

Modern Language Association

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Source: *PMLA*, Vol. 100, No. 2 (Mar., 1985), pp. 167-186

Published by: Modern Language Association

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/462288>

Accessed: 06/08/2009 16:23

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Sexual and Social Mobility in *The Duchess of Malfi*

The real subject is not primarily sexual lewdness at all, but "social lewdness" mythically expressed in sexual terms.
Kenneth Burke on *Venus and Adonis*

MOST READINGS of *The Duchess of Malfi* apply two categories of analysis: psychological inquiry (what are Ferdinand's motives? how should we understand Bosola?) and moral evaluation (what is the status of the duchess's marriage to Antonio? how does he measure up to it?). But prior questions can be asked. *Why* does Webster give us a wandering duchess? an incestuous brother? an eager yet remorseful henchman? And why are these figures in the play together? How are their features and actions linked? Correlations between incest and promiscuity, ascribed and achieved status, community and alienation can help us chart this sprawling yet impacted play by situating it more firmly in Jacobean culture. Such analysis would align the play with many other efforts, from those of James I to those of Hobbes, to articulate and construe the friction between the dominant social order and the emergent pressures toward social change.

I treat first the noble brother and sister in the light of class strata and anthropological notions of incest and then the experience of their mobile servants Antonio and Bosola as employees and self-conceived social inferiors. In each instance I seek to read Webster's interrogation of the highly charged boundary phenomena of a stratified but changing society.

I. Sexual Mobility

During the last fifty years anthropologists have developed an extensive body of theory about incest. Debate continues on many issues: origin versus structure and function, incest and exogamy (sexual versus marriage regulation), and animal versus human social behavior.¹ Still, a basic outline is now visible. A narrowly psychological—that is to say, universal—explanation of incest (via, for instance, "instinctive repulsion") is

stymied by the diverse data available from non-Western cultures. Jack Goody has found considerable variation in the object of the defining "horror" that incest supposedly "inevitably arouses." Sometimes intercourse with blood relatives arouses the repulsion; on other occasions only relatives by marriage are forbidden (32, 35–42, 46). Moreover, as Kenneth Burke notes, "psychoanalysis too often conceals . . . the nature of exclusive social relations behind inclusive [i.e., universal] terms for sexual relations" (*Rhetoric* 279–80).² A vocabulary of "human nature" obscures crucial variations specific to different social formations. To deal with such variations, we need to reconceive such "givens" of human psychology as social products.

Anthropologists propose two general sets of social explanation for the incest taboo: arguments from factors internal to the nuclear family (such as competition among males for females) and from factors external to it. The latter argument, from the larger social situation, fits neatly with Webster's play. It specifies, in Talcott Parsons's words, that

it is not so much the prohibition of incest in its negative aspect which is important as the positive obligation to perform functions for the subunit and the larger society by marrying out. Incest is a withdrawal from this obligation to contribute to the formulation and maintenance of supra-familial bonds on which major economic, political and religious functions of the society are dependent. (19)³

This notion of public determination of private social structure is quite flexible, as Raymond Firth noted long ago:

I am prepared to see it shown that the incest situation varies according to the social structure of each community, that it has little to do with the prevention of sex relations as such, but that its real correlation is to be found in the maintenance of institutional forms in the society as a whole, and of the specific interest of groups in particular. (340)

This powerful account also explains exceptions to the rule, such as those of ancient Egypt or Hawaii (and, as we will see, exceptions of individual inclination such as Ferdinand's). "Where interest of rank or property steps in," says Firth, "the incest prohibition is likely to melt away" (304).⁴ Both the taboo and its infringements are thus seen as social products, similarly determined by the pressures and limits of particular social formations.

The model thus far presented is derived from traditional societies, where intermarriage is the most important device for ordering "the interpenetration of memberships among the different elements in the structural network" (Parsons 18). Jacobean England, though much more differentiated in many ways, exhibits many of the structural relations of such a traditional society. Lawrence Stone judges that "in the sixteenth century, kin groupings remained powerful in politics, [and] much of the political in-fighting of the century revolved around certain kinship rivalries. . . . In local affairs, kin ties undoubtedly continue to be important well into the eighteenth century" (*Family* 126, 128).⁵ Aberle and his colleagues generalize the notion:

For the bulk of pre-industrial complex societies, the functions of the incest taboo in its extended form remain important at the community level. There, the regulation of affairs is not impersonal and legal. . . . The nexus of social life and cooperation continues to be based on kinship to a significant degree, until societies with well-developed market-economies appear. (18)

The politics of kinship thus continued in importance among the hereditary aristocracy throughout the Jacobean period.

With the development of a differentiated class structure there arises a new sort of pressure that, contrary to the pressure in traditional societies toward intermarriage, tends to limit exogamy. In moving from traditional toward differentiated structure, Jacobean England was marked by this new constraint. Among other ideological pressures, Stone says,

the custom of the dowry, according to which brides from all ranks of the propertied classes were expected to contribute a cash sum, together with the great sensitivity to status and rank, meant that there was a very high degree of social and economic endogamy [i.e., required marriage within the group, here defined in terms

of class]. Since marriage involved an exchange of cash by the father of the bride for the settlement of property by the father of the groom for the maintenance of the couple and a pension for the widow, it was inevitable that the great majority of marriages should take place between spouses from families with similar economic resources. . . . The fact that most [elite] families aspired to maintain status and enlarge connections through marriage meant that in most cases like would marry like. (*Family* 60-61)

These limits to intermarriage were further stressed in aristocratic consciousness by a gradual contamination of the ruling elite by invasion from below—a process that Stone has described in *The Crisis of the Aristocracy*. Although the elite responded with hegemonic contempt to most of these penetrations, widespread public fascination testifies to the issue's continuing potency. Castiglione's *Book of the Courtier* was functionally a prolonged sneer at what Thomas Hoby translates as those "many untowardly Asseheades, that through malapartnesse thinke to purchase them the name of a good Courtier" (29).⁶ And Shakespeare explores the problem repeatedly, from Bottom to Bassanio and Edmund and Othello. This problem of ontological mobility, or mobility of identity, is palpably at the center of the cultural consciousness, certainly in London, nowhere more than in the theater, where I believe it shaped depictions of sexual and marital patterns. In *The Duchess of Malfi* in particular, the class-endogamy pressure assigns to licit marriage an outer frontier, which the duchess trespasses, just as the incest taboo marks the inner wilderness, where Ferdinand longs to dwell.⁷ But to grasp the significance of these symmetrical vectors of social force, we must mark the details of the play.

First, though, a glance at the history of critical opinion about Ferdinand's incestuous desires. F. L. Lucas first addressed the possibility, though he thought it dubious (2: 23-24); Clifford Leech presented the view fully, in *John Webster* (100-06). Leech's argument occasioned resistance, from, for instance, J. R. Mulryne, as implying too readily "the desire to consummate the passion" (223). In response Leech itemized his evidence in *Webster*:

The grossness of his language to her in Act I, the continued violence of his response to the situation, his holding back from identifying her husband and, when that identity is established, from killing him until the

Duchess is dead, his momentary identification of himself with her first husband, his necrophily in Act V—all these things . . . seem to point in one direction. (57)⁸

These items have been widely accepted as suggesting incestuous desires, but they do not address Mulryne's doubts, nor do they clearly relate the incest theme to other elements in the play. The anthropological view of incest, which emphasizes not sex relations but the maintenance of institutional forms, allows us to add to Leech's evidence, make a virtue of Mulryne's objection, and integrate Ferdinand's behavior with the otherwise all-embracing issue of social mobility.

The core of this hypothesis can be briefly stated. I conceive Ferdinand as a threatened aristocrat, frightened by the contamination of his ascriptive social rank and obsessively preoccupied with its defense. This view, when coupled with Leech's evidence, suggests that Ferdinand's incestuous inclination toward his sister is a *social posture*, of hysterical compensation—a desperate expression of the desire to evade degrading association with inferiors. Declining Muriel Bradbrook's substitutive position that the notion of Ferdinand's incest "can satisfactorily compensate for inaccessible Jacobean theological or social moods" (144), I propose to retrieve the social mood and read the two explanations as one, through an understanding of the ideological function of the incest taboo. The taboo enjoins trans-familial bonding: when Ferdinand flouts the taboo, he violently refuses such relations. His categorical pride drives him to a defiant extreme: he narrows his kind from class to family and affirms it as absolutely superior, ideally alienated from the infections of interactive social life. The duchess then becomes a symbol, flooded with affect, of his own radical purity. In reaching for her he aspires to the old heroic tag *par sibi*, to be like only himself, excelling, transcendent, other.⁹

This obsession is made clear by, and accounts for, many small touches early in the play. Webster initially presents Ferdinand expressly addressing his alienation from those below. When Castruchio, making small talk, avers that the prince should not go to war in person but rather "do it by a deputy," Ferdinand replies, "Why should he not as well sleep, or eat, by a deputy? This might take idle, offensive, and base office from him, whereas the other deprives him of honour"

(1.1.99–102). While this hallowed pursuit of distinction warrants personal participation, Ferdinand otherwise enacts his alienation precisely by eschewing participation and employing prosthetic agents: "He speaks with others' tongues, and hears men's suits / With others' ears . . . dooms men to death by information, / Rewards by hearsay" (1.1.173–74, 176–77). His courtiers are to be his creatures, will-less, without spontaneity: "Methinks you that are courtiers should be my touch-wood, take fire, when I give fire; that is, laugh when I laugh" (1.1.122–24). (It is common to describe this behavior as usual for flatterers and ambitious men; for the prince to require it publicly involves a different emphasis altogether.) Ferdinand especially enjoys the distancing trick of surprise: "He will seem to sleep o'th'bench / Only to entrap offenders in their answers" (1.1.174–75). Nicholas Brooke (52, 54, 61) emphasizes how Ferdinand's courtly appearance constitutes an "absolute spectacle" ("laugh when I laugh," "The Lord Ferdinand / Is going to bed" [3.1.37–38], "The Lord Ferdinand laughs" [3.3.54]). Bosola's criticism suggests that this may be an intentional effect: "You / Are your own chronicle too much; and grossly / Flatter yourself" (3.1.87–89). This pattern of distancing objectifies those below Ferdinand as mere reflective witnesses to his absolute surpassing. His embattled sense of excellence insists on ontological separation from those below, but his frenetic iteration of the motif suggests a strategic failure. For there is an inherent contradiction in this device, as in Hegel's master-slave relationship:

The master was actually dependent on the slave for his status as master; both in the general society and in the eyes of the slave, the master was recognized as such only because he controlled slaves. What is worse, the master could not achieve the recognition he originally fought for in this relationship because he was recognized only by a slave, by someone he regards as sub-human. . . . He needed an autonomous person to recognize his desire as human, but instead of free recognition, he received only the servile, dependent recognition of the slave. (Poster 13)¹⁰

Self-defeated, Ferdinand also fails his subjects: instead of acting as the traditional fount of identity to them, he generates the loss of their identity, striving to become more himself by reducing others. His strategy of domination reduces them to tools, to things.

Ferdinand's fascination with his sister is equally strategic. His leering assurances to her that all her most private thoughts and actions will come to light mark the invasive urge to control of the authoritarian voyeur.¹¹ The news of the duchess's liaison brings the social element firmly into view, for Ferdinand's fantasy leaps to the assumption of class disparity. He imagines "some strong thigh'd bargeman; / Or one o'th'wood-yard, that can quoit the sledge, / Or toss the bar, or else some lovely squire / That carries coals up to her privy lodgings" (2.5.42–45). (When he actually discovers Antonio's identity, he describes him as "A slave, that only smell'd of ink and counters, / And ne'er in's life look'd like a gentleman, / But in the audit-time" [3.3.72–74].) This anger specifies cross-class rivalry, and the debasement by occupation marks the intensity of the aversion.¹² For him invaders are mere laborers, well-equipped with poles and bars, false, and potent; by coupling with the duchess they couple with him and contaminate him, taking his place. He desires exclusiveness, which he pursues not by intercourse but by blockage. Mulryne is right, I think, to doubt the urge to physical consummation: for Ferdinand the passion's fruit is in denial, closed and whole in his preemptive possession. To use Firth's terms, the point of Ferdinand's incestuous rage is not the achievement of sexual relations but the denial of institutional slippage through contaminating relation. Just as the taboo takes the form of a denial but functions as a positive pressure outward, so Ferdinand's infringing attitude looks like a desire but functions as a hostile withdrawal inward. As James Nohrnberg has suggested in another context, "incest has some claim to being a kind of intentional chastity" (432).¹³

This formulation deciphers another recalcitrant fact. Firth notes that "in general the harmony of group interests is maintained" by the taboo; "the 'horror of incest' then falls into place as one of those supernatural sanctions, the aura of which gives weight to so many useful social attitudes." But sometimes the reverse is true: "Where [group interests] demand it for the preservation of their privileges, the union permitted between kin may be the closest possible" (340). If Ferdinand's incestuous impulse is determined by class paranoia, then he might well feel a cognate but reversed horror for the outmarriage that contravenes what he needs to believe about social absolutes. Firth frames just this affective reversal in terms of ra-

cial rather than class outmarriage.

The attitude toward incest has something in common with a popular, uninformed view about union of the sexes in the "colour problem." Here one meets with a comparable repugnance to the idea, the same tendency to put the objection on a "natural" or "instinctive" foundation. Close family sentiment is even invoked as the clinching argument in favor of the impossibility of the admission of such unions—in the well-known formula, "Would you like to see your sister marry. . . ." . . . Here, as in the case of the prohibition of the union of very close kin, is an irrational emotional attitude, developing from a set of powerful complex social institutions. (341)

Hamlet is horrified that his own mother would "post with such dexterity to incestuous sheets." Ferdinand's horror is equally aroused by posting and dexterity, but instead of incest the referent is the duchess's horrifying outmarriage.¹⁴

Her action is also threatening to Ferdinand because it suggests that the supposedly ontological class categories are brittle and imperiled by the powers of flexible self-determination exhibited by the duchess and her base lover. Such rewriting of the rules threatens to reveal the human origin, and thus the mutability, of the ultimate elevation on which he rests himself. He cannot tolerate the suggestion, and its source makes it even more frightening—one of his own kind become heretic, apostate. His cruel execution of the duchess may thus have several overlapping motives. To destroy her is to destroy the necessarily potent source of doubt, and the process of destruction reconstitutes them both: she is now the felon, the outlaw; he the transcendent judge. His imprisonment of her reisolates her, puts her in her place, and so restores her status as untouchable, in a private realm that only he can enter. And if her murder counts as a kind of rape, a consummate possessing, he typically employs an agent, a debased and dehumanized prosthesis used teasingly, like the dead man's hand. So he maintains the style of alienation we have seen on the bench (or, for that matter, in the voyeuristic boudoir scene). Such devices allow his forbidden conduct while punishing hers, and then allow him to deny his implication in them. This final evasion is couched in revealing terms, for he returns to the issue of disparity in rank when interrogating Bosola for what has now become an unauthorized murder: "Let me but examine well the cause: / What was the meanness of her match

to me?" (4.2.281–82). Her marriage was for him an adulteration that his fantasy of possession was designed to occlude. He now averts his eyes from his aversion and so alienates himself from himself.

This usurping investment in denial can only be maintained by increasingly radical devotion to the task, a surgical practice degenerating toward ultimate alienation: the solipsism of insanity.¹⁵ Ferdinand had already long contracted his ground of being to the two of them; when he sees that he has accomplished his revenge for her divisive betrayal, he reveals (at 4.2.267) the striking fact that they are (were) twins, restoring a lost unity between them even as her death makes him singular. The enormous condensation at work here may be partially untwisted with the aid of Pausanias's alternative version of the Narcissus fable (the Ovidian version having been pertinent all along). Narcissus in fact had a beloved twin sister.

Upon her death, he is said to have come to a fountain alone, and suffering from desire, gazed upon his own image there. But although that seemed somewhat of a solace, he at length perished with great desire, or, as is more pleasing to others, threw himself into the fountain and perished.¹⁶

When Ferdinand looks down into his dead sister's dazzling eyes, he sees himself, faces his own death too.¹⁷ The circle shrinks again, becoming more and more rapidly only his own. When asked why he is so solitary, he replies that the noble eagle flies alone: "they are crows, daws, and starlings that flock together" (5.2.30–31). Next he tries to divest himself of his shadow, attacking even this inherent multiplicity (5.2.31–41). His lycanthropy, unitary wolf at last, brings him to his logical end in total isolation. Walled in alone, not in a secret garden but in an inward hair shirt,¹⁸ he is finally *sui generis*, a peerless class of one—an entropic apotheosis of the superb Renaissance hero.

Webster presents the duchess in terms precisely symmetrical to her brother's hypertrophy of will. Ferdinand, as we have seen, is pathologically endogamous, investing his energies much farther inward toward the nuclear core than is normatively fitting. His paranoia digs an ontological moat around itself. In contrast, the duchess is excessively exogamous: fettered in Ferdinand's enclosure, she seizes self-definition by reaching out not only past the interdicted purity of her family but

beyond the frontiers of her class, to marry her admirable steward. What Ferdinand would hoard, she circulates. He fastens on the absolutes of ascriptive identity; the duchess, on the earnables of achieved character. And where Ferdinand's denials issue in unpolled sterility, the duchess's self-assertion is fecund, both biologically and ideologically.¹⁹

These opposed actions rest on the same base of will: each sibling has the compulsive focus of Marlowe's protagonists. If Ferdinand is an ingrown Tamburlaine (who, Puttenham tells us [106], was punished with childlessness for his presumption to absolute status), the duchess is a family pioneer who ruthlessly carves out for herself the privatized domestic realm of the future, based on personal rather than familial or class imperatives—a heterosexual Edward II. This fetish of will allows a reading via negative stereotypes for willful women: those, for instance, that lie behind Cleopatra, Lady Macbeth, Benedick's Beatrice—temptress-whore, monster, shrew. But Webster obviates these constructions by emphasizing the biologically and divinely sanctioned maternal motive and the antagonistic stimulant of Ferdinand. In the face of such pressures the duchess seeks to evade a reductive code by creatively adapting strategies of self-determination hitherto restricted to the masculine world of social action. Sadly, they are the very strategies of mobility that have activated Ferdinand's psychotic defenses. That is to say, the duchess's enterprise is not primarily private and romantic: it is, rather, a socially adaptive action that extends to the zone of gender conflict a maneuver actively in play in the arena of class conflict. Like Ferdinand's incestuous bent, it is irredeemably social.²⁰

The duchess begins the play as a widow. Upon her husband's death she entered a new realm of freedom from male domination, the only such realm open to Jacobean women,²¹ and it is this transformation that directly enables her outlaw marriage. Much has been written of late about the liberated status of Renaissance widows: I will here point out only that the duchess privately assumes the unmistakably male tone of the Renaissance hero.²²

Shall this move me? If all my royal kindred
Lay in my way unto this marriage,
I'd make them my low footsteps: and even now,
Even in this hate, as men in some great battles

By apprehending danger, have achiev'd
 Almost impossible actions—I have heard soldiers
 say so—
 So I, through frights, and threat'nings, will assay
 This dangerous venture: let old wives report
 I wink'd and chose a husband. (1.1.341-49)

The apostrophe, the amplification of the hostile odds, the abjection of the enemy, the soldierly comparison, the imperative call for historical (if female) witness—all are heroic topoi. They seem to me to preclude the impoverished interpretive option of the “lustful widow,” husbandless and hungry: the tones are martial, not erotic. Instead, the duchess emphasizes her unconventional venture: “I am going into a wilderness, / Where I shall find nor path, nor friendly clew / To be my guide” (1.1.359-61). A cultural voyager, she arrogates to herself a new role, that of female hero, going knowingly to colonize a new realm of privacy.²³

It is no news, of course, that men read such self-determination as lust. Pitt-Rivers notes that

widows are commonly believed . . . to be sexually predatory upon the young men. . . . A woman whose shame is not in the keeping of a man is sexually aggressive and dangerous. The association reaches its extreme representation in the figure of the witch, the unsubjected female who rides upon a broomstick to subvert the social order.²⁴

Such deviants require (or receive, anyway) the discipline of the charivari, a raucous folk shaming of proven relevance to this play, where it dresses the tortures of act 4 in marriage-masque array.²⁵ But for my point its weight is that this is *Ferdinand's* masque; its ritual structures convict not the married widow but her barren brother—as can be seen when the madness slides from masque to master. Act 5 makes it clear that no ritual management of disorder has supervened here.

The act of self-defining will that occasions this pseudosocial judgment can usefully be compared to the differently compliant postures of Cariola and Julia, antinomies of definition for the duchess. Cariola, best of motherly servants, confirms the secret marriage and tends the duchess at child-bed, joining other servants of daring ladies (Juliet, Portia, Desdemona, Beatrice-Joanna) in attesting to a female self-direction that acts within and yet refuses masculine categories of social control. For such women submission to the lady's lord is per-

functory, allegiance in rebellion and evasion with the lady automatic and simple. Indeed, Cariola is an exceptionally focused specimen of the type: she is not given any of the divided loyalties that would accompany the usual suitor of her own (though Delio is structurally available). But neither is there any sign of degradation in her service, of the sense of self-waste that marks characters who are more modern and more problematic. She seems happily to derive almost the whole of her identity from her relational dedication and so to exhibit for purposes of contrast one familiar form of female self-gift for the duchess to transcend.²⁶

This casting, however, must not be seen as merely negative and limited. For in the Renaissance the private company of women often seems to constitute a secret space in the midst of male society, a haven where the normal modes of subjection are canceled and where a version of traditionally male substantiality is annexed—what we might now hope to call human intimacy. Cariola relates to the duchess as Kent to Lear (though without the devotional power supposedly conferred by noble rank). She occupies the old mode of identity in service with its hierarchical origins, yet she also embodies the collusive strength that female identity can acquire in an oppressively role-restricted society. But though Cariola unquestioningly aids in the duchess's self-defining act, she also ends the scene with choric doubt about the potential for such female self-determination in the two-gender world: “Whether the spirit of greatness, or of woman / Reign most in her, I know not, but it shows / A fearful madness” (1.1.504-06).

Self-giving will of another sort, practiced by Julia, deflects the judgmental charge of lasciviousness away from the duchess. Wife of old Castuchio and mistress of the cardinal, she acts out the Renaissance court strumpet, male-begot, so that the duchess can be seen as freeing herself from such male imperatives. Julia contrasts with the duchess insofar as the duchess's project does not aim at self-subjecting relational identity but itself founds substantial identity in the normatively masculine sense. Julia reaches out to two sources of power in the play, the cardinal and Bosola, advertising in departure her husband's superannuated weakness and so catering to a male model of woman as yardstick of masculine worth. She who rejects the ties of marriage attests to the lover's power to draw a woman's heart even

against the oppressive double-standard rules of male-dominated society. She demonstrates not her own power of self-determination but his power over her. The courtly adulteress is especially drawn to power, to men who can, by conferring erotic relation, make their women significant or safe. By rejecting her decrepit husband Julia also testifies to her ruthless erotic vigor and so makes herself especially alluring to such men. But her achievement is finally self-wasting: Bosola merely employs her, and the cardinal tires of her and kills her. When she offers herself as a toy, she initiates her own consumption and disposal. Ironically, the cardinal murders her for her "hubristic" attempt to be a peer, a helpmate in a heightened sense, to share in cerebral relation rather than merely physical. Julia's ultimate goals are partly congruent with the duchess's, since both women seek personal security in a hostile male world, but the means Julia chooses inevitably subject her to men who define her as pastime, as furlough from the business of *negotium*—the terms in which she offers herself to them.

Like Julia, the duchess is forward in her wooing, but she moves delicately within the proper code of her social superiority to Antonio. As has often been observed, however, she uses this power to cancel itself, stripping herself of superiority in order to invent a private parity that they can occupy together. To see this act as a grave "moral infraction" (Calderwood 136–39) is to assent far too easily to a passive conservatism I doubt Webster sought. But it is certainly a social infraction, and Antonio's wariness is, I believe, a response to that fact.

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—
Conceive not I am so stupid but I aim
Whereto your favors tend: but he's a fool
That, being a-cold, would thrust his hands i'th'fire
To warm them. (1.1.420–28)

The elevation Antonio would reap from this alliance, however disguised, might easily be seen as the goal of *his* ambition, as Delio later thinks (2.4.80–81). But I think it more likely, in view of the allusions to her tortures in act 4, that the duchess's arrogation of masculine sexual self-determination marks *her* aspiring mind, a self-pro-

jection very complexly viewed by the playwright.

The duchess's goal is what we now perceive as a marital norm; as such, it may seem too domestic to count as disruptive social mobility. But such a goal was notably newfangled for the English aristocracy at this time, according to Stone (*Family* 180–91). Issues of female self-determination and mobility across class lines, both social and sexual, had of late come to be commonplace in London. Still, the notion was only slowly comprehended. The duchess herself must toil to bring her openness into the open, flitting back and forth between attack, intrigue, and renunciation. She criticizes high rank as hedging the will, forcing it into allegorical expression (as a tyrant fearfully equivocates, or as one dreams forbidden dreams), and calls on Antonio to awake (1.1.455). With coercive enticement she suggests what a wealthy mine she makes him lord of, and she puts off vain ceremony with a flourish, to appear as a desirous and desirable young widow with only half a blush. Such double, not to say duplicitous, language is necessary (though not sufficient) to capture the wary steward, who has previously been satisfied with fantasies. He must finally be bound by the spy behind the arras, a fitting aristocratic device. But even this forcible conversion of spirit to letter does not secure his free submission to the woman's will: he reluctantly swears but to "remain the constant sanctuary / Of [her] good name" (1.1.460–61). His fears, not cowardly but conventional, help to justify the duchess's use of the rhetorical wiles of intrigue, for which she has been condemned—precisely, I think, for their masculine force; more feminine wiles would be more comfortable to many readers. Still, for creating this heretofore unavailable option the duchess receives what such readers often seem to regard as the just deserts of the mad "spirit of greatness, or of woman." She tries to combine male and female modes here, and her world proves just as hostile to the androgyne as to any other sort of monster.

The duchess's marital inversion, conceptually a liberated move outward into the wilderness, takes the ironic practical form of a secret withdrawal that grows more and more claustrophobic. This effective quarantine encloses her gesture of liberation, which sought to enact the ideal of reciprocity between unequals, so often imputed to the citizens of a supposedly organic hierarchy. Perhaps this ideal originates as an ideology of the

nurturant family; in any case, in Jacobean society it serves mainly as an ideological pacifier. The duchess tries to reclaim it for familial privacy, with her forcible embrace: "All discord, without this circumference, / Is only to be pitied, and not fear'd" (1.1.469–70). She refers, ironically, to her brothers: she tries to banish old relations from the sphere of the new. But her power is limited, the marriage depressingly short-lived. Though three children are born, they arrive between acts (save for the first child, who vanishes behind the horoscope intrigue). Our sense of husband and wife living in peace together derives chiefly from the scene in which that life ends (3.2). Their small talk before Ferdinand appears suggests just the sort of deep and fruitful ease so lacking elsewhere in the play. (We do not see the children here; our impression of the nuclear family comes largely from the duchess's lines about syrup for the son's cold.) But even their boudoir banter addresses (perhaps as usual?) the relationship's foundation in female power, and ironies abound. For instance, Antonio says he rises early after a night with his wife because he is glad his wearisome night's work is over. The affectionate inversion displaces the real reason for early rising: the oppressive need for secrecy, typical of adultery rather than of marriage. Lightheartedness is simultaneously present and painfully absent.

When Ferdinand's eerie appearance disrupts the scene (and allows the duke a taste of substitution), the duchess enters a new isolation prefatory to tragedy. Her response to her brother's erect dagger takes a desperately agile variety of forms: she claims that she can die like a prince; she argues rationalistically (and falsely) that she did not set out to make "any new world, or custom" in marrying; she claims that he is too strict, that her reputation is safe, that she has a right to a future unwidowed. But all her claims fall on deaf, clenched Ferdinand as mere self-justification. Her rational mode of interaction between equals is doomed here, for the urge to parity is the source of the general problem for Ferdinand. When she realizes this she flies without further question.

The tenure of her flight is as truncated in dramatic time as the marriage is. But now as then, the duchess pauses to contemplate the larger significance of her actions, envying the birds of the field, who may marry without restriction;²⁷ wondering whether her brothers' tyranny is a form of

God's will, considering that "nought made [her] e'er / Go right but heaven's scourge-stick" (3.5.80–81); fearing and yet hoping that she is, like the salmon, higher in value when nearer the fire. These metaphysical maneuvers are her psychic defense in the face of capture by Bosola: she strives to perceive, and thus absorb and process, her experience *sub specie aeternitatis*, placing her action in a cosmos less inhospitable than her social world. But these defenses also contain the kind of speculation familiar from Shakespearean tragedy, where the elevated are crushed as they inaugurate new conceptual options. I think Webster here moves beyond Shakespeare, whose women are insufficiently disillusioned to face the ultimate universal hostilities. The duchess is the first fully tragic woman in Renaissance drama.

Once trapped, this woman recites a litany from Shakespearean tragic experience. Ironically courtly to the last, she exhibits a "strange disdain," refusing to grovel and reanimate the ideology she has left behind. She speaks of the thinness of daily life, feeling herself playing a part in tedious theater. She considers praying but instead curses the stars, calls down plagues on her tyrant lineage, and summons the ultimate and original chaos.²⁸ Like Job, she refuses to acknowledge sinfulness. Though utterly stripped like the bare, forked galley slave (4.2.28), she insists on her founding persona of power, "Duchess of Malfi still" (4.2.142). But in reiterating her freedom's origin (in rank), she inevitably also reminds us of her deep inscription in that system, for she has no independent proper name. Webster insists that she is not Victoria, not Livia, not Lucrezia or Cordelia, but one born to be trapped in rank, however she may struggle in the destructive element.

But this irony escapes her, and departs defiant, her own deed's creature to the end. She sustains investment only in her children, the bodily fruits of the personal human love that motivated her original action. The only hierarchy she will acknowledge is a residual and absconded heavenly one, utterly unrelated to any supposed earthly representatives. Having detranscendentalized her social world, she sarcastically puts off her last merely feminine attribute, her tediousness, and bids Bosola tell her brothers they can feed in peace. She leaves Cariola behind her, briefly absent from felicity only to mark the limits of the female model her mistress has razed, by biting and

scratching and screeching a false and futile claim to the relational sanctuary of engagement to a young gentleman.

II. Social Mobility

With Antonio we turn to the issue of upward mobility seen from below. Antonio and Bosola are presented as members of the new class of instrumental men, functional descendants of fifteenth-century retainers who fought the Wars of the Roses for their masters. Under Henry VIII and Elizabeth some of these men came to major power, and many more served in lesser capacities, often as bureaucratic specialists but also as all-purpose henchmen. Wallace MacCaffrey notes that "the practice of the Elizabethan administration mingled confusedly the notion of a professional, paid public service with that of personal service to the monarch" (104). These roles interact in Antonio and Bosola—steward and spy, bureaucrat and hit man. Each feels the new obscure insecurity later to be identified and explained by reference to the cash nexus, the shift from role to job. Each feels it differently.

Antonio enters the play as a choric voice, praising French courtly virtues and presenting the *dramatis personae* in the reified generic terms of the seventeenth-century "character." He is thus grounded in our sympathy (and distanced from the action) by his ideological and narrative spokesmanship, an apparently authorial substantiation that Webster immediately undermines by plunging him into political elevation. He loses his distancing footing at once, in part through the very virtues that entitled him to the choric role.

After the choric exposition, we hear of Antonio's first action, his victory in the joust, a traditional arena for aristocratic character contests. But for this achievement Ferdinand has only perfunctory applause: "Our sister duchess' great master of her household? Give him the jewel:—When shall we leave this sportive action, and fall to action indeed?" (1.1.90–92). Such archaic and sanitized—that is to say, fictional—warfare bores the great duke. Mobile men like Antonio strive continually to grasp such identity as Ferdinand seems effortlessly to possess (though we know better), but they fail to extract satisfying ratification from its established possessors. This problem is more pressing—and more developed—in Bosola

than in Antonio, so I will postpone full discussion of it until the next section. But it is important to see that Antonio's efforts are ill-fated from the start.

We must also see Antonio as one who, like Bosola, is a man in the way of opportunity, a man with a fortune to make. In an early conversation (1.1.224–30) the two servants are superimposed by Ferdinand and the cardinal, who consider them for a job of spying. As a relatively solid steward, Antonio occupies a more assured position than Bosola, whose tormenting search for secured identity constitutes his role in the play; perhaps for this reason Bosola is judged more apt for spying. But they share the *a priori* situation of men whose identity is achieved, not ascribed, in a society where such identity has not yet been accepted as fully substantial.

As we have seen, the duchess's coercive offer animates Antonio's social insecurity. Her steward holds an achieved status of considerable power and security: the skilled estate manager was a Jacobean eminence. For Antonio has arrived at a local pinnacle, and he is satisfied to rest there in honorable service. In part because of this basic satisfaction, he fears the duchess's adventurous proposal. Despite his erotic fantasies concerning his mistress, he must be coerced into further mobility. Antonio is a "new man," his position based on new practices of personal self-determination. But his horizon of mobility is clearly circumscribed; beyond its limits he is ill at ease, unprepared for a society open to the top.²⁹

Once he enters that turbulent realm his public behavior becomes apparently more confident and aggressive, more typical of a man on the move. His sparring with Bosola, whose espionage he suspects from the start, takes the form of class insults. He sneers at him as an upstart, publicly adopting the attitude of the class he has secretly entered as the duchess's consort: "Saucy slave! I'll pull thee up by the roots" (2.3.36); "Are you scarce warm, and do you show your sting?" (2.3.39). In so doing, he emphasizes his own capacity to hire and fire, to make men and break them, ultimately to establish or deny their status; his sneers are combative and self-creative at once.

Such utterances are actually rooted in insecurity. "This mole does undermine me. . . . This fellow will undo me" (2.3.14, 29). But Antonio's insecurity is less remarkable than its restriction to

himself; he does not consider his wife and child in his fear. Barely able to cope with the storms of courtly intrigue to which the duchess has brought him, he is "lost in amazement" (2.1.173) when she goes into labor; having presented the cover story, he mutters, "How do I play the fool with mine own danger!" (2.2.69). When he hears the threats of Ferdinand's letters, he follows his wife's instructions, however grievously, and leaves his family to face Ferdinand's murderous rage without him. He fears for his own safety more than for theirs.

Antonio's insecurity also appears expressly in terms of gender roles. He agreed to his wife's coercive marriage proposal with the deference of the subordinate he feels himself to be. Yet he is miserable at one level of this enforced marriage, insofar as it subordinates him to a woman in that private context where both personal and gender will are at issue. When she reassures him that her brothers will not ultimately cause them harm, that "time will easily / Scatter the tempest" (1.1.471-72), he cannot allow the maternal address to his unmanliness. He asserts that "These words should be mine, / And all the parts you have spoke, if some part of it / Would not have savour'd flattery" (1.1.472-74). But clearly he would never have spoken such words to her. It was not for him to dismiss her brothers as insignificant until she had done so; only then can he painfully claim, for his own sense of self, that he would have said the words.

A similar compensatory gesture occurs in the boudoir scene. Antonio listens silently in hiding while Ferdinand threatens his wife. Having sworn not to seek Antonio, the duke leaves; only then does Antonio claim to wish that "this terrible thing would come again, / That, standing on my guard, I might relate / My warrantable love" (3.2.147-49). But he had been free just minutes earlier to defy Ferdinand. Then Bosola knocks; Antonio cries in dread, "How now! who knocks? more earthquakes?" (3.2.155). During the banter before Ferdinand's arrival Antonio had jested with relative ease about his privately subordinate position. But his elevation, because covert, has not given release from insecurity. He still feels the need to assert his own substance but does so only when he can avoid being held accountable for the assertion.

To rebuke Antonio's petty self-defenses would be to miss the point. They should be recognized as unchosen responses to stresses not of his mak-

ing. Antonio had filled a place where he felt secure and significant. When the duchess converts his erotic daydreams to reality, they become social nightmares. He is not prepared for life in the seismographic realm of noble intrigue. The duchess is not insolvent, for instance, as Webster might have arranged, with ample contemporary precedent, if he had desired to probe Antonio as a powerful new man of finance. Antonio is a man of regularities, not an improviser like Bosola. For this reason he is uncomfortable in his private relations with his wife, feeling bound both to the traditional hierarchy of rank, which enjoins his submission, and to the traditional gender hierarchy, which enjoins him to dominate. His culture has not prepared him to be a subordinate husband or to be a princely consort continually at risk. He is finally to be seen, and sympathized with, as a man helplessly ruled by problems arising from a superior's ambitious love. He lives uncomfortably in the courtly world that has enclosed him. Indeed, we might say, the text infects him with ambition: by the time the news of his child reaches Rome he seems ambitious even to his best friend, who fears "Antonio is betray'd. How fearfully / Shows his ambition now!" (2.4.80-81). And at his death Antonio speaks of a "quest of greatness" now his own, retrospectively apparent by its present collapse. This false dream he would spare his son, bidding him fly the courts of princes (a wish in fact ironically ungranted: the son's restoration at the play's end bodes ill for him, whatever it may say for Amalfi). Antonio's final action, the desperately naive journey to the cardinal for reconciliation, freezes him for us, as one whose unsought elevation never brought much sense of how to navigate the webs of alliance and enmity.

Like the other characters, Bosola is concerned to govern the grounding of his identity. As an employee he presents one of the most intricate examples of the Renaissance problematic of self-shaping. This representation is initially adumbrated through a dense blend of the predicates of counselor, malcontent, have-not, henchman, and aesthete, roles all marked by alienation.

Bosola enters on the heels of Antonio's normative set piece on the French court, a model of public service in which the solipsistic vanities of the decorative gentleman are given a final cause in political service to the prince. In Bosola's intensified and privatized enactment of Castiglione's

courtly counselor, Webster dissects the internal contradictions of the life to which the nation's ambitious young men were drawn.

In swift succession Bosola annexes a variety of stances toward "courtly reward and punishment." Antonio first labels him "the only court-gall" (1.1.23), suggesting the standoffish or outcast malcontent, almost a specialist Jeremiah. Yet this estimate is at once complicated further:

his railing
Is not for simple love of piety;
Indeed he rails at those things which he wants,
Would be as lecherous, covetous, or proud,
Bloody, or envious, as any man,
If he had means to be so. (1.1.23-28)

The distanced moralist and the envious parasite coincide in uneasy dissonance.

Webster also evokes the unrewarded servant: in having Bosola immediately demand belated reward from the cardinal for a suborned murder, Webster links him to the social problem of the veteran soldier, a stranger in his own land, dismissed from desert as well as from service. Then as now this figure was unprovided for, and Bosola has not even the minimal fact of service to his country to cushion his return to social life. He has been a more private soldier and has taken the fall. He will not rise in the pub or feast his friends on Saint Crispin's Day. He can only sneer bitterly at his employers for their relative depravity. Still, he is more than a Pedringano, much more than a Pistol, for Antonio has "heard / He's very valiant: this foul melancholy / Will poison all his goodness." So "'Tis great pity / He should be thus neglected" (1.1.74-77). The most complex of Bosola's ills, however, arise not from neglect but from employment.

For Bosola is preferred, to spy on the duchess. He is made a henchman, an agent, an instrument, and so suggests the complicated new problems that arise from the status of *employee*. At this point in English history, at the beginning of capitalist dominance, service was undergoing the momentous shift from role to job, and the ways in which it could ground a sense of self were changing. Hitherto the prince had been seen as the sacramental source of identity. Puttenham specifies this relation in a poem about Elizabeth: "Out of her breast as from an eye, / Issue the rayes incessantly / Of her justice, bountie and

might": these rays make "eche subject clearely see, / What he is bounden for to be / To God his Prince and common wealth, / His neighbour, kindred and to himselfe" (100). In this view service was simply a mode of assent to the static fact of ascriptive rank. As Stone shows, however, James's sale of honors helped to displace the power to confer identity from God's representative to the money that bought him (*Crisis* 65-128 et passim). As the human origin of rank was gradually revealed, it became clear that the power to confer it was freely available to those who could pull the strings of influence or purse. When ascriptive status emerged as a commodity, the king's sacred role as fount of identity began to decay, and with this shift came a change in the nature of identity itself. It became visible as something achieved, a human product contingent on wealth, connection, and labor. Later, when Marx described it theoretically, the notion could seem a conceptual liberation. As individuals express their life (i.e., as they "produce their means of subsistence"), so they are. What they are, therefore, coincides with their production, both with what they produce and with how they produce (*German Ideology* 42). Here human beings create themselves in the process of work. But in the Renaissance, when this insight began to be visible, it seemed a loss rather than a liberation. The obligation to found identity on one's actions seemed to sever the transindividual bonds that bound the polity together; it left one on one's own, save for the new power of cash, which could buy knight-hoods, even titles. Marx of course clearly specifies this historical passage as a demolition: the exchange relation of capitalism, he says, "has pitilessly torn asunder the motley feudal ties that bound man to his 'natural superiors,' and has left remaining no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest, than callous 'cash payment' " (*Communist Manifesto* 9). For Bosola, an early transitional figure, such clear formulation was not available. I think this nexus seemed to him like a lifeline, weaker perhaps than Elizabeth's nearly divine "rayes" but still somehow linked to the ontologically solid ground of the ruling aristocracy.³⁰ In examining Bosola's "neglect," Webster offers us the first tragic figure whose isolation is formulated in terms of employment by another.

Bosola initially reflects this coincidence of loss and possibility in bitterly deploring his "misera-

ble age, where only the reward / Of doing well is the doing of it" (1.1.31–32). Webster inverts the proverb (Tilley V81) to show that virtue is no longer its own reward but has become a commodity, only a means to an end. What formerly conferred a sense of absolute worth based on a collective cultural judgment has now lost its savor and is worthless unless vendible. Bosola is so far modern that he laments not the absence of the old mode but its residual presence. Still, he gets what he seems to want almost at once, within about two hundred lines, when Ferdinand says "There's gold" (1.1.246). The rest of the play examines (as Bosola dourly inquires) "what follows." For the post of intelligencer aggravates his discontent, though it frees him from the material want and shame that dominate his galley life. But such a reward is mere hire and salary; he wants more, is miserable without it. Bosola cannot be said to be merely greedy for gain, a motive that no more explains his actions than it does Ferdinand's (see 4.2.283–85). But we need to understand what more he wants.

Of course the answer is the same total self-realization achieved by Cariola and Kent. But the personal service by which Bosola seeks this ultimate goal in fact reduces and dehumanizes him. Where Kent's desires were completely coincident with his master's ("What wouldst thou?—Service"), Ferdinand's are withheld from Bosola ("Do not you ask the reason: but be satisfied" [1.1.257]) and so cannot be adopted as purposes.³¹ Bosola is specifically alienated from the utility of the "intelligence" that is his labor's product, and so he creates a reified commodity and a reified self along with it. Marx formulates this action precisely.

[Alienated] labor is *external* to the worker. . . . it is merely a *means* to satisfy needs external to it . . . the external character of labor for the worker appears in the fact that it is not his own, but someone else's, that it does not belong to him, that in it he belongs, not to himself, but to another. . . . [The worker's activity] . . . is the loss of his self.

(*Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* 110–11)

Instead of founding his identity, Bosola expends it in his work. Hungry for spiritual ratification, Bosola offers up to Ferdinand all he has. He expects this relationship, his relation to his prince, to found him; he expects the cash relation to carry

the same kind of life-giving social blood as the earlier circuit of rule and fealty. But instead he merely spends himself and gets paid. Then, of course, he resorts to working harder, presuming he has not yet sufficiently earned his ontological paycheck; and the more he puts himself into his production, the more he loses himself. This sense of his desire helps construe what would otherwise seem a simply "depraved" ongoing decision to continue doing Ferdinand's dirty work, much in spite, he claims, of his own good nature. Compulsively seeking to be paid, recognized, acknowledged, identified, Bosola expends efforts that intensify his sense of need but prove unequal to the task of filling it. The cash payment is the full exchange value to be got from this employer.

Bosola tries to obliterate this lack of ratification with a device prominent in the English machiavel's career: the aestheticizing of intrigue. Noble machiavels may seek this stance in search of Ferdinand's *sui generis* alienation, but Bosola's purpose is different, even somewhat the reverse. A clue to his practice can be found in Georges Sorel's suggestion that artistic creation anticipates the way perfected work will feel in the society of the future (39, 287). This kind of activity confers just the unity that alienated labor undercuts. Hence, it may be argued, aestheticizing can restore a felt unity or wholeness to actions by decontextualizing them, separating them from the context that displays one's fragmentation. In focusing on the aesthetic shape of, say, a suborned act of violence or betrayal, to the exclusion of awareness of the context that marks it *as* suborned violation, alienated laborers can grasp a false sense of integrity by, as it were, alienating themselves from their alienation.³² Seen in this light, Bosola's aestheticizing functions as an evasion, a narcotic that lends a sense of totality while dulling awareness of its falsity. The part seems the whole, for he can devote his whole self (and so reconstitute it for the duration) to the means of the task by ignoring the opacity of its end.

The apricot incident offers a specimen of this technique. Here Bosola observes the duchess's physical condition in considerable specialist detail (2.1.63–68) and applies a test for pregnancy—the typically alimentary Renaissance device of administering apricots (a laxative and thus labor stimulant).³³ The trick is, he says to himself, "A pretty one" (2.1.70): Bosola watches not only the duchess but himself at work, taking pleasure in

his professional prying, even setting up private dramatic ironies and sotto voce gloating for his own entertainment (see 2.1.112, 117, 140, 145). Lukács offers a theoretical frame. "The specialized 'virtuoso,' the vendor of his objectified and reified faculties does not just become the [passive] [sic] observer of society; he also lapses into a contemplative attitude *vis-a-vis* the workings of his own objectified and reified faculties" (100). Bosola is thoroughly engaged (and thus unifyingly estranged) not only in practicing the technicalities of his craft but in appreciating his own stylistic flair.³⁴

We can see a similar bifurcation of consciousness in the interrogation scene (in 3.2), where Bosola discovers that Antonio is the duchess's husband. To unfold it properly we must first examine Bosola's youth, which was characterized by a more ostentatiously aesthetic sense of his actions. For according to Delio, Bosola was

a fantastical scholar, like such who study to know how many knots was in Hercules' club, of what colour Achilles' beard was, or whether Hector were not troubled with the toothache: he hath studied himself half blear-eyed, to know the true symmetry of Caesar's nose by a shoeing-horn; and this he did to gain the name of a speculative man. (3.3.41-47)

Bosola has had the sort of university training that warped his predecessor Flamineo, gave him a sense of ambition, and fitted him for little but mobility. The Lylyan dandy's mode seems not to have worked for Bosola; instead he finally found work with the cardinal and thus found his way to the galleys. But Delio's gossip shows that the exquisitely intellectual management of reputation is to Bosola a familiar tool, cognate with spying and thuggery; he has only retreated from its more precious manifestations.³⁵

Under Bosola's questioning, the duchess screens her liaison by accusing Antonio of peculation (yet another false financial motive). When Bosola defends him against this accusation and other criticisms from Antonio's former fellows, she replies that Antonio was basely descended. Bosola then explicitly raises the contrast between ascription and achievement that is so central to the play: "Will you make yourself a mercenary herald, / Rather to examine men's pedigrees than virtues?" (3.2.259-60). This pointed challenge inspires her to reveal that Antonio is her husband, because it

so clearly specifies the terms of her rebellion in choosing him. Bosola's reply says as much about himself as about her.

No question but many an unbenefic'd scholar
Shall pray for you for this deed, and rejoice
That some preferment in the world can yet
Arise from merit. The virgins of your land
That have no dowries, shall hope your example
Will raise them to rich husbands: should you want
Soldiers, 'twould make the very Turks and Moors
Turn Christians, and serve you for this act.
Last, the neglected poets of your time,
In honour of this trophy of a man,
Rais'd by that curious engine, your white hand,
Shall thank you, in your grave for't; and make that
More reverend than all the cabinets
Of living princes. For Antonio,
His fame shall likewise flow from many a pen,
When heralds shall want coats to sell to men.

(3.2.283-98)³⁶

Her unequal marriage will legitimate many other sorts of deserving mobility: the unemployed graduate will find preferment, the impoverished virgin security with a rich husband. Alien Turks and Moors will flock like Othellos and Ithamores to her side in gratitude for this tolerance of heterodox origin. And this multifoliate action will be eternized by neglected poets happy to get the work. The duchess has ratified elevation by merit, and Bosola's applause betrays his own authentic experience of the dream—and of the attendant anomie, a blend of the loss of old securities and the lack of new ones.³⁷

Many readers accept Bosola's speech as sincere; others presume it to be a ploy designed to unlock the duchess's tongue. I think it is both: his own sincere response managed in pursuit of his employer's goal. This apparent contradiction is only a particular case of Lukács's reified employee's general deformation: "His qualities and abilities are no longer an organic part of his personality, they are things which he can 'own' or 'dispose of' like the various objects of the external world" (100). Bosola exchanges his authentic emotional stance for the information his master wants. But this self-commoditizing exchange manipulation is asymmetrical, for Bosola does not easily revert to the dispassionate stance of the intelligencer. Perhaps the plan for the false pilgrimage is a sarcasm enabling the difficult shift from intimacy to the spy report by positing a ground for an inter-

mediate stage of sneering distance: he can call her a politician, a soft quilted anvil, and so forth and return to his habitual malcontent mode. But even this self-manipulation (if that is what it is) is not fully anesthetic, for when Bosola *returns* to his commoditized state (the obvious force of the mediate pause of "What rests, but I reveal / All to my lord?") it is with self-loathing: "O, this base quality / Of intelligencer!" (3.2.326–28). A further deflection is needed, a universal projection of the commodity model: "why, every quality i'th' world / Prefers but gain or commendation: / Now, for this act I am certain to be rais'd, / *And men that paint weeds to the life are prais'd*" (3.2.328–31). If the duchess's act was sordid, and his own no lower than any other, Bosola may se-date the sympathy he had for her, at least long enough to file his report.

I will pass more briefly by the well-known torture and murder scene, pausing only to note how it combines the predilections of Ferdinand and his agent. The motive force is of course the brother's, a fact often missed, owing perhaps to his apparent absence. Michael Warren (of the Nuffield Theatre) has suggested that Ferdinand's role in this scene might be made clear by "having Ferdinand on or above the stage, physically directing the action" (66); I would prefer to have the duke visible but inactive, frozen in his contemplative mode of alien voyeur. For his part, Bosola steeps himself in procedure, but in the process he is touched by the insistent coherence of his fellow galley slave. She does not reach for external legitimation as he has done but rests in the fact that she is, like Middleton's Beatrice-Joanna, "the deed's creature," needing no DeFlores to tell her so. And as Bosola lives the parts he plays, his dismissal of earthly values besieges his increasingly stunted goals, even as he pursues ever more grimly the aesthetic anesthesia of obsession with form. He is finally silent throughout the strangling, returning to life (that is, jerking away from reflection to instrumentality) with the uncharacteristically brutal "Some other strangle the children" (4.2.239). He seems barely under control in the face of the tragedy he has caused, less and less confident of what has now come to seem repayment from Ferdinand.

Instead, of course, Ferdinand rewrites the contract (repudiating debt as Jacobean nobles often did) by pardoning Bosola's *murders*, ironically restoring to his agent the fully humanizing capac-

ity of the moral sense. (The "gift" inverts Lear's denial of Kent's loyal advice about Cordelia.)

Why didst thou not pity her? what an excellent
Honest man mightst thou have been
If thou hadst borne her to some sanctuary!
Or, bold in a good cause, oppos'd thyself
With thy advanced sword above thy head,
Between her innocence and my revenge!

(4.2.273–78)

Action beyond the employer's instruction is available only to the independent human, not to the tool that cannot think for itself. When Ferdinand challenges Bosola's humanity, he speaks his own heart too, called out of alienation too late, like Bosola's. But this castigation, meant to deflect his pain, only postpones it. In "pardoning" his henchman, he schizophrenically enacts revenge and forgiveness at once.

Though the reproach nourishes Bosola's developing rebellion against his reification, he cannot at first abandon his own project. He feverishly opposes legal, moral, rational, and courtly sanctions to Ferdinand's dismissal, demonstrating his service to be in all particulars deserving. This dismissal perverts justice, he says; you shall quake for it; let me know wherefore; "though I loath'd the evil, yet I lov'd / You that did counsel it; and rather sought / To appear a true servant, than an honest man" (4.2.331–33). The parallel with the duchess's defense in the boudoir is striking; here as there the arguments are incomprehensible to Ferdinand, who again burrows into the dark. And like the duchess, Bosola must face the ultimate failure of his project, for self-fashioning through employment:

I stand like one
That long hath ta'en a sweet and golden dream:
I am angry with myself, now that I wake

off my painted honour:
While with vain hopes our faculties we tire,
We seem to sweat in ice and freeze in fire.

(4.2.323–25, 336–38)

His dream of ultimate grounding at the hands of another stands revealed as a delusive Petrarchan hope for an absolute beyond earthly grasp.

Faced with this failure, Bosola seeks his ontological grounding anew in a succession of chosen

actions that he sees as neither derived from another (as his service was) nor evasively contemplative: "somewhat I will speedily enact / Worth my dejection" (4.2.374-75). Personal vengeance will at least make him his own deed's creature. (This action obscurely coalesces the dual motives of compassion for the duchess and anger over his own neglect: Ferdinand causes both sufferings.) When we next see Bosola he is accepting employment from the cardinal with ironic alacrity: "Give it me in a breath, and let me fly to't: / They that think long, small expedition win, / For musing much o'th'end, cannot begin" (5.2.118-20). Security, like virtue, rests in the doing, in the subsuming process of unalienated action itself—in the search for a vengeance that he desperately wants to be decisive, constitutive. As Bosola opens himself more and more to the sacramental powers of moral confidence to be got from the act, he turns hopefully to a traditional self-sacrificial idiom: "O penitence, let me truly taste thy cup, / That throws men down, only to raise them up" (5.2.348-49). Though he still feels neglect and seeks advancement, he has shifted his ground to the seemingly more reliable realm of the transcendent moral order.

It can only be Webster's comment on this posture that Bosola's next action (reminiscent of Cordelia's death after Albany's "The gods defend her!") is the unwitting murder of Antonio. His short-lived transcendental stance is utterly disrupted by this monstrous error: "We are merely the stars' tennis-balls, struck and banded / Which way please them" (5.4.54-55). The dream of self-substantiation through self-abnegation he now rejects as pointless, swearing "I will not imitate things glorious, / No more than base: I'll be mine own example" (5.4.81-82). He denies service to God and to Ferdinand alike as falsely coherent. In being his own example he returns to a stance like the duchess's unitary "I am Duchess of Malfi still." If he cannot realize himself in any cosmic or social terms, he may yet seek identity *par sibi*, and so he grimly carries out a revenge now sheerly his own.

In the play's final action Bosola begins firmly enough, killing the cardinal's innocent servant to secure the room. But mad Ferdinand comes in as to the wars, finally falling to action in deed, and wounds everyone to the death. Bosola lasts longest, playing his own Horatio for the astounded witnesses:

Revenge, for the Duchess of Malfi, murdered
By th' Arragonian brethren; for Antonio,
Slain by this hand; for lustful Julia,
Poison'd by this man; and lastly, for myself,
That was an actor in the main of all
Much 'gainst mine own good nature, yet i'th'end
Neglected. (5.5.81-87)

He casts himself finally and summarily as an agent, a vicarious actor on behalf of all the victims, not least for himself, murderer and murdered at once, haunted throughout by an always pending better self, now definitively neglected. The supposed restorative of revenge has littered the stage, but the body count, though lavish, is sterile. Bosola ends by fixing our eyes on this lack, this gulf, in his final line, about "another voyage." For as Lear's undone button invokes nakedness and the heath, Bosola's departure is seaward, to the galleys, to the pathless wilderness from which he entered the play, a castaway looking for solid ground to call his own.

III. Conclusion

This is the burden felt by all: the shaping of the social self in the abrasive zone between emergent and residual social formations. Webster's play is what Kenneth Burke calls a magical chart, a cognitive decree that names a problematic situation and voices an attitude toward it (*Philosophy of Literary Form* 3-8). Webster's chart insists that the characters' urges and defining gestures are transformations of one another; that they are fundamentally constituted by, "struck and banded which way please," a net of dimly understood and contradictory social forces; and that these forces shape and limit the kind of actions we habitually regard as individually authentic and chosen (and that carry the responsibilities we associate with tragedy and villainy). Webster provides a social world that constitutes what are clearly not the transcendental subjects of traditional moral inquiry.

Fredric Jameson suggests a more political repossession:

The cultural monuments and masterworks that have survived tend necessarily to perpetuate only a single voice . . . the voice of a hegemonic class. . . . They cannot be properly assigned their relational place in a dialogic system without the restoration or artificial reconstruction of the voice to which they were initially

opposed, a voice for the most part stifled and reduced to silence, marginalized, its own utterances scattered to the wind, or reappropriated in their turn by the hegemonic culture. (85)

I believe that this play was written, at least in significant part, to dissect the actual workings of the normative ideology set before us at its beginning. Far from providing criteria for the judgment of the heterodox characters (as criticism, seduced by power as order, has often presumed), this ideological frame and those who pose and endorse it are themselves to be judged by the "heterodox." Critics' moral judgments directed against the outcast duchess (as lustful, irresponsible, unwomanly, womanish) emanate from this ideological center; they are at one with high-minded humanist sneering at sycophants whom the center in fact invents,

summons up for service and ideological approbation. I believe that Webster strives to recover such stifled voices, to bare oppositional gestures usurpingly rewritten, both then and often even now, as womanish eccentricity or base-mindedness. My analysis has sought also to reclaim Ferdinand for understanding (if not sympathy) by reading his motives as the absolutized and finally self-destructive core of the nobility's project for dominance. Ferdinand's savage gestures strip to the skin the soothing discourse of reciprocity. To its incantations the play is addressed as a disruptive symbolic act, the reverse of Burkean Prayer—as an Imprecation.

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Notes

¹For a summary of the debate, see Aberle et al.

²However, see Marotti's approach to this problem, esp. 486.

³As has often been observed, this account slurs the distinction between the incest taboo (on sexual relations within the group) and the injunction to exogamy (prohibiting marriage within the group). But for the purposes of this study the gap may be collapsed, given the link between prohibitions of sex and of marriage within a descent group.

If therefore the rule of exogamy is to be related to the external value of the marriage alliance . . . then the intra-group prohibition on intercourse cannot be dissociated from it. The rejection of temporary sexuality within the group is in part a reflection of the rejection of permanent sexuality, and the latter is related to the importance of establishing inter-group relations by the exchange of rights in women. (Goody 44)

Concerning incest with blood relations (as in Webster) the explanations of the incest taboo and exogamy thus tend to be congruent.

⁴It is no surprise to find this open formulation in a pioneering study of Polynesia, a region famous (among anthropologists, anyway) for incest. This passage concludes Middleton's "A Deviant Case," which bases its strong argument for the nonuniversality of the incest taboo on Egyptian exceptions, especially in the middle class.

⁵Reviewers have given this book severe strictures but generally agree that Stone is reliable on the aristocracy, my subject here.

⁶For a detailed study of these matters, see Whigham, *Ambition and Privilege*.

⁷A confrontation between these inner and outer boundaries is present in the normative patterns of cuckoldry in Jacobean city comedy, where an older merchant with a young wife is

often cuckolded by an active young gentry figure. Sexual interaction between members of different generations (as here between husband and wife) has been called "metaphorical incest" by Lévi-Strauss (10)—witness our modern exclamation, "he's old enough to be her father"—so both boundaries may be entangled somehow. I address generational incest, literal and figurative, elsewhere in the larger study of which this essay is a part.

⁸The issues of restraint seem to be adapted from Ernest Jones's famous account of Hamlet's delay.

⁹On the general issue of "degree" compare Selzer, "Merit and Degree," a study that overlaps in some ways with my own. Selzer, however, works with a reified moral concept of "degree" that addresses neither the role of the concept in the period's ideological workings nor the growing body of work in the sociology and anthropology of Renaissance culture that would ground the term in the social context to which it manifestly refers.

In fairness, Selzer deserves credit for one of only two linkings I have seen of the incest motif to the question of isolated social grouping in *The Duchess of Malfi*. He observes in passing that Ferdinand's "tendency toward incest" is "rooted in an obsession with rank" (74). Empson's earlier comment is also somewhat better grounded. In a review of Leech's *Webster* he says that "Elizabethans believed that Lucrezia Borgia went to bed with her brothers because, owing to her intense family pride, which was like that of the Pharaohs, she could find no fit mate elsewhere" (85). Empson reports in correspondence that he cannot recall the documentary source for this suggestive claim, nor have I located it. The notion may well derive from gloating reports of rumors that circulated in Italy when Lucrezia's father, Pope Alexander VI, dissolved her marriage to Giovanni Pesaro: her husband claimed that Alexander wanted her for himself, and public opinion soon extended the

idea to her brothers. I have been unable, however, to locate any English Renaissance texts expressing this view, which modern historians regard as the sheerest propaganda. (For the Borgias see Mallett, Fusero, and Erlanger.)

On *par sibi* see Price.

A word on the status of Ferdinand's action. I take it that family relations are not static structures but activities, pursued in the mode specified by Bourdieu, who prefers "to treat kin relationships as something people *make*, and with which they *do* something . . . they are the product of strategies (conscious and unconscious) oriented towards the satisfaction of material and symbolic interests and organized by reference to a determinate set of economic and social conditions" (35–36). Bourdieu's analysis of parallel-cousin marriage, "a sort of quasi-incest" strategically deployed (40), offers an extended test of this view (see 307–71).

At this point I should also mention Bob Hodge's interesting article on false consciousness in Webster, which covers much of the same ground this essay addresses. (Hodge's piece appeared when this study was largely complete.) I will not attempt here a point-by-point comparison of views, aside from marking the significantly different final valuations of Webster and Bosola. It is, though, worth noting that Hodge shares something like Bradbrook's sense of the separateness of the sexual and social strands of the play: "Ferdinand in *The Duchess* is the only main protagonist who is concerned about class or status, but his incestuous obsession with his sister's purity is a stronger motive than his concern for Antonio's lowly status. It is as though the dramatist had conceived his plays from two totally unrelated points of view" (106). Again, I hope, by construing these ingredients very differently, to demonstrate their deep interdependence. Nonetheless, I recommend Hodge's piece to readers interested in the social freight of Webster's play.

¹⁰This is Poster's useful report of Kojève's presentation of Hegel; for Hegel's argument see the new Miller translation, 111–19, esp. 117 (where the terms appear as "lordship" and "bondage"). See also Sartre's discussion of the Look (340–400). The notion fits neatly with the social situation of the Renaissance court. Further analysis might suggest that Brooke's "absolute spectacle" is an attempt to dominate the Look, to appropriate its freedom; according to Sartre this attempt would be doomed to fail (see 494–534).

¹¹Hunter observes of the related "disguised prince" motif that one usually finds both "the desire to participate" and "the desire to condemn and withdraw" (101). Other relevant materials for this courtly *concupiscentia oculis* are Auden and Whigham, "Interpretation at Court."

¹²That we are still responsive to such shocks, though perhaps along different axes, may be seen by reference to Billy Wilder's *Sunset Boulevard*, where we respond with a similar shudder to the news that Erich von Stroheim, Gloria Swanson's butler, is her former husband. Then as now these are categories difficult to mix.

¹³Robin Fox, author of *The Red Lamp of Incest*, has suggested to me that since much hostility to outmarriage can be found throughout English literature since the Renaissance and yet only occasionally in the incestuous form Ferdinand exhibits, we ought properly to ask a broader and deeper question: "Why at some periods do inappropriate marriages cause incestuous anxieties and at others merely social outrage?" Unfortunately I cannot claim sufficient knowledge of the long sweep of English history and culture necessary to address this comparatist

question; I settle here for raising the larger issue and investigating a single Jacobean representation of the incest version of the problem.

¹⁴This argument entirely revalues the status of Ferdinand's turbulent response to his sister's marriage as evidence of incest. It reflects similarly on the formulation that he responds as a cuckold rather than as a wounded brother (proposed by Brennan 493). Whether these arguments are alternatives I am not sure.

¹⁵Williams points out that the term "alienation" could literally mean "insanity" (as in "alienation of the faculties") at this time (29). See also *OED* "alienation" 4. The common sense of alienation from God is also relevant here. Compare Kinsman's remarks on alienation in his introduction to *The Darker Vision*.

¹⁶I cite Nohnberg's translation of Comes's Renaissance version from the *Mythologiae*, which details the death (see Nohnberg 433n.); for Pausanias see *Description* 9.31.7–8.

¹⁷Sartre's moving discussion of sadistic torture is worth comparing to Ferdinand's final reaction. Sartre says that one who loves wants to be chosen both freely (contingently, from among others) and absolutely (to be the unique occasion of the total limitation of the beloved's capacity to choose) (479). The sadist fastens on this latter aspect of the irrevocably contradictory desire, seeking to appropriate the other's freedom, to steal and own it: "this is why the moment of pleasure for the torturer is that in which the victim betrays or humiliates himself" (523). But the victim always *chooses* the moment to yield and so retains his freedom and denies it to the sadist, Sartre argues (523). When the duchess says "Dispose my breath how please you" (4.2.228), she chooses her death and retains her freedom unbroken, frustrating Ferdinand's desire for ownership. The result is that "the sadist discovers his error when the victim *looks* at him; that is, when the sadist experiences the absolute alienation of his being in the Other's freedom. . . . The sadist discovers that it was *that freedom* which he wished to enslave, and at the same time he realizes the futility of his efforts" (525–27). Maybe this is why Ferdinand says "Cover her face." In any case, the immediate imputation of the crime to Bosola certainly may be the displacement of a failure.

¹⁸I owe this striking and obviously authorial view of the internal hair to Baker (350).

¹⁹Allison observed a vague version of this balanced contrast some two decades ago. Speaking of the "self-will and erotic bent" that Ferdinand and the duchess share, he says that "obverse aspects of the same temperamental excess have brought brother and sister to catastrophe" (266).

²⁰I think Webster meant to present us with a confusing social problem, not with an occasion for easy and moralistic response. Despite documentary arguments against widows remarrying and for the obligations of state service, it seems unlikely that the audience is supposed to find the duchess's action antisocial, hubristic, and licentious, as a certain sector of well-known criticism claims (see, for instance, Leech, *Webster*; Calderwood; and Peterson). Certainly the duchess's plight is pathetic in personal terms, but I object to seeing her as deservedly punished (nonetheless, as it were), chiefly because the ideology that grounds such a judgment—Ferdinand's ideology—is the very ideology the play puts most deeply in question. And any reader of Boklund's source study can see how far Webster went to problematize moral judgments that

were easy for William Painter. Empson's irascible retort to Leech is essential reading on this point.

²¹Compare Cressy's description of women's situation in general during the period:

Widows and women who were heads of households were the only women assumed to have any independence, but the polity was normally thought to exclude women of all sorts. Sir Thomas Smith categorically rejected women as subjects and citizens in the commonwealth. Women are "those whom nature hath made to keep home and to nourish their familie." A petition by Leveller women was turned away, "their being women, and many of them wives, so that the law tooke no notice of them." As little more than "men's shadows," women were subsumed under their husbands' or masters' identity. While a wife in England was accorded the rank or status of her man, she was, nonetheless, "*de jure* but the best of servants." (34)

It is easy to imagine such repression stimulating rebellion. Bosola's comment on the duchess's "strange disdain" in prison may suggest such a pattern: "this restraint, / (Like English mastiffs, that grow fierce with tying) / Makes her too passionately apprehend / Those pleasures she's kept from" (4.1.12-15). It is reductive to think of the duchess here as missing simply sexual pleasures (though Berry hears a hint of her "sexual proclivities" [113]). I think a more general liberation is at issue: the duchess's actions should be seen not as erotic (a common male reduction of women's issues) but as political.

²²Marlowe is adduced at this point by Berggren (353). The echo of Tamburlaine's royal human footstools is striking.

²³The paradoxical penetration of wilderness in search of domesticity can be deciphered by Fowler's alignment of wilderness with chastity and of tameness with submission to a lover's will, in regard to Wyatt's "Whoso list to hunt." Webster's adventuress is wild in one sense at the social level (venturesome) and wild in the other sense at the erotic level (maritally chaste). For her the real wild is the uncharted social waste she seeks to colonize and cultivate, though of course she must enter it by means anything but domestic from her brother's point of view.

²⁴Pitt-Rivers is writing of Andalusia, but the sentiment is common in Renaissance England, as many literary widows suggest.

²⁵See Ekeblad; see also Pitt-Rivers 47-50 and Thomas.

²⁶See Bardwick and Douvan, esp. the following: "In the absence of independent and objective achievement, girls and women know their worth only from others' responses, know their identities only from their [institutionalized] relationships as daughters, girl friends, wives, or mothers . . ." (231). Though all personal identity now seems thus socially constituted, the distinctive restriction of women can still be discerned in that they (and retainers like Kent) are defined in overdetermined relation—usually familial, always private—to particular people, a set much smaller than all one's associates; often the relation is to a single person, such as the husband (or king). Compare Kent's "Royal Lear, / Whom I have ever honored as my king, / Loved as my father, as my master followed, / As my great patron thought on in my prayers" (1.1.139-42).

²⁷This particular comparison reinforces my belief that the play's machinery substitutes the duchess's outmarriage for Fer-

dinand's incest as the object of horror, for Webster may well have adopted the terms of the juxtaposition from Myrrha's argument for the legitimacy of incest in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*: "Other animals mate as they will, nor is it thought base for a heifer to endure her sire, nor for his own offspring to be a horse's mate; the goat goes in among the flocks which he has fathered, and the very birds conceive from those from whom they were conceived. Happy they who have such privilege!" (10.324-29). This passage is the explicit source for defenses of incest or dark sexuality in Marston (*The Dutch Courtesan* 2.1), Tourneur (*The Atheist's Tragedy* 4.3), Donne ("The Progress of the Soul" 191-203), and Massinger (*The Unnatural Combat* 5.2). Webster's transvaluation of the trope to specify marital purity is striking, and the vague allusion to the lilies of the field (Matt. 6.28) amplifies the effect of a relation beyond the corrupt limits of the social.

²⁸Leech comments that "this longing for the first chaos links her with many characters in Elizabethan and Jacobean drama whose ambitions are thwarted and who would in anger overturn the hierarchies of 'degree.'" He quotes Northumberland's "let order die!" speech from *Henry IV, Part Two* and suggests that "just as Shakespeare wished to make clear the nature and ultimate goal of rebellion, so here Webster shows us a woman at odds with life itself. . . . There is a grandeur in the egoism, but its implications are essentially anarchic" (*John Webster* 76-77). But Leech has omitted the definitive case of *King Lear*, and, in any event, the moral weight of rebellion depends on what is being rejected.

²⁹For discussions that presume Antonio to be ambitious in the wooing scene, see Berry 108-09 and Best 169.

³⁰Ornstein has adumbrated this idea less technically, suggesting that Bosola "seeks to give meaning to his life by loyal service" (143).

³¹It is instructive to compare Macro's speech of self-definition as agent in Jonson's *Sejanus*.

I will not aske, why CAESAR bides doe this:
But ioy, that he bids me. It is the blisse
Of courts, to be imploy'd; no matter, how:
A princes power makes all his actions vertue.
We, whom he workes by, are dumbe instruments,
To doe, but not enquire: His great intents
Are to be seru'd, not search'd. Yet, as that bow
Is most in hand, whose owner best doth know
T'affect his aymes, so let that states-man hope
Most vse, most price, can hit his princes scope.

(3.714-23)

Macro actively embraces the role of instrument, yet, as the simile of the bow suggests, there can be utility in whatever discernment of intent is involved in hitting the prince's scope. Nonetheless, such curiosity, however instrumental, is hazardous at court, both in Webster (for Julia and for Bosola) and of course in Jonson's Rome.

³²See Lukács 139-40; Jauss. Hunter addresses some of the same issues, reaching somewhat different conclusions:

[Flamíneo and Bosola], like Malevole, are the individualists who know all the rules for individualists, know the meaninglessness of success, yet carry on, as if hypnotized by their own expertise. They indeed of all characters in the plays are least able to achieve any of their desired ends. As tool-villains they

have to obey the rules of those who have hired them, and lack even the satisfaction of a Lodovico in "limning" the night-piece of *The White Devil* (1612)—a satisfaction that seems to survive even when the artist himself is about to be "dislimbed." (104)

³³The detail of this commentary is impressive enough that Nordfors has described Bosola as a protoscientist.

³⁴For more on the significance of this emphasis on style and manner, see Whigham, *Ambition and Privilege* 34–39, 88–95.

³⁵Bosola's rejection of this strategy connects with his criticism of the Old Lady (2.1.21–44) for what may be termed the conspicuous ontological repair of cosmetics and with the

equally bitter mock instruction he gives Castruchio in how to "be taken for an eminent courtier" (2.1–20). The energy of these otherwise disconnected speeches may be read as self-castigation deflected onto a sitting target; see Whigham, *Ambition and Privilege*, 116–18, 223 n.40.

³⁶The nostalgic edge of Bosola's praise ("yet"—285) can presumably be explained by reference to the resentful claim of Castiglione's Vincent Calmeta, that "now adaies very few are in favor with princes, but such as be malapert" (110). Perhaps the ambitious always fear they have been left behind without realizing it; in any case, in that world rivals are always—contradictorily—presumptuous, versions of the self, deserving.

³⁷Among those who have made this connection are Best (173), Selzer (75), and Bradbrook (159).

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