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Emblem and Antithesis in The Duchess of Malfi

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THE TENSION between realism and abstraction which characterizes much Renaissance drama is strikingly displayed in *The Duchess of Malfi*. Critical discussions of the play's psychological realism, on the one hand, or its moral instruction, on the other, have proved largely unproductive. Though critics have recognized an elusive power in Webster's text, they have reluctantly concluded that it is ultimately flawed—psychologically incoherent or morally anarchic. Meanwhile, however, we are becoming increasingly aware that the qualities of plays like *Tamburlaine*, for instance, or *The Revenger's Tragedy*, are more readily understood in the context of an approach to Renaissance drama which takes account of its patently nonrealist antecedents. *The Duchess of Malfi*, I want to suggest, is a play poised, formally as well as historically, between the emblematic tradition of the medieval stage and the increasing commitment to realism of the post-Restoration theater.

The realist tradition, which becomes dominant in the eighteenth century and culminates in the well-made play of the nineteenth, places a high premium on individual psychological analysis, narrative enigma, and a dramatic structure which facilitates the unfolding of a coherent action.

The medieval tradition, by contrast, deals in the much more generalized psychology of representative moral types (in the cycles) or of "Mankind" (in the moralities), and develops a structure which promotes moral understanding in the audience rather than suspense. Realism (in the sense in which I have defined it) invites close audience involvement in the action; the medieval tradition distances the audience from the narrative, repeatedly arresting the action for the sake of moral analysis or debate.

Renaissance drama inherits this tradition of analysis and debate, while at the same time moving toward new conventions of verisimilitude and narrative tautness. The realist element has been the subject of extensive critical discussion, of course, but we have paid rather less attention to the continuing use of the medieval techniques of emblem and antithesis to focus the attention of the audience on the solution to the moral questions raised by the play, as opposed to the resolution of the narrative and psychological enigmas it poses. Dieter Mehl has drawn attention to the prominence of the emblematic tradition in Renaissance drama,[1] and I think that we may extend his argument to find evidence of the tradition not only in stage properties and allegorical dumb shows, but in the structural patterns of the plays themselves.

Emblem books use picture and text to propose an *interpretation* of a *concept* (opportunity, constancy), or the *relationship between concepts* (truth and error, wisdom and experience). In this they are the direct heirs of the medieval allegorical tradition. On the medieval stage the spectacle of Mankind flanked by Good and Bad Angels constitutes a "speaking picture" and its interpretation, an emblem of the human condition, divided between good and evil impulses. In this sense emblematic drama employs a mode of representation which is radically different from the realist quest for lifelike imagery.

At the same time, the tradition of debate in the medieval drama—between Cain and Abel, or Noah and Mrs. Noah in the cycles, for instance, or between virtues and vices in the moralities—depends on a pattern of antitheses. The spectators participate actively in the process of moral analysis to the extent that they evaluate the arguments, behavior,

1. Dieter Mehl, "Emblems in English Drama," *RenD,* II (1969), 39–57.

and fates of the contrasted figures. At the structural level the pattern of antithesis appears in the introduction of contrasted episodes, or of comic episodes which parody the main action. The conjuring of the clowns in *Doctor Faustus* is descended from the tradition which finds its most elaborate form in *The Second Shepherd's Play.*

Renaissance drama displays a conflict of interest between the new search for the reproduction of outward appearances and the concomitant commitment to narrative form, and the inherited tendency to interpretation and analysis of what seems to lie behind appearances. Glynne Wickham finds in the contemporary disputes over the adequacy of Renaissance staging conventions evidence of "a head-on collision of two fundamentally opposed attitudes to art: the typically medieval contentment with emblematic comment on the significance of the visual world versus a new, scientific questing for the photographic image."[2] It is my hypothesis that we may find evidence of a similar collision within the structures of the plays themselves, and that the existence of this collision necessitates a critical approach to Renaissance drama which is not content with the discussion of psychological realism or the moral values of the dramatist.

Contradictory structural elements in *The Duchess of Malfi* generate a tension between its realist features—psychological plausibility and narrative sequence—and the formality of its design. Close analysis of the text reveals that the audience is repeatedly invited by the realist surface to expect the unfolding of a situation or the interplay of specific characters, only to find that the actual constantly resolves into abstraction, the characters into figures in a pattern. The imagery, both visual and verbal, often functions in a way that is emblematic rather than realistic, arresting the movement of the plot and placing the emphasis on significance rather than experience. The effect is a play that presents an anatomy of the world rather than a replica of it.

The tension between realism and abstraction informs the construction of the play from the beginning. Act I opens with Antonio's account of the "fix'd order" established by the judicious king of France (I.i.4–22).[3] What

2. Glynne Wickham, *Early English Stages* (London, 1959 ——), II, i. 209.

3. References are to the Revels text, ed. John Russell Brown (London, 1965). There is no need to suppose that the speech is an interpolation (Brown, pp. xxv-xxvi).

is remarkable about this speech is that it tells the audience little about Antonio and nothing at all about the situation which provides the plot of the play. This is unusual in the *extent* to which the speech is isolated from the narrative sequence. The openings of Elizabethan tragedies, though they often do much more, normally offer at least some information concerning the ensuing action. The first scene of *King Lear* introduces Lear's intention to divide the kingdom as well as Edmund's bastardy; the opening scene of *Othello* establishes Iago's hatred of the hero. *The Revenger's Tragedy* begins with Vindice's commentary on the court as it passes over the stage, and his subsequent meditation with the skull explains the sources of his impulse to revenge; the opening of *The Changeling* shows Alsemero in love with Beatrice-Joanna and so points toward the central situation of the play. On the other hand, in each of the first three cases the opening scene has the important function of defining not only the relationships between individual characters, but also a state of society within which the ensuing action is intelligible.

Other instances resemble *The Duchess of Malfi* more closely. The opening of *Bussy D'Ambois* functions fairly obviously as a prologue to the theme of courtly corruption and has something of the static and defining quality of Antonio's speech. But it also serves to identify Bussy's own initial position of Stoic virtue, which is immediately threatened by the entry of Monsieur. It is thus not external to the action in quite the same sense as Antonio's description of the French court. The Andrea-Revenge prologue to *The Spanish Tragedy* is outside the central events of the play, but it frames them, giving an account of the preceding action and leading into the main plot.

Antonio's speech, however, brings sharply into focus a mode of construction which is very different from that of the realist tradition. The speech defines an ideal of government which emphasizes by *contrast* the courtly corruption of the world of the play. It forms not only an integral but an important part of the whole: the play refers back to it many times, as I shall suggest. But it works by establishing an external and static model, not by leading into a sequence of events.

The entry of Bosola (l. 22) and of the Cardinal (l. 28) leads us to expect that the world of the play's action will now be introduced. And to some extent this expectation is fulfilled. Bosola is seen to be a recognizable

dramatic type, the malcontent, and his opening exchanges with the Cardinal indicate a specific situation: he is neglected and resentful. At this point several possible developments suggest themselves to the audience: a quarrel, an account of the crime which has led Bosola to the galleys, or the employment of Bosola for some specific purpose. Instead the Cardinal gives three brief and noncommittal replies to his complaints and then goes out, leaving Bosola in mid-generalization about the pursuit of honesty (ll. 42–44). Antonio again invites us to expect an account of Bosola's situation: "He hath denied thee some suit?" But Bosola does not answer the question directly. Instead he offers an image of the court:

> He, and his brother, are like plum-trees, that grow crooked over standing pools; they are rich, and o'erladen with fruit, but none but crows, pies, and caterpillars feed on them.
>
> (ll. 49–52)

The plum trees and the stagnant pools are stationary, their relative positions fixed in an image which functions like an emblem, simultaneously delineating and commenting morally on the world of the play. There is a specific contrast here with Antonio's account of the French court, which is a fountain nourishing the state (l. 12), and which is purged of parasites like those which "feed" on Ferdinand and the Cardinal (ll. 7–9). There follows a series of images, equally vivid and equally emblematic (ll. 52–69), and all amplifying Bosola's analysis of the Italian court. When Bosola leaves the stage at line 69 we have learned no more of the plot than we knew at line 30.

There follows the entry of the court (ll. 82 ff.), and by analogy with *Hamlet* or *Lear*, or even *The White Devil,* the audience might now expect the main lines of the action to be drawn up. What they are offered is a quasi-realistic conversation concerning horsemanship, and a series of double entendres at the expense of Castruchio. The episode gives us no significant information at the level of action. Instead it amplifies further Bosola's images of the court. It is idle (ll. 91–92) like the stagnant pools, and it nourishes flattering sycophants like those dismissed by the French king (l. 8).

The figure of Ferdinand is dominant:

> Why do you laugh? Methinks you that are courtiers should be my touch-wood, take fire, when I give fire; that is, laugh when I laugh, were the subject never so witty.
>
> (ll. 122–125)

This court has none of the reciprocity of France, where the king relies on a council "who dare freely / Inform him the corruption of the times" (ll. 17–18). In contrast to the French court the Italian one is dramatized, not described: action and interaction between figures on the stage replace an account. But at the same time the episode shares something of the static quality of Antonio's description or Bosola's images. It displays and defines: it does not develop.

The entry of the Duchess and the Cardinal (l. 147) provokes not a situation but further description, Antonio's "characters" of the Cardinal, Ferdinand, and the Duchess. Like the Overbury *Characters* these define a series of types: they are in no sense psychological portraits.[4] They make no attempt to account in terms of motive or past experience for the qualities they identify, nor are they offered as a basis for moral or psychological development. In this sense they are analogous to Antonio's opening speech and Bosola's images of the court, and like them they are related to one another by specific antitheses:

> the spring in his face is nothing but the engendering of toads
>
> (ll. 158–159)

> the law to him
> Is like a foul black cobweb to a spider—
> He makes it his dwelling, and a prison
> To entangle those shall feed him
>
> (ll. 177–180)

> She stains the time past, lights the time to come.
>
> (l. 209)

While light radiates from the Duchess, what issues from the Cardinal and

4. Cf. Monticelso's "character" of a whore, John Webster, *The White Devil*, ed. John Russell Brown (London, 1966), III.ii.78–101; cf. also Vindice's opening account of "four excellent characters," Cyril Tourneur, *The Revenger's Tragedy*, ed. R. A. Foakes (London, 1966), I.i.5.

Ferdinand is dark, repulsive, and finally deadly. The contrast evokes the antithesis within Antonio's opening speech:

> a prince's court
> Is like a common fountain, whence should flow
> Pure silver drops in general: but if't chance
> Some curs'd example poison 't near the head,
> *Death and diseases through the whole land spread.*
>
> (ll. 11–15)

The emblematic fountain radiates purity and life, or death and diseases. Antonio's equally emblematic portraits of the Duchess and her brothers echo these contrasting possibilities, and the rest of the play amplifies the antithesis, juxtaposing the Duchess's world of innocence, reciprocity, and fertility with Ferdinand's sterile darkness, isolation, and death.

These metaphors of spreading and radiating are oddly analogous to Webster's own dramatic technique. After over two hundred lines the play still has no semblance of plot. Commentary has alternated with episodes which fail to develop a situation, leaving the audience with its expectations unfulfilled in terms of events, but with a strong and expanding sense of certain polarities which the text defines in outline and then in detail, in imagery and then in action.

The long-delayed creation of a situation now follows very rapidly. In only eight lines Cariola arranges a meeting between the Duchess and Antonio, and Ferdinand secures the provisorship of the horse for Bosola (ll. 210–218). His appointment of Bosola as intelligencer follows, and the details of the situation begin to emerge: Bosola is to "observe the duchess" (l. 252); she is a young widow (l. 255); Ferdinand "would not have her marry again" (l. 256). The dialogue now has a strong flavor of realism. Bosola's harsh cynicism is expressed in the language and rhythms of ordinary speech:

> Whose throat must I cut?
>
> (l. 249)

> what's my place?
> The provisorship o'th'horse? say then, my corruption
> Grew out of horse-dung.
>
> (ll. 285–287)

At the same time, however, a curiously archetypal quality in this episode underlies the realism of the surface:

> Take your devils
> Which hell calls angels . . .
> . . . should I take these they'd take me to hell.
> (ll. 263–266)
>
> Thus the devil
> Candies all sins o'er . . .
> (ll. 275–276)

The language recalls the pattern of temptation analyzed allegorically in countless morality plays. Bosola is "lur'd" to Ferdinand (l. 231) and is entangled, through his own desire to "thrive" in the world (l. 261; cf. l. 37), in a web of false reasoning, deception, and self-deception which leads to his damnation. The specific hiring of a spy simultaneously evokes the temptation and fall of Mankind, and the episode hovers disturbingly between realism and abstraction. Bosola's closing *sententia* seems to resolve it into abstraction:

> Let good men, for good deeds, covet good fame,
> Since place and riches oft are bribes of shame—
> Sometimes the devil doth preach.[5]
> (ll. 289–291)

The instruction to the Duchess follows logically in terms of the play's action, but this time it is the ritualistic nature of the dialogue which is surprising. The play itself draws attention to the "studied" quality (l. 329) of the patterned, formal, joint monologue of the brothers, which is punctuated by the strikingly more natural interjections of the Duchess: "Will you hear me?" (l. 301); "This is terrible good counsel" (l. 312). At the literal level the episode tells the audience nothing that Ferdinand has not already told Bosola. It fails to resolve the enigma of his motivation, already apparently deliberately created by the play ("Do not you ask the reason," l. 257). Instead it establishes a contrast between the natural

5. The devil or the Vice conventionally "preaches" in the morality plays.

behavior of the Duchess and the curiously contrived, "studied" world of the brothers. Subsequently, Ferdinand's motives remain obscure: his examination of the "cause" (IV.ii.281–287) explains nothing to our satisfaction, and his dying words preserve the enigma—"*Whether we fall by ambition, blood or lust . . .* " (V.v.72). But the polarity established here is amplified in the rest of the play, which consistently aligns the Duchess with the freedom of nature, and Ferdinand and the Cardinal with a world of artifice, embodied in the waxworks, the masque of madmen, and the violent ritual of the divorce. In Act IV the Duchess is "plagu'd in art" (IV.i.111) until she becomes like her "picture":

> A deal of life in show, but none in practice;
> Or rather like some reverend monument
> Whose ruins are even pitied.
>
> (IV.ii.32–34)

The two parts of the comparison taken together ironically evoke her own previous assertion:

> This is flesh, and blood, sir;
> 'Tis not the figure cut in alabaster
> Kneels at my husband's tomb.
>
> (I.i.453–455)

The effect of Webster's technique is to define good and evil by antithesis, at first in broad terms (the fountain and the poison) and then more specifically (domination and reciprocity, radiance and cobwebs, nature and artifice), and at the same time to show through the sequence of events the processes by which evil reduces good to a semblance of itself. Ferdinand's "artifice" envelops the Duchess, reducing her to a lifeless work of art; his darkness progressively reduces her radiance; his mental hell is realized in the tortures of the Duchess and brings her close to despair.

Further detailed analysis of the mode of construction in *The Duchess of Malfi* would, I suggest, reveal that the technique I have described is consistently maintained. The quasi-realistic surface repeatedly dissolves into *sententiae*, meditations, and fables. Not only does the imagery form a network of echoes, antitheses, and amplifications: whole episodes refer to and parody each other. The distribution of the central characters shows

more concern with pattern than with any kind of psychological probability.[6] As Antonio is to the Duchess, so the Cardinal is to Ferdinand—cautious, prudent, restrained. They are figures in a design, not character studies. The high points in the action of the play are realized precisely by arresting the action and drawing the audience's attention to a visual tableau: the Duchess unconsciously isolated on the stage, abandoned by Antonio and threatened by Ferdinand (III.ii); the spectacle of the Duchess confronting the spectacle of the waxworks (IV.i). During the dance of the madmen (IV.ii) the Duchess does not speak; the emphasis is not on the psychology of her reactions but on the contrast between her solitary stillness and the grotesque caperings which are an image of the tyranny she is "chain'd to endure" (IV.ii.60). The dumb show of the Cardinal's arming and the divorce (III.iv) distances what in another play would be a cue for passionate individual response. The commentary of the pilgrims bears precisely the same relation to the visual spectacle as the explanation to the picture in an emblem.[7]

1ST PILGRIM
What was it with such violence he took
Off from her finger?
2D PILGRIM
'Twas her wedding ring,
Which he vow'd shortly he would sacrifice
To his revenge.

(III.iv.36–39)

The key words "violence," "sacrifice," and "revenge" focus attention on the nature of the evil, not on the experience of the characters. The same principle is more sharply evident in the preceding exchange: "But by what justice?" "Sure, I think by none" (III.iv.34). Abstraction repeatedly prevails over actuality, pattern over situation, structure over event.

6. For the death blow to the quest for probability see Christopher Ricks, "The Tragedies of Webster, Tourneur and Middleton: Symbols, Imagery and Conventions," *English Drama to 1710,* Sphere History of Literature in the English Language, III (London, 1971), 306–351.

7. Mehl, p. 47.

Instead of tracing further the details of the play's construction, however, I should like to consider more closely the nature and the implications of the patterns which the technique establishes. As I have suggested, the central pattern is one of antitheses whose function is to identify and define. Thus, for instance, Cariola's terrified efforts to escape death emphasize the Duchess's fortitude (IV.ii). Julia acts consistently as a foil for the Duchess. Her relationship with the Cardinal forms a (rather slight) subplot which intensifies by contrast the effect of the main plot, drawing attention to the moral distance between Julia's fruitless and distrustful adultery and the Duchess's marriage. Act II, scene iv, offers a display of reciprocal accusations of inconstancy, which concludes with the Cardinal's extraordinarily ambiguous reassurance ("for my affection to thee, / Lightning moves slow to 't," II.iv.40–41), and Julia's ambivalent response to Delio's overtures. By Act V the Cardinal is weary of her; Julia betrays him to Bosola; he poisons her. This sequence is in direct contrast to the increasing fertility and reciprocal trust of the Duchess's marriage.

It has long been recognized that Julia's proposition to Bosola parodies the Duchess's proposal to Antonio both in language and action. Gunnar Boklund complains that this episode comes too late to clarify the moral question whether the Duchess's second marriage is innocent or wanton, willful, and base.[8] It seems to me, however, that this is a question raised by twentieth-century criticism anxious to locate the Duchess's tragic flaw, and not by the play itself, which owes nothing to the Aristotelian concept of tragedy. The function of the intrigue between Julia and Bosola is to reenact in caricature the entire life of the Duchess, and not merely her wooing. As a result of her wanton overtures to Bosola, Julia hurries to her ruin (V.ii.258) by coming to participate in "a prince's secrets" (l. 260). In doing so she ties a dangerous knot (l. 264): the Cardinal warns her that possession of the secret may cause her death (l. 266). He poisons her, and she dies exclaiming, "I go, / I know not whither" (ll. 288–289). The Duchess's wooing, by contrast, leads to the "sacred Gordian" of her secret marriage which is the cause of her death. She dies certain of heaven. Julia's

8. Gunnar Boklund, *The Duchess of Malfi: Sources, Themes, Characters* (Cambridge, Mass., 1962), p. 158.

intrigue is like a negative photograph of the Duchess's marriage, and part of its effect is to "place" the Duchess in the minds of the audience so that the values she represents are reemphasized after her death. The echo scene, which follows this one, achieves a similar effect by positive means, offering Antonio (and possibly the audience)[9] a momentary vision of the Duchess herself (V.iii.45).

During the wooing scene (I.i.361–503) Antonio accuses himself of ambition (ll. 412–413) and calls it "madness" (ll. 420 ff.). In case the audience should be tempted to any absolute evaluation and judgment, the following scene opens with Castruchio's grotesque version of the same vice and Bosola's instructions on how to satisfy it (II.i.1–20). Earlier in Act I Bosola has displayed the more serious implications of ambition: in order to "thrive" in the world he knowingly chooses a course which leads to damnation. Thus placed between exemplum and satire, Antonio's "ambition," which leads to faithful marriage, is seen to be artless and transparent, dangerous in the corrupt world of the play, but morally innocent in the sense that, unlike Bosola and Castruchio, Antonio defies the values of that world.

Similarly, the painted Old Lady serves to reinforce the Duchess's purity. Bosola's "meditation" (II.i.45–60) and his sardonic imperative, "you two couple" (II.i.61), reduce humanity to the level of the beasts. The scene follows the declaration of Antonio and the Duchess that their marriage is to emulate the music of the spheres (I.i.481–484). Far from "tainting" the Duchess as Berry suggests,[10] the contrast defines her, and the juxtaposition of the two scenes embraces the paradox of human nature.

This paradox, that human beings may aspire to heaven or sink to the level of the beasts, is among the main implications of the play's pattern of contrasts. The central antithesis in the play is, of course, between the Duchess who, valuing life, is able to die (III.ii.71) and the predatory Ferdinand, man as wolf, destroying others. That the play establishes a polarity between the values of life and death, fertility and destruction is widely agreed. What is not, I think, so commonly recognized, is the

9. A lighting effect may have revealed the Duchess herself within a grave (Brown, p. xxxv).

10. Ralph Berry, *The Art of John Webster* (Oxford, 1972), p. 42.

number of points at which the pattern of the play apparently calls this antithesis into question by establishing parallels between Ferdinand and the Duchess, only to resolve them again into further polarities. The Duchess's dissimulation, her equivocation, her double entendres, her cursing and her "madness" are in a sense *like* Ferdinand's. (That they are twins, of course, invites a director to draw attention in visual terms to the ironic parallels.) At the same time, however, examination of these points of likeness proves in each case to emphasize the moral distance between the Duchess and Ferdinand. The play thus constitutes an exploration of the nature of evil, setting out to discover whether it is synonymous with particular patterns of behavior, and concluding, I believe, that it is not. Just as the form of the play constantly raises expectations that its focal point will be a series of events, only to resolve situation into pattern or abstraction, so the pattern itself draws parallels between Ferdinand and the Duchess, only to resolve them into new contrasts. As the construction of the play undermines its realism, so its thematic pattern undermines Antonio's self-accusation:

> *The great are like the base—nay, they are the same—*
> *When they seek shameful ways, to avoid shame.*
>
> (II.iii.51–52)

Dissimulation is the characteristic method by which Ferdinand and the Cardinal achieve their aims.[11] Ferdinand "will seem to sleep o'th'bench / Only to entrap offenders" (I.i.174–175); the Cardinal, who would have become pope by bribery "without heaven's knowledge" (I.i.166), would appoint Bosola an intelligencer and "not be seen in't" (I.i.225). Even in his fury Ferdinand determines to "study to seem / The thing I am not" (II.v.62–63), and thereafter he consistently seems generous when he is most dangerous. He tortures the Duchess with waxworks, ingenious counterfeits designed to bring her to a real despair. In P. F. Vernon's view, "the actions of the Duchess and Antonio in the first three acts of the play are as culpable as those of their persecutors. They are up to their ears

11. For a detailed analysis of the theme of dissimulation in the play see P. F. Vernon, "The Duchess of Malfi's Guilt," *Notes and Queries,* N.S. X (1963), 335–338.

in secrecy and disguise."[12] But while it is true that the play establishes an analogy in terms of action, it goes to some lengths to make distinctions in terms of causes and consequences. The mode of behavior which is *chosen* by Ferdinand and the Cardinal is *imposed* on the Duchess and Antonio. The text stresses the reluctance with which they dissemble:

> O misery! methinks unjust actions
> Should wear these masks and curtains, and not we
> (III.ii.158–159)

It also stresses the inadequacy of innocence obliged to dissimulate. The Duchess has succeeded in "plotting" a "politic conveyance" for the midwife (II.i.163–165), but the suddenness of her labor leaves the guileless Antonio helpless, convinced that they are "lost" (II.i.160). It is Delio who suggests how to cover the situation by giving out the information that Bosola's apricots have poisoned the Duchess, and then devises a way to keep the physicians at bay, while Antonio complains, "I am lost in amazement: I know not what to think on't" (II.i.173). In the same way it is Bosola who suggests the feigned pilgrimage. There is considerable irony in the Duchess's assertion that she can thus "wisely" forestall her brothers (III.ii.322).

While the dissimulation of Ferdinand and the Cardinal is designed to entrap and destroy, the schemes of the Duchess and Antonio cloak not "unjust actions" but childbirth and the flight from tyranny. The *magnanima menzogna* (III.ii.180) of Antonio's dismissal injures no one but Antonio, whom it is designed to protect. In the case of the stolen jewels the Duchess is said to be anxious that her device should give no offense, far less do harm: "She entreats you take't not ill . . . " (II.ii.61). The judgment that condemns the Duchess and her brothers as equally culpable is too simple. Webster shows that the great are like the (morally) base only to display that they are far from "the same." Similar behavior springs from antithetical impulses—to protect or to destroy.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 337. The Duchess's dissimulation is also noted as a moral weakness by Clifford Leech, *Webster: The Duchess of Malfi,* Studies in English Literature No. 8 (London, 1963), p. 54; Peter B. Murray, *A Study of John Webster,* Studies in English Literature No. 50 (The Hague, 1969), pp. 148–150; Berry, p. 111.

Ferdinand "as a tyrant doubles with his words, / And fearfully equivocates" (I.i.443–444). Again the play itself draws attention to the parallel between the Duchess's equivocation and Ferdinand's:

> so we
> Are forc'd to express our violent passions
> In riddles, and in dreams, and leave the path
> Of simple virtue, which was never made
> To seem the thing it is not.
>
> (I.i.444–448)

For Ferdinand language is part of the mist which obscures the true nature of evil. His equivocation is designed to entangle his victims: "*Send Antonio to me; I want his head in a business*" (III.v.28); "*I had rather have his heart than his money*" (III.v.35–36). His offer of the dead hand to the Duchess is a grotesque and cruel caricature of the wooing scene:

> I will leave this ring with 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)

His double entendres are a form of antagonism directed against Castruchio (I.i.105 ff.) or offensive to the Duchess (I.i.336–337). The equivocation of the Duchess, by contrast, is designed to communicate with Antonio. It is not an expression of hostility but a means of reestablishing and reinforcing relationship. Its object is first marriage, and later praise, mitigating the dramatic effect of her simulated rage as she dismisses Antonio: "I have got well by you . . . " (III.ii.183); "I would have this man be an example to you all" (III.ii.189). Her double entendres are similarly transparent and domestic, secret references understood by Antonio and the audience to her secret marriage (II.i). The mist generated by Ferdinand envelops the Duchess's behavior, but the effect is to emphasise the contrast between them: parallel again resolves into antithesis.

Ferdinand curses the Duchess: "Damn her!" (IV.i.121). And the tortures of Act IV are intended as a means of realizing his curse, "To bring her to

despair" (IV.i.116) and so to damnation. Ferdinand's efforts are finally ineffectual, but he succeeds in creating for the Duchess a world which resembles hell (IV.ii.25–26). Ferdinand's curse "places" the Duchess's:

> DUCHESS
> I could curse the stars.
> BOSOLA
> O fearful!
> DUCHESS
> And those three smiling seasons of the year
> Into a Russian winter, nay the world
> To its first chaos.
> BOSOLA
> Look you, the stars shine still:—
> DUCHESS
> O, but you must
> Remember, my curse hath a great way to go.
> (IV.i.96–101)

Bosola's mockery and the Duchess's ironic reply draw attention to the inefficacy of this curse. The stars shine still: human beings are powerless to affect their courses;[13] and the Duchess is aware of their remoteness. Unlike Ferdinand's, this is a curse which she can make no attempt to realize. It is an expression of anguish not of a desire to destroy. She compares the stars to tyrants (IV.i.103), but she does not curse the tyrants themselves. The result of Ferdinand's attempts to envelop the Duchess in his own evil is to produce patterns of behavior which externally resemble his own, but it is an empty resemblance, the form without the substance.

The play invites a similar consideration of the Duchess's "madness" in conjunction with Ferdinand's. Ferdinand's is indicated in Act II, scene v (ll. 2, 46, 66). It is destructive and self-destructive (ll. 63–64), "deform'd," "beastly" (l. 57). It is finally established in the lycanthropy of Act V. The Duchess's "madness" is her marriage (I.i.506), mad only in the terms of the world she lives in. Ferdinand nonetheless offers her the masque of madmen as an emblem of her state (IV.i.124–131). Despite the

13. Job 38: 31–33. For parallels between the Duchess and Job see Murray, pp. 130–134.

references in the dialogue to madness (IV.ii.7, 17), the Duchess reiterates that she is not able to escape in this way (ll. 24, 26), and the masque itself creates an antithesis between the silent Duchess and the chattering madmen. Ironically, they function dramatically as transformations not of the Duchess but of Ferdinand. Like Ferdinand, who would damn the Duchess, the First Madman would draw doomsday nearer (IV.ii.73). He would "set all the world on fire" (IV.ii.74–75), just as Ferdinand would "have their bodies / Burnt in a coal-pit . . . " (II.v.66–70), and would despatch Bosola

> To feed a fire, as great as my revenge,
> Which ne'er will slack, till it have spent his fuel.
> (IV.i.140–141)

The Second Madman sees hell as a glass house "where the devils are continually blowing up women's souls" (IV.ii.77–78). His vision is a demonic caricature of Ferdinand's readiness to imagine the Duchess "in the shameful act of sin" (II.v.41). His statement that "the law will eat to the bone" (IV.ii.94–95) recalls the image of Ferdinand using the law "to entangle those shall feed him" (I.i.180). The Third Madman's insistence that "He that drinks but to satisfy nature is damned" (IV.ii.96–97) functions as a parody of Ferdinand's attitude to the Duchess's natural impulse to marry again. If the Third Madman is referring here to the eucharistic wine, there is an additional parallel with Ferdinand's behavior: the Duchess tells Ferdinand, "You violate a sacrament o'th'church / Shall make you howl in hell for't" (IV.i.39–40).[14] The Fourth Madman is a companion to the devil (IV.ii.107): Ferdinand is the devil's own child (V.iv.21). Like Ferdinand, the madmen are condemned to a perpetual hell of the mind, a sleepless world of perverted sexuality and death. It is Ferdinand, and not the Duchess, who finally escapes into madness.

Thus in each case a seeming parallel resolves into a new antithesis. The effect is not simply to extenuate the Duchess's behavior: rather, the play identifies evil itself—not in terms of individual motive or intention but as a concept—by locating it within a pattern, defining it with increasing

14. I am indebted for this suggestion to G. K. Hunter.

precision by a series of contrasts. *The Duchess of Malfi* invites the audience to consider evil as a mode of behavior, only to suggest in the end that it is something anterior to this, at once more mysterious and more substantial. Ferdinand's evil denies all reciprocity: " . . . you that are courtiers should be my touch-wood, take fire, when I give fire . . . " (I.i.122–123); "Do not you ask the reason . . ." (I.i.257); "Distrust doth cause us seldom be deceived" (I.i.241). He incorporates the world into himself, feeding on it like a spider (I.i.177–180), a tiger (III.v.86), or a shark (III.v.123–141),[15] or transforms it in his own image, "Rotten, and rotting others" (IV.ii.320). Both impulses have their origins in an egoism that verges on solipsism:

> He that can compass me, and know my drifts,
> May say he hath put a girdle 'bout the world
> And sounded all her quicksands.
>
> (III.i.84–86)

His object is "a general eclipse" (II.v.79) which will envelop the world in his own darkness, and the recurrent imagery which aligns Ferdinand with the devil draws attention to the parallel between this and the Satanic desire to transform paradise into hell.[16] The play explores, too, the power of evil, challenging the audience to question the extent of its capacity to destroy. Ferdinand murders the Duchess but he cannot damn her. A corrupt world can darken the Duchess's outward behavior but it cannot touch her soul.

These two areas of exploration, the nature of evil and the extent of its power, are finally fused in the climactic antithetical emblems of Act V, Ferdinand as wolf and the Duchess as echo. The grim comedy of Ferdinand's "treatment" shows the Doctor trying to tame him through fear as Ferdinand has tried to frighten the Duchess into obedience. Like Ferdinand, the Doctor fails. Ironically, Ferdinand is "studying the art of patience" (V.ii.45), but his concept of the virtue is a travesty of the

15. For images of the Duchess as his prey see III.v.110–113; IV.ii.237; V.ii.341.

16. Cf. D. C. Gunby, *"The Duchess of Malfi:* A Theological Approach," in *John Webster*, Proceedings of the 2d York Conference, ed. Brian Morris (London, 1970), pp. 181–204, Gunby's argument that the Cardinal and Ferdinand are possessed by the devil seems to me an overliteral interpretation of the play's imagery.

Duchess's: "To drive six snails before me, from this town to Moscow . . . " (V.ii.47–48). The parallel and contrast between Ferdinand and the Duchess is thus kept before us. Ferdinand as wolf embodies all the qualities we have come to associate with him throughout the play: the symbol evokes a world of isolation, darkness, and destruction. In his quest for total "solitariness" (V.ii.29), Ferdinand would destroy his own shadow (V.ii.31–41). Evil that preys on the world is reduced finally to preying on itself.

The echo scene shows how the Duchess, too, is reduced: the echo is powerless to protect Antonio; it is insubstantial, "*a dead thing*" (V.iii.39). The Duchess's grave is appropriately among ancient ruins where good men hoped in vain to outlast the storms of the world (V.iii.9–17). Paradoxically, however, though the abbey is in ruins, it evokes a "reverend history," and equally paradoxically the ruined Duchess survives as a light which shows "a face folded in sorrow" (V.iii.44–45). Bosola's final pessimism is thus not entirely synonymous with the play's conclusion:

> We are only like dead walls, or vaulted graves,
> That ruin'd, yields no echo
>
> (V.v.97–98)

It is evil which finally destroys itself and seeks to be "laid by, and never thought of" (V.v.90). Innocence survives as an echo, a reverend history, or a momentary light revealing the sorrow which is its inevitable experience in a fallen world.

It is true that the play offers no answer to the problem of how to survive in a corrupt world. Bosola's solution is to submit to its values, and he is finally neglected. The Duchess goes her own way (I.i.321) and is murdered. Service to Ferdinand is deadly, opposition vain. The play suggests no way of reaching the ideal of the French court, cleansed and life-giving.

It is presumably for this reason that Webster has so consistently seemed to critics incoherent, morally anarchic, or nihilistic. In reality, I suggest, the play constitutes a rigorously coherent exploration of the nature of evil in a fallen world, and the coherence is the paradoxical product of its contradictory structure. The values of the play are implicit in the analysis it offers, and in the formality by which it repeatedly distances the audience

from imaginative absorption in the plot to challenge examination of its analysis. The tension between realism and abstraction alternately involves the spectators and draws their attention beyond the intensity of the play's action to its anatomy of the world, inviting them to perceive the world as a deep pit of darkness, irradiated by the memory of innocence, Antonio's recollection of the French court, an echo of the Duchess's reverend history.

In an essay of this length it has not been possible to introduce detailed comparisons between Webster and contemporary dramatists at each stage of the argument. My hypothesis is, however, that if *The Duchess of Malfi* is unusual in the period, it is so only in the sharpness with which it displays the effects of the contradictory pressures on Renaissance drama. In Tourneur, for instance, on the one hand, we see the emblematic mode in dominance; in Middleton, on the other hand, the formal patterns are present but are more fully masked by the realist surface. Shakespeare, as always, is a case apart, and here it is perhaps harder for us to perceive the emblematic elements in the plays because of our rich heritage of realist critical analysis. But in Webster, and in *The Duchess of Malfi* in particular, we are able to identify a precise and productive instance of the conflict between the contrary pressures of residual and emerging dramatic conventions.