



Prologue

“In my end is my beginning”:¹ time’s up for *The Duchess of Malfi*

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When Paul Hammond discusses the function of “an Italy of the mind” in Shakespeare’s comedies, he defines it as a “space in which unusual happenings were possible” that is not “constrained by the kinds of plausibility demanded in London city comedy”.² Similarly, John Webster’s *The Duchess of Malfi* testifies to the fashion of an Elizabethan Italy-of-the-mind as a safe mirror to the English court. The perception of Italian city states as places of corruption and blood revenge is at the same time remote and close to Jacobean spectators. Malfi is a *locus* of the counter-reformation ideology that can easily act as a symmetrical image of reformed England. However, unlike Shakespeare, Webster breaks neither with the plausibility of urban comedies nor with an obvious English territoriality. Webster’s characterisation heavily borrows from English city comedies (the “lusty widow”³ and her young lover, the procurer or the bawd) and humoral comedies (the sanguine Duchess, the choleric Cardinal, the melancholic Ferdinand).⁴ The dramaturgy of the arras in the opening scene is based on an English legal practice and is used again in Webster’s own city comedy *Anything for a Quiet Life* (1621).⁵ This revenge tragedy is dipped in the blood of comedy and anchored in the early modern English context. There lies the

¹ T. S. Eliot, “Burnt Norton” (1935), *Four Quartets*, London, Faber & Faber, (1944) 2009.

² Paul Hammond, *Figuring Sex Between Men from Shakespeare to Rochester*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2002, p. 87.

³ John Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi*, ed. Michael Neill, New York, Norton, 2015, l.i.330. All references to the play are taken from this edition.

⁴ The opening scene refers to the stock-characters of the old widow and her younger lover (l.i.339–40), the procurer or the bawd (l.i.261–262; ll.v.9). Webster’s characterisation stresses early modern reliance on humoral language to represent the self. The Duchess is associated with blood (l.i.290), Ferdinand with cholera (“rage”). The Cardinal is “the melancholy churchman” (l.i.151–2) and Bosola is characterized by “foul melancholy” (l.i.73). Ferdinand is also associated with “gall” (the black bile), in ll.2, as are Antonio in l.i.387 and even Julia in ll.iv.28.

⁵ See Nathalie Rivère de Carles, “Channelling the Tragic Through the Arras in *The Duchess of Malfi*”, *The Duchess of Malfi: Webster’s Tragedy of Blood*, ed. Pascale Drouet and William Carroll, Paris, Belin, 2018, p. 273.

strength of Webster's "very localized topicality"⁶ as instrument of the playwright's conversation with his audience.

Shakespeare's Italy of the mind is "a world elsewhere, but still a possible world",⁷ and this is even truer when it comes to Webster's plays. This "world elsewhere" is of mixed continental origins – Italian, Spanish, French – and the "possible world" may be Webster's England, or rather what the playwright suggests England *should* be. However, if the play's adversarial dimension with its violent anti-papist and anti-Spanish satire cannot be denied, we should not understand Webster's English world in the sense of a symmetrical perfection to a continental imperfection but in a humanist perspective. The continental narrative blend added to the English dramatic forms and context is precisely what helps Webster to fashion a prospective English world. Webster's renowned bitter scepticism should not supersede his appeal for meritocratic changes: the historical, social and religious topicality is but a vehicle for the play's inherent transformative dynamic.

Hence, far from limiting the play to a nostalgic voyage through early modern remnants of feudality and the bitter religious wars tearing Europe apart, this collection of essays emphasises the play's topical permanence and its capacity to suggest "a possible world". It considers *The Duchess of Malfi* as a topical play "for all time"⁸ that engages in a poetic conversation on social, political and sexual categories and hierarchies with its spectators. The play violently challenges post-Renaissance audiences as much as it did Jacobean spectators. The following articles thus focus on the meritocratic discussions and gender debates raised by the Jacobean play and fuelled by its subsequent performances. Far from projecting a warped modernity on an old play to make it say what we want it to say, these fresh looks at *The Duchess of Malfi* show how fundamental this play's aesthetic of shape-shifting and transshaping enables a humanist discussion. We thus can paraphrase T. S. Eliot and say that in this play's end of an old world is a new world's beginning. The mixed topicality of the play, its echoing structure and above all its fragmented expression of both a literary and an existential ending seem to be the key to the play's inherent timelessness. The study of the play's uncertain sense of an ending shows how, with *The Duchess of Malfi*, Webster joins Shakespeare in being "for all time". With its ultimate transformation of the title character, echoing in eternity, the play reaches the atemporal level of the myth. This is made possible by the fictional nature of its historicity (topicality) and the transhistoricity⁹ of both the play's performance and dynamic of aesthetic and socio-political reconfigurations.

A topical play for all time: *The Duchess* as poetic conversation with spectators

The constant renewal and rewriting of the play in performance ensures the transfer of its fictional historicity from one era to another. Thus, the flexible historicity of Webster's play can be endlessly reproduced and modified to fit the time of each performance as it replicates its initial genetic principle. *The Duchess of Malfi* is a conversation with the

⁶ Analysing Webster's revision of Marston's *The Malcontent*, Kevin Quarmby shows "Webster's adaptation and re-location of the play's original satire against sexual immodesty and corruption in an Italian court" in a dialogue redolent of "Anglocentric topicality and immediacy", *The Disguised Ruler in Shakespeare and his Contemporaries*, London, Routledge, 2016, p. 21; 98–99.

⁷ P. Hammond, *Figuring Sex*, p. 87.

⁸ "Not of an age but for all time" is Ben Jonson's eulogy of William Shakespeare.

⁹ Transhistoricity is the quality of holding throughout human history, not merely within the frame of reference of a particular form of society at a particular stage of historical development.

spectators both in the early modern sense of an intimate encounter or a civil dialogue between two disputants, and the contemporary sense of a wider dialogue.¹⁰ The play's erotic substrate and recurrent use of the blazon make it a conversation akin to that of the sonneteer and his silent addressee.¹¹ However, the stage is the locus of multiple voices (the hidden playwright's, the characters'), and the audience acts as the silent, albeit physically present, addressee. The presence of a silent audience outside the realm of the play participates in an expansive redefinition of the conversation between the play and the audience. This expansion is made possible by the play's echoic structure and its blend of prose and various styles of poetic verse (blank verse, ballad, rhyming couplets), of popular common places and the skilled rhetoric of *sententiae*, of highbrow and lowbrow language. All these characteristics paired with episodic symmetry and contrastive characterisation create a poetic and structural labyrinth. Nonetheless, what is a trap for the characters does not make the play a self-enclosed structure. Webster's dramatic and poetic expression of the *bivium* is paradoxically what enables the play to transcend its own fictional boundaries. Within Webster's theatrical maze, roles are reversible, and this is precisely an entry point for the audience. Robert Weimann has shown that the early modern English stage is divided between the *locus* and the *platea*:

[*The locus* is] a fairly specific imaginary locale or self-contained space in the world of the play, and *the platea* an opening in *mise-en-scène* through which the place and time of the stage-as-stage and the cultural occasion are made either to assist or resist the socially and verbally elevated, and spatially and temporally remote representation.¹²

In an early modern English theatre, the *platea* is the area near the edge of the stage: it is the intersection between stage and audience where characters perform for and comment knowingly to the audience.¹³ The *locus/platea* division is the expression of a theatrical form of labyrinth: an open labyrinth whose external limits are porous. The theatrical open maze is reinforced by the play's mixed topicality juxtaposing fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Italy, seventeenth-century France and England. Therefore, Webster moves his plot beyond the limits of an intimate erotic conversation and turns it into a discussion of sexual, social and religious violence in the wider community of the *polis* represented by the audience.

This is what Andrew Hiscock emphasises in his study of the dialogue between Delio and Antonio in the opening scene as an "intellectual, political and social debate, disputation and exchange amongst the educated".¹⁴ Focusing on "initiation and re-

¹⁰ Shakespeare uses the word "conversation" for a sexual encounter in *Richard III* (III.v.28-31). See Jennifer Richards, *Rhetoric and Courtliness in Early Modern Literature*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2015, p. 23-30.

¹¹ In the incipit, the Duchess emblazons her own body: "Diamonds are of most value / They say, that have pass'd through most jewellers' hands" (I.i.291-292).

¹² Robert Weimann, *Author's Pen and Actor's Voice: Playing and Writing in Shakespeare's Theatre*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000, p. 181.

¹³ Let us note Webster's reliance on asides in the play which is paired with the performance of the play in the more intimate space of indoor playhouses such as the Blackfriars. In her article, Farah Karim-Cooper quotes Paul Menzer's observation that indoor playhouses made the "proximity to the actor's face and form" "a theatrical norm", thus offering the audience a more direct "access to an imagined interiority". Farah Karim-Cooper, "Spectacle and female power: *The Duchess of Malfi* in the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse", *Time's Up for the Duchess: Malfi in Conversation*, ed. Florence March and Nathalie Rivère de Carles, *Arrêt sur scène / Scene Focus*, n°7 (2018), p. 89 n. 2. Further references to this article are included in the text.

¹⁴ Andrew Hiscock, "'You are welcome to your country': initiation and re-encounter in the dramatic world of John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*", *Time's Up for the Duchess: Malfi in Conversation*, ed. F. March and N. Rivère de Carles, pp. 21-32, p. 23. Further references to this article are included in the text.

encounter” as the founding tenets of the incipit, Hiscock chooses to follow the First Quarto’s division of act I into two scenes and to analyse the opening dialogue until Antonio’s rhyming couplet on “all black malcontents” (l.i.78-79). He shows that the choric roles the characters play project the action onto a transhistorical and trans-territorial plane in order to “offer a panoramic vision of failing political states which appear to warp all forms of human creativity and dynamism” (p. 30). He shows that Webster’s tragic Italy of the mind, his mixed topicality and the conversation between stage and audience do not operate at all “as a Brechtian technique of *Verfremdung*, or alienation, in the theatrical or reading experience” (p. 23) but as “guiding principles, or referents, with which to negotiate our entry into this tragic universe” (p. 23).

Similarly, David K. Anderson’s article points out the persistence of this negotiation between the stage and the audience, between the time of the play and that of the spectators, in his analysis of “the martyred Duchess”.¹⁵ Anderson shows that the “terrible spectacles of persecutory violence ... meted out by the state on the bodies of criminals in numbers that strain modern credulity” (p. 69) do not alienate the audience but challenge “the collective conscience” (p. 69) when it comes to the judicial use of violence. Webster questions the genre of revenge tragedy by introducing such excessive levels of violence that it tries the classical retributive pattern and echoes the Baconian’s critique of revenge, and most particularly private revenge, as “wild justice”.¹⁶ Janet Clare shows that Websterian revenge tragedies “invert the process of state punishment and depict the subject acting violently against autocracy”.¹⁷ Anderson focuses on the Duchess’s endless ordeal in act IV and how it echoes “the deaths of religious dissidents [that], far from consolidating sympathy with the authorities, had the power to unsettle the country” (p. 69). Analysing act IV scene ii through the prism of John Foxe’s *Acts and Monuments*, Anderson shows that “Foxian themes of complicity and community, sympathy and purgation, running deep in the culture, ... inform the nature and meaning of [the Duchess’s] suffering” (p. 70-71). He stresses how Webster reconfigures the function of tragedy and the judicial performativity of retributive violence in order to question authority and responsibility. Hiscock’s and Anderson’s articles offer new discussions of the play’s competing voices. Emulating Webster’s contrastive writing, they put the Aragonian brothers’ warped political and religious authority into the critical perspective of courtly commentators and of their victims. This critical mirror is the framework of the play’s social and sexual discussion that opposes high and low born, male and female roles and power. If the play inherently rejects a self-enclosing topicality, it also stages a bitter rejection of the fixity of the great chain of being. Webster emulates Shakespeare’s satirical distancing from Sidney’s theory of decorum¹⁸ in aesthetic terms but he pushes it further by making it the formal expression of a clearly meritocratic ideal.

¹⁵ David K. Anderson, “The martyred Duchess”, *Time’s Up for the Duchess: Malfi in Conversation*, ed. F. March and N. Rivère de Carles, pp. 69–80, p. 69. Further references to this article are included in the text.

¹⁶ Francis Bacon, “On Revenge”, *The Essays Or Counsels, Civil and Moral*, ed. Brian Vickers, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005, p. 10.

¹⁷ Janet Clare, *Revenge Tragedies of the Renaissance*, Tavistock, Northcote House Publishers, 2006, p. 8.

¹⁸ In *The Defence of Poesy*, Sidney decried “the indecorous mingling of kings and clown in the mongrel tragicomedy”, but he objected solely to the failure of certain plots to observe decorum rather than to the mixture of genres. Philip Sidney, *The Defence of Poesy*, in *Sir Philip Sidney: The Major Works*, ed. Katherine Duncan-Jones, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2002, p. 212.

Superfluous men and necessary women

The play's capacity to converse with Jacobean as well as contemporary spectators also depends on Webster's teleological and transformative discussion of male and female socio-political ontology. His play may be considered teleological as it stages the evolutions and shortcomings of the Tudor age in terms of access to education and social mobility. Yet the play is not a mere sterile satirical critique of the inconclusiveness or the wastage of a generation of educated young men. Webster's reliance on the aesthetics of *ars moriendi* when it comes to the Duchess's ordeal as well as to Ferdinand's lethal degradation reveals the play's fundamental plea for change. Indeed, transformation of the self before death features prominently in the art-of-dying literature. The metamorphic experience mitigates nostalgic interpretations of the play's eponymous character.¹⁹ The Duchess, and her female adjuvant, Cariola, and foil, Julia, are also the depositaries of a desire for necessary shifts in terms of social representation and political expression.

Michael Neill's introductory essay shows how Webster's "graveyard politics" and his violent anatomy of his age are soluble in present history.²⁰ He summons Pankaj Mishra's exploration of the resentment that arises from "the contradiction between extravagant promise and meagre means".²¹ He combines it with the literary type of the "superfluous man" and channels Webster's transhistorical discussion of alienation as dislocating force. Webster's "divided malcontent"²² is a mirror of the "alienated intellectuals of early Stuart England"²³ and a prolepsis of the nineteenth century literary type of the superfluous man.²⁴ Neill focuses on how "Bosola is just the kind of superfluous man that both Curtis and Mishra describe. A character almost entirely of Webster's invention, he becomes the vehicle for social resentments that often seem to voice those of his creator" (p. 16).

However, Neill shows that, unlike his later Russian counterpart, Webster's superfluous man retains a form of agency since "this low-born, frustrated scholar becomes [the Duchess's] rival as tragic protagonist, [and] the catastrophe of the last act effectively belongs to him" (p. 16). Bosola's agency is less social and political than metadramatic as he enables the play to "become what (adapting a term from the lexicon of comedy) we might call a 'citizen tragedy'" (p. 16). Bosola is a vehicle for the reconfiguration of the revenge tragedy whose dynamic is less concerned with revenge and more by transformation. If the superfluous man is a type fitting Webster's malcontent, it requires

¹⁹ Leah S. Marcus points at the possibility of a nostalgia for Elizabeth I's rule as the Stuart court was mired with corruption and abuses. See J. Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi*, ed. Leah S. Marcus, London, Arden/Bloomsbury, 2009, p. 11.

²⁰ Michael Neill, "Superfluous men": the graveyard politics of *The Duchess of Malfi*", *Time's Up for the Duchess: Malfi in Conversation*, ed. F. March and N. Rivère de Carles, pp. 1–20, p. 1. Further references to this article are included in the text.

²¹ Pankaj Mishra, *The Age of Anger: A History of the Present*, London, Penguin Books, 2017, p. 330–331.

²² Jane Marie Luecke writes that Bosola is a "divided malcontent as he is in fact an articulation of two types of malcontents: the first type of malcontent is the vindictive satirist who is characterised by an impersonal attitude such as Marston's Malevole (*The Malcontent*, 1604) and Tourneur's Vendici (*The Revenger's Tragedy*, 1607). The second type of malcontent is Hamlet who struggles with his melancholy and displays a speculative turn of mind, leading us into the world of tragedy". Jane Marie Luecke, *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, vol. 4, n°2, *Elizabethan and Jacobean Drama* (Spring, 1964), p. 275–290.

²³ M. H. Curtis, "The Alienated Intellectuals of Early Stuart England", *Past and Present*, 23, 1962, p. 25–43.

²⁴ The superfluous man is "a character type whose frequent recurrence in 19th-century Russian literature is sufficiently striking to make him a national archetype. He is usually an aristocrat, intelligent, well-educated, and informed by idealism and goodwill but incapable, for reasons as complex as Hamlet's, of engaging in effective action. Although he is aware of the stupidity and injustice surrounding him, he remains a bystander". (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*, s.v. "superfluous man").

to be considered in Websterian terms of contrastive characterisation. The drama of superfluous men is paired with that of necessary women who are the *loci* of a more potent transformative dynamic.

Even if the Duchess's choice of a husband rather than a consort may be problematic politically, it also symbolises an empowering of the private self. Empowerment of marginal or inferior orders is part of the play's conversation as shown by Bosola and Antonio's parallel discussion of service. The nature of the social shift is best exemplified by secondary female characters. Julia is more than a mere negative counterpoint to the Duchess, she embodies a struggle for political and financial recognition and rule in Jacobean times. To the social shift, Webster adds the need for a shift in the nature of political speech. As Shakespeare uses Paulina, the courtier, in *The Winter's Tale* to denounce King Leontes's tyrannical abuses, so does Webster use Cariola. The latter represents the early modern discussion of tyranny and truthful political speech. In act IV scene ii, she voices the tyrannical nature of Ferdinand's rule:

CARIOLA 'Tis the wild consort
Of madmen, lady, which your tyrant brother
Hath placed about your lodgings. This tyranny,
I think, was never practiced till this hour.
(IV.ii.1-4)

The polyptoton tyrant/tyranny mirrors the expansive nature of Ferdinand's excess and emphasises the defiant quality of feminine speech in this play. Cariola's speech is an instance of parrhesia. In early modern times, parrhesia retained its classical meaning which is "1. To be bolde, 2. Plaine, and 3. Faythfull",²⁵ but it was progressively redefined as the act of apologising for speaking freely.²⁶ Nevertheless, Cariola is not apologetic and fits the classical definition of parrhesia as her analysis is bold, true, and direct. Webster's female characters are far from being superfluous, they represent the necessary critical perspective on authority and how to provide it. Women in *The Duchess of Malfi* are no more ornamental characters limited to the clichés of re-defined stock-characters. Instead, they are the active instruments of a critique of revenge tragedy and of the society which relished on its performance.

Farah Karim-Cooper's article emphasises how Webster differs from the play's moralising source-texts and offers instead the "spectacle [of] female power".²⁷ Analysing the experimental context of the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse as a reconstruction of an early modern indoor theatre, she shows how Webster's "extraordinary moment of theatricality again works to throw light upon the Duchess's noble character and draws upon the empathetic sensibilities of the spectators" (p. 93). The play's dramaturgy testified to and integrated Jacobean innovations in terms of proximity with the actors and lighting effects, and its recreation on the stage of the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse enables a contemporary audience to experience a similar intimate access to the play and its characters. Karim-Cooper explains how the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse favours this transhistorical conversation in terms of theatrical experience and political definitions of

²⁵ *The Three orations of Demosthenes*, Thomas Wilson (trans.), London, 1570, p. 102.

²⁶ See Henry Peacham, *The Garden of Eloquence* (1577), ed. Willard R. Espy, London, Harper and Row, 1983, p. 193.

²⁷ Farah Karim-Cooper, "Spectacle and female power: *The Duchess of Malfi* in the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse", *Time's Up for the Duchess: Malfi in Conversation*, ed. F. March and N. Rivère de Carles, pp. 89–99, p. 89. Further references to this article are included in the text.

the sexual self. Webster's play testifies to a "reportorial focus on female tragic heroines ... perhaps suggesting that indoor theatres were viewed as hospitable to female spectators and attracted or cultivated stories of female subjugation, survival and heroism" (p. 91). Karim-Cooper argues that setting the Duchess as a paragon, "Webster's play provides a proto-feminist perspective on her story" (p. 97). Relying on Linda Woodbridge's analysis of the Duchess as a new tragic "hero of desire" (p. 91), she shows how the desiring Duchess transcends the meritocratic desire of superfluous men into a plea for a new social and sexual ontology.

The play as transformative mirror of mankind: humanism and transshaping

Karim-Cooper shows that "given the proxemics of actor and audience, the Duchess's experience becomes our own" (p. 96), and Marissa Greenberg adds that this is also made possible by Webster's animal poetics. The latter dramatizes the necessity of a transformative ontology that somehow partakes of a transitional view of humanism. Greenberg argues that "relations between humans and animals, in particular horses, are pivotal to Webster's worldmaking and construction of character".²⁸ Following Erica Fudge's reflections on animal-human relations in *Perceiving Animals: Humans and Beasts in Early Modern English Culture*, she brings together Webster's text and the Jacobean audience's aural and animal environments and offers a thought-provoking perspective on characterisation and subjectivity. She argues that "listening for horses and horsemanship in *Duchess* produces new understandings of Webster's tragic dramaturgy and discursive construction of character" (p. 34). Although the contemporary audience has a different relationship with horsemanship, the equine trope conveys "a realism at the heart of which lies, not certainty, but a question about what is the real nature, the real estimate, of man".²⁹ Despite the play's bleak context, the animal mirror of mankind retains the humanist requirements for change and improvement as Webster's tragedy relies on metamorphic imagery.

The discussion of the "real nature ... of man" (p. 34) is not limited to the individual subject in *The Duchess of Malfi* and its transformative dynamic applies to the rules and expressions of sociability in the play. Janice Valls-Russell's article focuses on act III scene ii as "a selection of conversational court games, in which fine and witty speech is the mark of a gentleman, intended to encourage social interaction, more especially between the sexes".³⁰ Through this analysis of "courtly banter", she explores the conversational turn of the play and how Webster manipulates the tragic unreliability of language to illustrate the failure of the Duchess's and Antonio's attempts at making Antonio's transformation into a royal husband. Using the concept of transshaping,³¹ Valls-Russell emphasises the transformative dynamic of the play, and shows how Webster's choice of mythological intertexts warps the euphoric potential of metamorphosis: "Antonio's borrowing of

²⁸ Marissa Greenberg, "Webster's horse-play", *Time's Up for the Duchess: Malfi in Conversation*, ed. F. March and N. Rivère de Carles, pp. 33–46, p. 34. Further references to this article are included in the text.

²⁹ Inga-Stina Ewbank, "Webster's Realism, or, 'A Cunning Piece Wrought Perspective'", *John Webster*, ed. Brian Morris, London, Ernest Benn, 1970, p. 159–178. Quoted by Greenberg, "Webster's horse-play", p. 34.

³⁰ Janice Valls-Russell, "Courtly banter in *The Duchess of Malfi* (III.ii.1–57): 'not so merry'", *Time's Up for the Duchess: Malfi in Conversation*, ed. F. March and N. Rivère de Carles, pp. 57–67, p. 60. Further references to this article are included in the text.

³¹ Studying the use of the word "trans-shape" in Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing* (v.v.159–164), Marianne Montgomery explains that it is "usually associated with Ovidian metamorphosis, [and] emphasizes the reshaping work of metaphor", in "Double Tongue", *Multilingualism in the Drama of Shakespeare and his Contemporaries*, ed. Dirk Delabastita and Ton Hoenselaars, Amsterdam, John Benjamins, 2015, p. 204–205.

mythological references in praise of marriage from Whetstone acts as a kind of subtext to the play that becomes problematic through displacement" (p. 63). When it comes to the Duchess and Antonio's marriage, tragedy makes transshaping an instance of hamartia. However, when Webster gives it a theatrical turn in the echo scene, it becomes an instrument of transcendence of and resistance to tragic annihilation.

Pascale Drouet's exploration of the dialectics of truth and appearances also raises the question of the dysphoric nature of grafting and transshaping. Drouet's article discusses the issue of hybridization in act II scene 1. Like Valls-Russell, she shows the characters' resistance to grafting and hybridisation. Yet she also points that when Bosola remarks that animals' names are appropriated in our linguistic field, "we bear diseases / Which have their true names only ta'en from beasts", and that the circulation of matter "from one species to the other, invit[es] us to consider hybridization as a natural process that transcends our cultural preoccupations and positioning".³² Grafting and transshaping require then to be considered on two different levels: the characters and the metadramatic levels. On the level of the characters, transshaping is tragically jeopardised by the Aragonian brothers and their tool-villain, Bosola. On a metadramatic plane, generic and thematic hybridisations reboot the genre of revenge tragedy.

The metadramatic success of grafting and transshaping counterweighs the play's tragic cynicism and despair climaxing in its inconclusive ending. François Laroque insists that it is necessary to observe the play as an anamorphosis.³³ Hence, Bosola's apparent indictment of nuptial mismatches is ironically reversible into the hidden playwright's praise of hybridization as a successful transformative dynamic. After all, let's not forget that the Duchess's transformation into an echo guarantees the "Integrity of [her] life" (v.v.118) and that generic hybridisation successfully reconfigures revenge tragedy.

The play without end: multiple catastrophes³⁴ as denouement

Webster referred to the published text of *The Duchess of Malfi* as "a poem" destined to last "when the poets themselves were bound up in their winding-sheets".³⁵ The transcending transformation of the Duchess in the play leads into a questioning of the role of the play-as-monument. The protagonist reaches heroic posterity and a form of eternity in the excipit of the play which acts a statement of intention on the part of Webster. Parallel to the paradox of his Duchess's fleshliness and transfiguration into the echo, Webster's tragedy reconfigures death as a beginning rather than an ending.

To the Duchess's question "What death?" (IV.ii.192), we could answer with T. S. Eliot's excipit to "Burnt Norton": "in my end is my beginning". This new beginning lies in Webster's deriding death as a banal denouement. The banality of death is dramatised in the multiple endings which, instead of reasserting death's omnipotence, ensures an aesthetic renovation of the tragic genre. When the Duchess announces on the threshold of death, "I'd not be tedious to you" (IV.ii.213), she breaks with the contemplative *tedium vitae* and paradoxically reasserts a creative agency that lies in the reconsideration of the

³² Pascale Drouet, "The dialectics of appearances and reality (II.i)", *Time's Up for the Duchess: Malfi in Conversation*, ed. F. March and N. Rivère de Carles, pp. 47–56, pp. 52–53, p. 53.

³³ François Laroque, *John Webster, The Duchess of Malfi (1613-14)*, Paris, Ellipses, 2018, p. 59.

³⁴ In classical tragedy, the catastrophe is a destructive and painful action, a reversal of fortune. It can be embodied in a silent character who brings some news leading to a reversal of fortune. The catastrophe is thus seen as the link between tragedy and the course of the world.

³⁵ J. Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi*, ed. M. Neill, p. 122.

ars moriendi literature. Gisèle Venet explains that the hecatomb of act V is a way to deride death and the play's denouement as each new death fails to compare to the Duchess's private ordeal:

L'acte V par les morts multiples et convulsives qu'il met en scène, ne pourra plus offrir qu'une dérision de dénouement, comme la trace inversée d'une expérience privée, de soi à soi, qui ne peut se partager, mais au regard de laquelle toutes les autres mesurent leur néant.³⁶

Webster opposes the Duchess's stoic acceptance of death as a banal event, and the trivial nature of the other characters' deaths. The inconclusiveness or the pointlessness of the characters' deaths in act V, and Webster's refusal to make the Duchess's death the play's denouement partake of a manipulation of tragic endings to revisit revenge tragedy.

The final dramatic hecatomb matches in number and variety of deaths the intensity of the Duchess's ordeal. It creates a structural coherence generating a paradoxical form of balance expected in a classical denouement. It also acts as a delaying technique helping to reconfigure the tragic ending: by cumulating one death per scene in the last act, Webster substitutes the conventional catastrophe to the denouement of his revenge tragedy. In act V scene iv, Bosola overhears the Cardinal planning his death: "Twas the Cardinal's voice. I heard him name / Bosola, and my death. – Listen! I hear one's footing" (30-32). The hendiadys "Bosola, and my death" creates a deadly echo that should be interpreted beyond the irony of the deadly conspiracy against the eavesdropping murderer. The disjunctive nature of the hendiadys signals Bosola's forthcoming death as a peripeteia that moves the action forward at a moment the audience thought to have reached a diegetic stability with the tool-villain turned revenger.

Besides, the multiple deaths are a sort of symbolic echo of the injustice of the Duchess's death. Chorus-like, Bosola lists the brothers' victims:

Revenge – for the Duchess of Malfi, murdered
By th'Aragonian brethren; for Antonio,
Slain by this hand; for lustful Julia,
Poisoned by this man; and lastly for myself
(v.v.79-83)

He reasserts the play's genre at the beginning of line 79 and the substance of a revenge tragedy at the end of the same verse. However, he metadramatically signals the modification of the timeline of revenge as the murder occurred only a few scenes ago. Bosola also stresses the other novelty in Webster's handling of revenge tragedy which is to end on an inconclusive death in the form of "another voyage" (102). Bosola's inconclusive death is often mirrored by an interruption of his final speech in productions as in the 2018 Royal Shakespeare Company version where he is cut short by a sudden darkness and Delio's final lines. The play is what Umberto Eco calls an "open work"³⁷ and emulates Shakespeare's somehow inconclusive ending for an equally bleak tragedy, *King Lear*.

The Duchess of Malfi's final openness is characterised by derision, absurdity and perhaps "pointlessness" (p. 86) as argued in Charles Whitworth's article on the final scene.³⁸ The latter argues that Webster's "achievement ... should be considered in literary

³⁶ Gisèle Venet, « Notice sur *La duchesse d'Amalfi* de John Webster », *Théâtre Elisabethain*, vol. II, ed. Line Cottagnies, François Laroque, Jean-Marie Maguin, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, Paris, Gallimard, 2009, p. 1718.

³⁷ Umberto Eco, *The Open Work*, trans. Anna Cancogni, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1989, p. 4.

³⁸ Charles Whitworth, "A little point, a kind of nothing': the final scene of *The Duchess of Malfi*", *Time's Up for the Duchess: Malfi in Conversation*, ed. F. March and N. Rivère de Carles, pp. 81–87, p. 86. Further references to this article are included in the text.

terms" (p. 87) as his "sceptical vision is embodied in imagery and language" (p. 87). This inconclusive ending in the form of a stuttering catastrophe testifies to Webster's aesthetic endeavour, but also guarantees its enduring relevance and adaptability. Nevertheless, one should not underestimate what lies beneath the malcontentedness of the "crabbed Websterio"³⁹ and this seemingly unsatisfying ending. The latter is a realistic detachment from classical tragedy and comedy and their artificial return to order. To this euphoric type of denouement Webster substitutes a cruel but realistic vision of the world along with an offer in the guise of the play's reformatory dynamic and a final lesson in ethics.

³⁹ H[enry] F[itzeoffery], *Satyres and Satyricall Epigrams: with Certain Observations at Blackfryers*, London, 1617, F6v-7r, quoted in J. Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi*, ed. M. Neill, p. 187.