9)

Man is no more than a bundle of perishable matter and life and death are vain, as suggested by Antonio just before he dies: “In all our quest of greatness/ Like wanton boys, whose pastime is their care,/ We follow after bubbles blown in th'air” (5, 4, 62-4). Antonio seems to rephrase Gloucester's tragic outcry in *King Lear*, “As flies to wanton boys are we to the Gods” (4, 1, 36), and the *Homo Bulla* motif, typical of vanity scenes and emblems of death where Thanatos *putti* are seen to blow soap bubbles, testifies to the brevity and insignificance of human life. Delio's moralizing comments upon the huge waste of the end add to this sombre picture by hinting at oblivion and obliteration:

These wretched eminent things
Leave no more fame behind'em than should one
Fall in a frost and leave his print in snow—
As soon as the sun shines, it ever melts
Both form and matter. (5, 5, 111-5)

Even though the Duchess's child will be established in her mother's right, the snow of death melts everything away. The world of *The Duchess of Malfi* is dominated by vacuity and meaninglessness but the *vanitas* motif is not balanced by its *aeternitas* pendant so common in baroque visualisations of death. Life and death are mere tales told by madmen, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing, and the only way

to express this frightening reality is by using a language whose meaning is evanescent.

3. The value of signs

The Duchess of Malfi is a play concerned with language, or more precisely with the make-up and proper ends of language. The first encounter between the Duchess and Antonio is a good introduction to the complex linguistic games and semantic slips abounding in the play. After the ceremonies held the previous night to celebrate her brothers' visit, the Duchess thinks it "fit, like thrifty husbands [they] enquire/ What's laid up for tomorrow" (1, 1, 357-8). She means by this that she should consider the way to write her will, but Antonio understands that she intends to do her accounting:

Antonio: I'll fetch your grace

The particulars of your revenue and expense.

Duchess: Oh, you are an upright treasurer; but you mistook,

For when I said I meant to make inquiry

What's laid up for tomorrow, I did mean

What's laid up yonder for me.

Antonio: Where?

Duchess: In heaven. (1, 1, 361-66)

In the course of the conversation meaning becomes abstruse because the matter of the speech is unclear and the phrasing is sophisticated, as when the Duchess urges Antonio to be less humble and more adventurous:

Duchess: This goodly roof of yours is too low built;

I cannot stand upright in't, nor discourse,

Without I raise it higher. Raise yourself,

Or, if you please, my hand to help you so.

Antonio: Ambition, madam, is a great man's madness,

That is not kept in chains and close-pent rooms,
But in fair, lightsome lodgings, and is girt
With the wild noise of prattling visitants,
Which makes it lunatic beyond all cure. (1, 1, 404-12)

The image of the roof of humility paraphrases Joseph Hall's description of the humble man as "a True Temple of God built with a low roof"⁵ (Hall, 94). The textual embedding is meant to parody the moral implications of the original text, which obviously Antonio does not notice, and his reply to the Duchess is a piling up of long-drawn, convoluted metaphors obfuscating meaning. To claim that ambition is measured by chattering visitors living in beautiful lodgings is awkward and the phrasing is roundabout. Such linguistic excess is a barrier to social communication and the Duchess does not even care to answer Antonio, she simply states that she makes him lord of her properties: "You may discover what a wealthy mine / I make you lord of" (417-8).

The misunderstanding between the Duchess and Antonio is amplified as she proposes to him, playfully deploying double entendre and what Barbara Correll defines as "discursive maneuvering" (365). When she offers her ring to cure his eye, the imagery is purposefully contorted: "One of your eyes is bloodshot—use my ring to't./ They say 'tis very sovereign" (1, 1, 395-6). The bloodshot eye is a metaphor for his misunderstanding (he cannot see what she is driving at), but it can also be an image of male erection and the ring she offers as a remedy is of course a bawdy pun for the female sex. Gratiano uses the same image in the final couplet of *The Merchant of Venice*, fearing "no other thing/ So sore as to keep safe Nerissa's ring." The whole passage is replete with gross sexual innuendo which Antonio can barely construe at first. Right from the outset, the language of the play

⁵ Hall's *Characters of Vertues and Vices* was issued in 1608.

operates on equivocation, as the Duchess finally admits after she has made her proposal:

We are forced to woo, because none dare woo us;
And as a tyrant doubles with his words,
And fearfully equivocates, so we
Are forced to express our violent passions
In riddles and in dreams. (1, 1, 430-34)

Ferdinand also uses the language of equivocation whose design is to deceive his enemies: he pretends he wants Antonio's advice when he plans to have him killed ("Send Antonio to me; I want his head in a business," 3, 5, 27). Catherine Belsey is right to draw attention to the fact that the Duchess's equivocation is meant to "establish relationship" with Antonio whereas Ferdinand's purpose is just "to entangle his victims" (129), but the fact remains that in *The Duchess of Malfi*, communication is often suspended, if not entirely blocked, and the Duchess's double entendres are self-reflective comments on the language of the play as a whole.

Communication depends on shared use of language but the characters appear to be confined into a language of their own. Antonio and the Duchess lie to secure their position as husband and wife, Ferdinand deliberately withholds information, as when he refuses to explain why he does not want his sister to remarry ("Do not you ask the reason, but be satisfied/ I say I would not," 1, 1 250-1), and Bosola and the Cardinal both comment on their own private designs in numerous asides not intended to be shared by others.

Moreover, the play incorporates several dumb shows which the characters watch in silence, like the madmen's caperings (4, 2). Visual tableaux are effective and need no words of explanation but when verbal comments are provided, they merely describe what has been shown. During the dumb show of the Cardinal's arming (3, 4), the Duchess, Antonio and their children are banished from the Loreto

shrine and a long ditty is sung by some churchmen. As in a conventional emblem, a verbal comment is adduced to the visual element but it simply puts into words what is being staged in the show. In this case the function of words is to repeat, and not to create meaning. Later in the play, the Echo scene (5, 3) provides evidence of a language reduced to meaningless stammering. The Duchess has become a lost voice and all she can do is to repeat some of Antonio's words. Of course the echo serves to reveal Antonio's oncoming fate, but the scraps of sentences she utters are like a broken syntax that makes no sense outside the pattern of iteration and exemplifies a language deprived of its creative energy.

Catherine Belsey has rightfully observed that the stereotyped rhetoric of emblems informs the language of the play (Belsey, 115-6), and in many instances, the characters use aphorisms and maxims reminiscent of emblematic discourse. When the Cardinal dies at the hand of his brother he dramatically exclaims that "I suffer now for what hath former been;/ Sorrow is held the eldest child of sin" (5, 5, 53-4), and Ferdinand meets his own death echoing his brother with a couplet which strangely contradicts his attitude all along the play: "Whether we fall by ambition, blood, or lust,/ Like diamond we are cut to our own dust" (5, 5, 70-1). These *sententiae* certainly express abstract moral truths and suggest that in the case of the two brothers punishment is justified, but they ring false in the derelict world of the end of the play where moral concepts have no place. In the same way Delio's closing lines calling for a life of integrity that none of the characters has been able to construct accentuate even more blatantly the discrepancy between language and reality: "Integrity of life is fame's best friend,/ Which nobly, beyond death, shall crown the end" (5, 5, 118-9).

Approached from a historical perspective, the issue of language in *The Duchess of Malfi* should be referred to the early modern semantic conceptions and understandings of the relationship between signs and their meanings. The play questions the Neo-Platonic-

Hermetic tradition that names are the essence of what is named. As rightly pointed out by Robert Ornstein in a classic of Jacobean criticism, Webster “presents in art the sceptical, pragmatic nominalism of the late Renaissance” (Ornstein, 134). By exploring the energy and the limits of language, the play suggests that the connection between signs and signifieds is not motivated naturally, it also intuits that the reality which it is the function of language to capture is too complex, too shady and too unstable to ever be fixed in and by a rigid linguistic system.

To wrap up, *The Duchess of Malfi* should be understood in terms of its aesthetic instability. The technique of characterization rejects rigid codifications and allegorical figurations. The Duchess, Antonio, Bosola, the Cardinal and Ferdinand all grapple with inner conflicts, they are aggregates of contrasting facets in a huge catoptric construction where images are superimposed over, and displaced by, other images. The play is an exploration of evil, but none of the characters can be reduced to the totality of what evil means. When “rightly gaz’d upon,” character construction shows “nothing but confusion,” but “ey’d awry,” it reveals the fluidity of identity and the paradoxes of human nature.

The world of Calabria is inhabited by corruption and decay and it rests on no valid ethical system since the distinction between good and evil is continually blurred. Just as Bosola’s guilty conscience is “a black register wherein is writ/ All our good deeds and bad--a perspective/ That shows us hell” (4, 2, 343-5), reality is ungraspable because made of shifting perspectives whose final image is the effacement consequent upon death.

The language of the play oscillates between over elaborate rhetoric and a form of sterile vocality which bespeaks a degree of skepticism in the power of words to express reality. As stated by Inga-Stina Ewbank, the language of the play serves to define “the nature of

the whole world in which the Duchess in particular and man in general live” (271).

Fascination with death and decay, together with the direct presentation of horrors onstage, align the play with some of the main features of baroque aesthetics. *The Duchess of Malfi* conforms to the baroque impulse which José Antonio Maravall defines in *Culture of the Baroque* as “the pursuit of the extreme” (Maravall, 87). But the tendency to fragmentation in the presentation of human identities expresses more mannerist concerns, while some of the language of the play is shared between the use of maxims and *sententiae*, recalling the classical genre of the emblem, and a more pregnant questioning of the power of language. Classical, mannerist, and baroque, Webster’s play is a brilliant, hybrid composition which evades ready-made aesthetic categorizations

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