



## “Superfluous Men”: the graveyard politics of *The Duchess of Malfi*

Sinking into nothing, I cease to be superfluous...  
Ivan Turgenev, *Diary of a Superfluous Man*

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On 6 November 1612 there occurred an event that shook England to its core: the death from typhoid of King James’s eldest son, Henry, Prince of Wales. The eighteen-year-old prince had emerged as the hero of the country’s more militant Protestants: inclined towards Calvinism, he was imagined as the engineer of a future second Reformation: “Henry the 8. Pull’d down abbeys and cells”, went the jingle, “But Henry the 9. shall pull down Bishops and bells”.<sup>1</sup> Heralded as a champion against the threat from Catholic Spain, he had presided over a household that, in the last two years of his life, became an ideological rival to the court of his father, the self-proclaimed *rex pacificus*. As a result, Henry’s passing was the occasion for an unprecedented outpouring of public grief. A flood of mourning publications included accounts of his life, descriptions of his funeral, and more than fifty elegiac volumes from leading poets of the day – among them Webster himself, who must have put aside work on *The Duchess of Malfi* to compose the first of his tributes to the dead prince, *A Monumental Column* (1613).

For four weeks Henry’s body lay in state at his palace of St James. Then, on 7 December, it was transferred to a superbly ornamented hearse – the tomb-like structure, devised by his Surveyor of Works, the architect and stage-designer Inigo Jones, which formed the centrepiece of his ostentatious funeral procession. An enormous cortège – larger even than that accorded to Queen Elizabeth – consisting of over 2000 mourners then accompanied the body to Westminster. Crowds in the street, as they caught sight of Henry’s waxwork effigy,

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<sup>1</sup> Sir John Harington, *A Supplie or Addition to the Catalogue of Bishops to the Yeare 1608*, ed. R. H. Miller, Potomac

made "a fearefull outcrie ... as if they felt ... their own ruine in that losse ... [and their] streaming eyes made knowen howe much inwardly their harts did bleed".<sup>2</sup> The funeral climaxed in a magnificent service at the Abbey; where the prince was duly buried. There, in Henry VII's lady chapel, King James had recently installed a grand monument for his predecessor, Elizabeth I (1606), as well as marble tombs for his infant daughters, Mary and Sophia (1607), before, in the very year of Henry's death, completing an especially impressive edifice in which to re-inter his mother, Mary Queen of Scots.

Mary had been executed by Elizabeth for involvement in Anthony Babington's treasonous papist conspiracy (1587); and the erection of her monument (significantly larger than Elizabeth's) was an act of symbolic recuperation. For all the splendour of his obsequies, however, the Protestant hero was to receive no such dignity, his body being simply consigned to lie beside his Catholic grandmother in the vault beneath her tomb. Rumours circulated regarding plans to build him an equally lavish memorial, but nothing eventuated. James would no doubt have pleaded penury; but, given their fractious relationship, the neglect must have seemed conspicuous; and it was no doubt partly in reaction to it that for three decades Henry's greatness continued to be proclaimed by adherents of the Protestant and parliamentary cause. Webster himself wrote a "Monument of Gratitude"<sup>3</sup> to the Prince as the climax to his 1624 mayoral pageant, *Monuments of Honor*; and there, in a telling metaphor, he imagined "fames best president" as having been "Cald to a higher Court of Parliament".<sup>4</sup> As late as 1641, in the months leading up to parliament's rebellion against King Charles, two biographies appeared in print:<sup>5</sup> each optimistically dedicated to the current Prince of Wales as "the true inheritour of your noble Uncle's vertues".<sup>6</sup> Both works were attributed to Henry's former treasurer, the late Sir Charles Cornwallis (d. 1629), who in 1614 had been sent to the Tower for organising parliamentary opposition to James.

Cornwallis's *Discourse of The most illustrious Prince Henry*, points to the absence of any tomb for his master by concluding with the regretful "wish [that] it were in my power to raise such a monument unto his fame, as might eternise it unto all posterities".<sup>7</sup> In this he echoed a number of the 1613 elegists who had already seemed to anticipate the King's neglect, by suggesting that their words alone would now preserve Henry's fame: William Drummond, for example, in the pyramid-shaped verse that he contributed to the collection fittingly named *Mausoleum*, foreseeing that "no great Marble Atlas tremble[ing] with gold", would be erected "To please a vulgar eye", promised that the tears of Apollo and the Muses would instead form "A Chrystal tombe" to show the dead prince's worth.<sup>8</sup> In his own elegy, *A Monumental Column*, Webster makes use of a similar conceit: "The greatest of the kingly Race is gone", he begins,

<sup>2</sup> Contemporary account from the National Archives, cited in *The Lost Prince: the life and death of Henry Stuart*, ed. Catherine MacLeod, London, National Portrait Gallery, 2012, p. 161.

<sup>3</sup> John Webster, *Monuments of Honor*, London, Nicholas Okes, 1624, sig. C-C2.

<sup>4</sup> J. Webster, *Monuments of Honor*, C2.

<sup>5</sup> *A Discourse of The Most Illustrious Prince, Henry, Late Prince of Wales, Written Anno 1626 by Sir Charles Cornwallis*, London, 1641, and *The Life and Death of Our Late and most Incomparable and Heroique Prince, Henry Prince of Wales ... Written by Sir Charles Cornwallis*, London, 1641.

<sup>6</sup> *A Discourse*, sig. A3.

<sup>7</sup> *A Discourse*, sig. E3.

<sup>8</sup> William Drummond, *Mausoleum or, The Choisest Flowres of the Epitaphs, written on the Death of the never-too-much lamented Prince Henrie*, Edinburgh, Andro Hart, 1613, n. p.

with a defiant superlative; but, although humbly “Laid in the earth”, Henry now resembles “a perfect diamond set in lead [whose] glories do break forth” adorned by “those colors, which Truth calls her own”.<sup>9</sup> No matter that the prince lacks the material grandeur of a “Darius’ chest [i.e. tomb]”,<sup>10</sup> his fame will be preserved by poets, who alone have power to immortalise great men.

The idea of literature-as-monument, offering immortality to its creator as well as to its subject, was of course a venerable trope, deriving from Horace and other Latin poets, “I have built a monument more lasting than bronze, and loftier than the pyramids of kings” Horace had declared of his own poetry.<sup>11</sup> Famously elaborated in Shakespeare’s *Time* sonnets, it is a theme of John Weever’s antiquarian study *Ancient Funeral Monuments* (1631) whose opening chapter reminds its readers that “the Muses works are of all monuments the most permanent, for of all things else there is vicissitude, a change both of cities and nations”.<sup>12</sup> The memorialising power of poetry was again in Webster’s mind when *The Duchess of Malfi* went to press, providing the theme of his dedicatory epistle with its insistence that “such poems as this ... when the poets themselves [are] bound up in their winding-sheets” will make their patrons “live in [their] grave and laurel spring out of it”;<sup>13</sup> and the resonance of this conceit for the play as a whole is confirmed by the self-consciously chosen compliments of the encomiastic verses which Webster’s fellow-playwrights contributed to the printed text. This “masterpiece”, wrote John Ford, would endow the poet himself with “A lasting fame to raise his monument”,<sup>14</sup> while Thomas Middleton, echoing the playwright’s own graveyard politics, announced that:

Thy monument is raised in thy lifetime.  
And ’tis most just; for every worthy man  
Is his own marble, and his merit can  
Cut him to any figure and express  
More art than Death’s cathedral palaces,  
Where royal ashes keep their court.<sup>15</sup>

Middleton’s sardonic vision of royal ashes holding court, recalls the language of Webster’s villain-satirist, Bosola; but it also encodes a reference to the immediate circumstances of the play’s creation, for the encomium is surely glancing at *A Monumental Column*: there Webster remembers a time “when churches in the land were thought / Rich jewel-houses”, declaring that “this age hath b[r]ought / That time again”<sup>16</sup> – not, however, through a revival of papist

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<sup>9</sup> J. Webster, *A Monumental Column* (London, 1613), reprinted in J. Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi*, ed. Michael Neill, New York, Norton Critical Editions, 2015, p. 173-174.

<sup>10</sup> J. Webster, *A Monumental Column*, p. 174.

<sup>11</sup> Horace, *Odes*, III.30, l. 1-5.

<sup>12</sup> John Weever, *Ancient Funeral Monuments*, London, 1631, reprinted in J. Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi*, ed. M. Neill, p. 183.

<sup>13</sup> J. Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi*, ed. M. Neill, p. 5, l. 15-20.

<sup>14</sup> John Ford, “To His Friend Mr. John Webster Upon His *Duchess of Malfi*”, in J. Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi*, ed. M. Neill, p. 7, l. 2, 6.

<sup>15</sup> Thomas Middleton, “In the Just Worth of That Well-Deserver, Mr. John Webster, and Upon This Masterpiece of Tragedy”, in J. Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi*, ed. M. Neill, p. 6, l. 6-11.

<sup>16</sup> J. Webster, *A Monumental Column*, p. 180.

ornamentation, but through a more metaphysical transformation. Middleton's dismissive reference to "Death's cathedral palaces",<sup>17</sup> together with Webster's insistence on the fragility of worldly "greatness" – of "all our scepters and our chairs of state"<sup>18</sup> – recall the way in which Webster's elegy urges its readers to visit "Henry the Seventh's Chapel", where "The dust of a rich diamond [lies] enshrined",<sup>19</sup> setting its display of monumental grandeur against a spectacle of decay like that which confronts Antonio and Delio in the ruined cloister of act v:

What a dark night piece of tempestuous weather,  
Have the enraged clouds summoned together,  
As if our loftiest palaces should grow  
To ruin, since such highness fell so low.<sup>20</sup>

It is the Muses alone, Webster insists, who can enable "great men" to transcend the ruins of time: "For they shall live by them, when all the cost / Of gilded monuments shall fall to dust";<sup>21</sup> and Henry's patronage of the "noble arts" will make his "beams ... break forth from [his] hollow tomb / Stain the time past and light the time to come".<sup>22</sup>

The extent to which the prince's death continued to weigh on Webster's mind as he returned to work on *Malfi* is suggested by the way in which he repeated that figure of illuminated fame in Antonio's first paean to the Duchess ("She stains the time past, lights the time to come", l.i.202). The repetition is typically explained by the compositional habits of a borrower so compulsive that he could not resist borrowing even from himself; but this is not a casually deployed metaphor, for it is deliberately recalled by a visionary moment in the last act. There, in the so-called "Echo scene", amid the desolate remains of time past, as a disembodied voice speaks of time to come, Antonio is visited by a mysterious "clear light" (v.iii.45). Nor is this the scene's only imagistic connection with the poetry of Prince Henry's death; for its suggestive Echo turns out to be modelled on another of the 1613 elegies – George Wither's fiercely anti-Catholic *Prince Henry's Obsequies*.

In Wither's poem, the allegorical figure of Britain summons the prince to rise from his grave and defend his people against the swarming menace of "Rome's locusts".<sup>23</sup> He is answered by a voice that consoles his countrymen with the apocalyptic promise that "Babel's [i.e. Rome's] fall and Jacob's [i.e. James's] rising [are] near".<sup>24</sup> Although Wither's title-page promises "A supposed Inter-locution between the Ghost of Prince Henrie and Great Brittain", the text identifies this prophetic voice only as a "Spirit";<sup>25</sup> and (since Protestant doctrine did not allow for the return of the dead) it is carefully distinguished as being neither

<sup>17</sup> T. Middleton, "In the Just Worth of That Well-Deserver, Mr. John Webster", p. 6, l. 10.

<sup>18</sup> J. Webster, *A Monumental Column*, p. 176.

<sup>19</sup> J. Webster, *A Monumental Column*, p. 180.

<sup>20</sup> J. Webster, *A Monumental Column*, p. 180.

<sup>21</sup> J. Webster, *A Monumental Column*, p. 181.

<sup>22</sup> J. Webster, *A Monumental Column*, p. 180.

<sup>23</sup> George Wither, *Prince Henries Obsequies* (London, 1612), in J. Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi*, ed. M. Neill, p. 171.

<sup>24</sup> G. Wither, *Prince Henries Obsequies*, p. 172. For a reading of Webster's Echo scene that stresses its connection with Ovid's story of Echo and Narcissus, see Agnès Lafont, "I am truly more fond and foolish than ever Narcissus was": Webster's *Duchess of Malfi* and Ovidian Resonances", *The Duchess of Malfi: Webster's Tragedy of Blood*, ed. Pascale Drouet and William C. Carroll, p. 60-77.

<sup>25</sup> G. Wither, *Prince Henries Obsequies*, p. 171-173.

"my prince's ghost, or fiend"<sup>26</sup> – its divinations coming only as uncanny echoes of Britain's own words. Webster's version is even more careful to discount any suggestion of papist superstition, since Delio explains that, though "many have supposed it is a spirit", the voice results simply from the acoustics of "a piece of cloister which ... gives the best echo you ever heard" (V.iii.5-9); and the stage name dubs it only "Echo". For Antonio, Echo's words are given supernatural significance by its sounding "like my wife's voice" (V.iii.26); but, in contrast to Wither's Spirit, it has no uplifting prophecy to offer, speaking instead only of its interlocutor's mortality – "*Thou art a dead thing*" (V.iii.40) – and of his wife's fearful absence, warning that he will "*Never see her more*" (V.iii.43). What are we to make of this bleak transformation of Wither's optimistic vision? It is, I think, a product of Webster's disillusioned response to the sudden death of the Prince of Wales and its politically contentious aftermath.

*The Duchess of Malfi* is not usually thought of as an especially political play: yet there are reasons for thinking that, to its first audiences, it may have appeared a more engaged, and even controversial work than it does to us. Most obviously, given James I's determination to maintain peace with Spain and to cultivate the loyalty of his own Catholic subjects, it is likely to have seemed implicitly oppositional in its treatment of the Duchess's brothers: not only does it emphasise their arrogant pride in "The royal blood of Aragon and Castile" (II.v.22), but it is openly anti-papist in its portrait of the war-mongering, lecherous Cardinal, whose cold-blooded murder of his own mistress with a poisoned bible is among Webster's more lurid additions to his sources.<sup>27</sup> The intention behind this vicious caricature was perfectly evident to Horatio Busino, chaplain to the Venetian ambassador, who, when the King's Men re-staged the play in 1618, took offence at the ways in which it sought to "deride our religion as detestable and superstitious".<sup>28</sup>

Occurring just as the country moved towards a crisis over the proposed marriage between Prince Charles and the catholic Infanta of Spain, the 1618 revival looks like an already loaded gesture on the part of a company that would face serious trouble a few years later when it staged Thomas Middleton's *Game at Chess* (1624) with its openly satiric attack on James's Spanish policies; and it is probably no coincidence that *The Duchess of Malfi* was finally published in 1623, just as the conflict between James and parliament over the Spanish match reached its peak, and a matter of months before Webster's own sympathies were once again made plain in *Monuments of Honor*, staged after Charles appeared to have thrown in his lot with parliament by turning his back on the Spanish match. Of course hostility to Spain as Europe's principal instrument of Catholic reaction had been a recurrent feature of English theatre since at least the 1580s, with the performance of Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* (c. 1587), where slaughter in the Spanish court is presented as an apocalyptic "fall of Babilon".<sup>29</sup> What makes *The Duchess of Malfi* distinctive, however, is the way in which the play's political and religious attitudes are bound up with an equally oppositional social vision.

<sup>26</sup> G. Wither, *Prince Henries Obsequies*, p. 171.

<sup>27</sup> For an account of contemporary rumours suggesting that Prince Henry himself had been the victim of "a nefarious popish poison-plot", see James Bellamy and Thomas Cogswell, *The Murder of James I*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2015, p. 182.

<sup>28</sup> Horatio Busino, *Journal* (February 7, 1618), in J. Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi*, ed. M. Neill, p. 188.

<sup>29</sup> Thomas Kyd, *The Spanish Tragedy*, London, Edward Allde, 1592, act IV, sig. K.

A key to this aspect of the tragedy is to be found in the scene on which I have just touched. The Echo scene might seem to have very little to do with politics, just as it can seem imperfectly integrated into the design of the play itself. That design is itself an odd one, since it allows the action to continue for an entire act after the death of the nominal protagonist; but, in addition to making that act – most of which is of the playwright's own invention<sup>30</sup> – the longest in the play, Webster placed at its centre an episode that is not only without equivalent in other versions of the story, but that contributes almost nothing to an already overstretched plot. As a result, the scene is routinely cut from modern productions of the play. Why then did Webster choose to include it? The answer has everything to do with what I have called the politics of the graveyard.

"The Grave's a fine and private place", wrote Andrew Marvell to his coy mistress, "But none I think do there embrace".<sup>31</sup> It is easy to assume that the dead don't do much politicking either. But, unless unmarked and forgotten, graves are never truly private; and we have only to think of the storm of controversy currently surrounding the proposal to remove the body of General Franco from his pompous mausoleum and to rescue the bodies of his victims from their anonymous mass graves to realise the intensely political significance with which places of burial can be invested. Tombs like those of Karl Marx in Highgate cemetery, or of Oscar Wilde in Père Lachaise have become places of pilgrimage. Indeed from the very earliest times – before even the gigantic pyramids erected by the pharaohs of 4<sup>th</sup> Dynasty Egypt – there has always been a politics to the graveyard; while the recent vandalism of mausoleums by Islamist rebels in such venerable cities as Timbuktu, Mosul, and Palmyra is a reminder of how even the most ancient funeral monuments can be (re-)invested with political meaning. In early modern England the politics of the tomb became, for reasons I have begun to suggest, especially fraught; and the author of *The Duchess of Malfi* became deeply invested in the contested ideology of monumental display.

Webster's tragedy is full of graves, figurative as well as literal: in Bosola's imagination the living body itself is no more than an animated cadaver: inhabiting "a shadow, or deep pit of darkness" (v.v.99), human beings are merely "dead walls or vaulted graves" (v.v.95) whose condition anticipates the corruption of the boneyard:

Though we are eaten up of lice and worms,  
And though continually we bear about us  
A rotten and dead body, we delight  
To hide it in rich tissue. All our fear –  
Nay, all our terror – is lest our physician  
Should put us in the ground, to be made sweet.  
(II.i.55-60)

In the Duchess's brothers Bosola sees "a pair of hearts are hollow graves, / Rotten and rotting others" (IV.ii.303-304); while Ferdinand himself, tormented by jealousy, complains that his

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<sup>30</sup> Of the main events in the act, only Antonio's murder at the hands of Bosola is recorded in the sources, which say nothing about the fate of the Duchess's brothers or of Bosola himself. It is true that the details of Ferdinand's lycanthropy in v.ii are closely modelled on the account of that disease in one of the source versions, Edward Grimston's translation of Simon Goulart's *Admirable and Memorable Histories* (1607); but these come from a portion of Goulart's text quite unconnected with the Malfi story.

<sup>31</sup> Andrew Marvell, "To His Coy Mistress", *Miscellaneous Poems*, London, Robert Boulter, 1681, p. 19.

sister has “ta’en that massy sheet of lead / That hid thy husband’s bones, and folded it / About my heart” (III.ii.112-14). Following her murder he imagines that “The wolf shall find her grave and scrape it up – / Not to devour the corpse, but to discover / The horrid murder” (IV.ii.293-294); and the figure uncannily anticipates his own lycanthropic madness, when, convinced he has himself become a wolf, he “Steal[s] forth to churchyards in the dead of night / [To] dig dead bodies up” (V.ii.11-12). Set against the grave’s harsh reminders of mutability and corruption are the lavish edifices by which great men seek to ensure their own immortality. But this is mere vanity: the “huge pyramid” to which Bosola compares the Cardinal, “Begun upon a large and ample base”, ends “in a little point, a kind of nothing” (V.v.75-77); while to Cariola, the imprisoned Duchess herself resembles “some reverend monument / Whose ruins are even pitied” (IV.ii.32-33); and it is to just such ruinous nullity that the play leads its audience in the derelict necropolis of the Echo scene.

On a first reading, the scene can easily seem like a piece of gratuitous melodrama, intended simply to match the hauntings of plays like *Hamlet*, Chapman’s *Bussy D’Ambois*, or Middleton’s *The Lady’s Tragedy*. At the beginning of the last act, Antonio, still unaware of his wife’s murder, has informed his friend Delio that he intends to seek “reconciliation” with her brothers, the Cardinal and Duke Ferdinand (V.i.1, 71). Now, as the two friends approach the Cardinal’s castle they find themselves in the remains of an “ancient abbey” (V.iii.2), where their conversation is punctuated by the ominous responses of a voice that, even as it insists that he will never see his Duchess again (V.iii.43), exposes him to a fearful hallucination: “on the sudden, a clear light / Presented me a face folded in sorrow” (V.iii.45-46). Whose face it is, he does not say; and critics readily assume that, like the apparition that tormented Bosola at the end of the previous scene, it is the Duchess’s. Supposing that the mysterious Echo must issue from her own grave, they conjecture that Webster, taking advantage of a spectacular property which the King’s Men had built a little earlier for *The Lady’s Tragedy* (1611), actually intended the Duchess’s spectral form to appear on stage.<sup>32</sup> In Middleton’s play, when the hero Govianus visits the grave of his murdered love, her monument suddenly flies open and “a great light appears in the midst of the tomb” revealing her figure, “standing just before him all in white, stuck with jewels and a great crucifix on her breast” (IV.iv.42). Webster’s “clear light”, it is suggested, signalled his intention to re-use this expensive device; but, given the care with which the play’s dialogue and the stage directions detail the spectacular effects required elsewhere – in the Cardinal’s military investiture, for example (III.iv), or Ferdinand’s display of waxwork bodies (IV.i) – this seems unlikely. Antonio speaks of the ruined graves that “questionless” must lie beneath their feet (V.iii.9-17), but there is nothing to indicate the presence of anything like the “richly set forth” monument that dominates two whole scenes of *The Lady’s Tragedy* (IV.iii-iv).<sup>33</sup> In place of Middleton’s eloquent ghost, whose dialogue with

<sup>32</sup> J. Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi*, ed. John Russell Brown, *Revels Plays*, (Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press, 1964) Manchester and New York, Manchester University Press, 2009, p. xxxv. I was formerly attracted to this conjecture myself: M. Neill, “Monuments and Ruins as Symbols in *The Duchess of Malfi*”, *Drama and Symbolism*, ed. James Redmond, *Themes in Drama 4*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1982, p. 71-87; “Fame’s Best Friend”: The Endings of *The Duchess of Malfi*”, *Issues of Death: Mortality and Identity in English Renaissance Tragedy*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1997, p. 328-353; J. Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi*, ed. M. Neill, p. xxi, 105 n.

<sup>33</sup> Thomas Middleton, *The Lady’s Tragedy* [The Second Maiden’s Tragedy], *Thomas Middleton: The Collected Works*, ed. Gary Taylor and John Lavagnino, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 2007, p. 833-906.

Govianus extends for nearly fifty lines, Webster's scene offers only the insubstantial echo which (however it may sound to Antonio) is simply the distorted reverberation of the characters' own voices; and, given that the "face folded in sorrow" seems invisible to Delio, it is likely that the audience were no more supposed to see it than they were allowed to witness the previous haunting that Bosola dismissed as the illusory product of his own "melancholy" (v.ii.346).

Insofar, then, as the scene remembered Middleton's staging, it was surely just to emphasise Webster's refusal to indulge in such fantasy: what matters here, as Brian Chalk has recently suggested, is the scene's very lack of monumental display.<sup>34</sup> In its place there is only the desolate ruin conjured into the audience's minds by Antonio's rumination on the "reverend history" (v.iii.11) represented by the remains of an "ancient abbey" (v.iii.2):

... questionless, here is this open court,  
Which now lies naked to the injuries  
Of stormy weather, some men lie interred  
Loved the church so well, and gave so largely to't,  
They thought it should have canopied their bones  
Till doomsday; but all things have their end:  
Churches and cities, which have diseases like to men,  
Must have like death that we have.  
(v.iii.12-19)

It is worth asking, however, why, in a work generally careful to avoid topographic detail, this decaying cloister should be so vividly imagined.

The prospect envisioned in Antonio's extended *vanitas* or *memento mori* will have seemed uncomfortably familiar to Webster's audience, of course: for it belongs not to the play's nominal setting in Renaissance Italy, but to early modern England, whose landscape had been left scarred with such remains by the iconoclastic violence of the Reformation. The "bare ruin'd choirs" that Shakespeare lamented<sup>35</sup> were painful reminders of the contentious politics of monumental display, to which recent historical events had given an especially sharp edge. The most explicit reflection on their significance is to be found in a work that appeared not long after the publication of Webster's play – John Weever's *Ancient Funeral Monuments*. To this antiquarian, the sight of the vandalised tombs that had once adorned the aisles and chantries of abbeys, churches, and cathedrals was so disturbing that, in an effort to preserve their derelict record, he set about compiling a detailed catalogue of all that he could find. In it he contemplated the sad effects of "the small continuance... of magnificent strong buildings", quoting an anonymous sonneteer's lament for "the sudden fall of our religious houses"<sup>36</sup> in language that strikingly resembles Antonio's own meditation:

What sacred structures did our elders build,  
Wherein Religion gorgeously sat decked?  
Now all thrown downe, religion exiled ...

<sup>34</sup> Brian Chalk, "Webster's 'Worthiest Monument': The Problem of Posterity in *The Duchess of Malfi*", *Studies in Philology*, 108, 2011, p. 379-402, reprinted in J. Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi*, ed. M. Neill, p. 335-353.

<sup>35</sup> William Shakespeare, Sonnet 73, *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, ed. Katherine Duncan-Jones, London, (Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1997) The Arden Shakespeare, 2007, p. 257, l. 4.

<sup>36</sup> J. Weever, *Ancient Funeral Monuments*, p. 184.



Or ruined so that, to the viewer's eye,  
In their own ruins they entombèd lie;  
The marble urns of their so zealous founders  
Are diggèd up, and turned to sordid uses;  
Their bodies are quite cast out of their bounders,  
Lie uninterred...<sup>37</sup>

For Weever, such monuments, whatever their pious inscriptions, had less to do with religion than with the advertisement and preservation of the social order: "Sepulchres", he declared, "should be made according to the quality and degree of the person deceased, that by the tomb everyone might be discerned of what rank he was living".<sup>38</sup> Even as he lamented the destruction of tombs that had embodied this ideal, Weever railed against the way in which the church monuments of his own day appeared to flout it, so that "more honor is attributed to a rich quondam tradesman or griping usurer than is given to the greatest potentate entombed in Westminster".<sup>39</sup> Moralising on such futile ostentation, he is forced (in spite of his determination to preserve the relics of the past) to concede that "It is vanity for a man to think to perpetuate his name and memory by strange and costly great edifices", for they serve only to demonstrate "the vanity of our minds, veiled under our fantastic habits and attires".<sup>40</sup> *The Duchess of Malfi* expresses a similar scorn for "fantastic" ostentation in the grave, but pushes it towards a levelling conclusion that would have been anathema to the conservative Weever.

The Echo scene may not show us the Duchess's monument, but immediately before her murder a disguised Bosola offers to build her one: presenting himself as a tomb-maker, whose "trade is to flatter the dead" (IV.ii.136), he enquires "of what fashion" she desires to have hers built; "Why", she responds with defensive irony, "do we grow fantastical in our deathbed? Do we affect fashion in the grave?" (IV.ii.143-144). "Most ambitiously", he replies, offering a lesson on contemporary style:

Princes' images on their tombs do not lie as they were wont, seeming to pray up to heaven, but with their hands under their cheeks as if they died of the toothache. They are not carved with their eyes fixed upon the stars, but as their minds were wholly bent upon the world, the self-same way they seem to turn their faces. (IV.ii.145-150)

Just such an image appears in a well-known Jacobean portrait, a detail of which appears on the cover of my Norton *Malfi*; and thinking about that painting can, I believe, help to illuminate the politics of Webster's monuments.<sup>41</sup> The painting traces the life-story of Sir Henry Unton, Queen Elizabeth's ambassador to France: beginning with his birth at Wadley House, the family seat in Berkshire, it moves through his marriage and subsequent career to his death and to the imposing heraldic funeral that preceded his interment in the parish church of Faringdon in 1596. The climax of the narrative is supplied by a splendid tomb, whose armour-clad effigy of Sir Henry lies in precisely the "toothache" posture that Bosola describes; behind it kneels the figure of Unton's wife, Dorothy, gesturing at a pedestal on which a pious

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<sup>37</sup> J. Weever, *Ancient Funeral Monuments*, p. 184.

<sup>38</sup> J. Weever, *Ancient Funeral Monuments*, p. 185.

<sup>39</sup> J. Weever, *Ancient Funeral Monuments*, p. 186.

<sup>40</sup> J. Weever, *Ancient Funeral Monuments*, p. 184, 186.

<sup>41</sup> A full reproduction of the portrait can be found in J. Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi*, ed. M. Neill, p. xxxii.

book lies open: frozen for eternity, Lady Unton seems to belong, like her husband, to the grave; but in fact her presence on the monument merely signalled the mourning death-in-life to which a dutiful widow was supposedly consigned. Lady Unton would live on – not just to see the completion of Sir Henry’s monument in 1606, but to commission the portrait itself – whose programme she no doubt supplied. She would, moreover, get married a second time, resembling in this Webster’s defiant Duchess who, as she woos her new husband, is made to repudiate just such an image of widowly piety:

This is flesh and blood, sir;  
'Tis not the figure cut in alabaster  
Kneels at my husband’s tomb.  
(I.i.441-443)

We do not know how Lady Unton’s family reacted to her re-marriage; but Webster’s protagonist undertakes hers in outright defiance of her brothers’ opinions: “You are a widow”, she is reminded. “They are most luxurious [lustful] / Will wed twice ... The marriage night / Is the entrance into some prison ... Wisdom begins at the end – remember it” (I.i.285-318). Compounding her offence by choosing to marry one of her own servants, in what was known as a marriage of disparagement,<sup>42</sup> the Duchess presents her wooing of Antonio as nothing less than a heroic quest – a scene from chivalric romance:

as men in some great battles,  
... have achieved  
Almost impossible actions...  
So I, through frights and threat’nings, will assay  
This dangerous venture.  
(I.i.334-338)

... Wish me good speed,  
For I am going into a wilderness  
Where I shall find nor path nor friendly clew  
To be my guide.  
(I.i.348-351)

Then, as she places her ring upon his finger, the Duchess raises her steward from his own kneeling position, symbolically reversing the deferential hierarchy embodied by her figure on the tomb (“This goodly roof of yours is too low built”, I.i.404). For all her defiant rhetoric, however, she is compelled to marry in secret, and will remain dogged by reminders of that mortal “end” where wisdom begins too late (I.i.318), and of the tomb to which her first husband’s death had seemed to consign her. When at last she is forced to accept her brothers’ “gift” of death (IV.ii.211), she does so in a posture that painfully recalls the alabaster figure she sought to repudiate:

Yet stay – heaven gates are not so highly arched  
As princes’ palaces: they that enter there  
Must go upon their knees.  
(IV.ii. 218-220)

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<sup>42</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*.

Here it might seem as if the Duchess has come full circle, finally submitting to the role of pious widow; and if this were all, the play could seem to endorse, with only minor qualifications, those earlier versions of the story that had presented her life as a warning against princely irresponsibility and the consequences of undutiful widowhood.

But there is more to the play's graveyard politics than this; and again, we can find pointers in the Unton portrait. Among this painting's oddities is the way in which it asks to be read in more than one way. Insofar as its biographical design is shaped by the funeral procession that dominates its foreground, its action seems to lead directly from cradle to grave, with only a wedding to intervene. Unton's career as a diplomat, figured above, is reduced to a kind of digression from this insistent narrative; and, although in each of its episodes his figure is lit by the sun in the top right-hand corner, it is his tomb at the bottom left which its beams illuminate with special magnificence, making it appear the proper culmination of a life well lived. Beneath the tomb, however, the painter shows us Sir Henry's shrouded cadaver, a reminder of the sordid reality beneath that monumental display; and it is not, after all, to the monument that the viewer's eye is most insistently drawn. Instead, the image that dominates the entire composition – even as it remains conspicuously unintegrated into its narrative design – is a formal portrait of the diplomat at work, his head framed by two figures who compete to possess him: on his left Death presents Unton with an ominous hourglass, but on his right the winged figure of Fame – as if set free from her other representation beneath the canopy of the monument – swoops down to claim him, blowing her trumpet. The portrait figure, then, appears to stand for a renown that, as it displaces the progress of mortality, transcends the merely material ostentation of the tomb.

A similar effect is created, I think, in the last scene of the *Duchess of Malfi*, where Bosola's despairing epitaph – "We are only like dead walls or vaulted graves / That, ruined, yields no echo" (v.v.95-96) – sends us back to the Echo that resounded among those other ruined graves – one whose significance is finally spelt out in Delio's response to the "great ruin" (v.v.109) by which he is surrounded:

These wretched eminent things  
Leave no more fame behind 'em than should one  
Fall in a frost and leave his print in snow –  
As soon as the sun shines, it ever melts  
Both form and matter. I have ever thought  
Nature doth nothing so great for great men  
As when she's pleased to make them lords of truth:  
*Integrity of life is fame's best friend,  
Which nobly, beyond death, shall crown the end.*  
(v.v.111-119)

It is the Duchess's integrity whose fame Delio proclaims; but it is no accident that he should speak of "great men", for his is the generalised elegiac language of *A Monumental Column*: "Oh greatness! What shall we compare thee to? / To giants, beasts, or towers framed out of snow ... *The evening shows the day, and death crowns life*".<sup>43</sup> It would resound once more in *Monuments of Honor*, where, as if remembering Bosola's "huge pyramid" (v.v.75), the closing

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<sup>43</sup> J. Webster, *A Monumental Column*, p. 176, 181.

"Monument of Gratitude" begins with a display of "four curious Paramids charged with the Princes Armes ... which are Monuments for the Dead, that hee is deceased",<sup>44</sup> before claiming for Henry a greatness whose fame transcends such empty display:

Such was this Prince, such are the noble hearts;  
Who when they dye, yet dye not in all parts:  
But from the *Integrity of a brave mind*,  
Leave a most *Cleare* and Eminent Fame behind.  
Thus hath this *jewell* not quite lost his Ray,  
Only cas'd up 'gainst a more glorious day.<sup>45</sup>

The echo of *Malfi's* "*Integrity of life*" (v.v.118) is unmistakable, and it is important that the concluding lines of the pageant claim that same princely virtue for the bourgeois Lord Mayor himself – "... *Integrity*, that keeps / The safest Watch and breeds the soundest sleeps"<sup>46</sup> – since Henry is implicitly presented here as a patron of Sir John Gore's Merchant-Tailors and their citizen world.

In *The Duchess of Malfi*, as the Duchess prepares to face the imprisonment that will separate her forever from Antonio, she is urged by Bosola to "Forget this base, low fellow ... One of no birth" (III.v.112-114); she responds with a parable that exposes conventional ideas of rank to question, "*Men oft are valued high when they're most wretch'd*" it concludes, "*There's no deep valley but near some great hill*" (III.v.136-139). In the virtual epilogue that announces the play's tragic conclusion, Delio provides a gloss for these somewhat enigmatic *sententiae*: "Let us make noble use / Of this *great* ruin ... Nature doth nothing so *great* for *great* men / As when she's pleased to make them lords of truth" (v.v.108-109, 116-117, my emphasis). His insistent repetition of "great" comes as a final reminder of the semantic pressure that the play has put on that bland-seeming adjective: together the words "great" and "greatness" appear no fewer than 56 times in Webster's tragedy – a frequency matched only in two other plays that subject the idea of "greatness" to similar interrogation: Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida* (57) and *Antony and Cleopatra* (53). The court world, though haunted by fears of "a *great man's ruin*" (III.i.92), is full of so-called "great men": Ferdinand "the *great* Calabrian duke" (I.i.83) claims the privileges that belong to "great men" (I.i.233), the Cardinal is called "this *great* fellow" (I.i.44), "the *great* Cardinal" (V.ii.185), and "a *great* man" (V.ii.290), their sister is "the *great* Duchess" (V.ii.268), a "great woman" (IV.ii.125) whose downfall is ironically assured when she becomes "great with child" (II.i.108). Among the other characters, the foolish Malatesta is called "the *great* Count" (III.i.41), while Julia, the Cardinal's mistress, boastfully numbers herself among "great women of pleasure" (V.ii.192). Even Bosola, Antonio sneeringly suggests, is "studying to become a *great* wise fellow" (II.i.76). Ferdinand, who scorns Antonio as "A slave that only smelled of ink and counters, / [Who] ne'er in's life looked like a gentleman" (III.iii.72-73), sarcastically dubs this social-climber the "great master of [the Duchess's] household" (I.i.86); but it is Antonio himself who (in a figure uncannily brought to

<sup>44</sup> J. Webster, *Monuments of Honor*, sig. C, C2.

<sup>45</sup> J. Webster, *Monuments of Honor*, sig. C2. My emphasis.

<sup>46</sup> J. Webster, *Monuments of Honor*, sig. C2, my emphasis. In his *Funeral Elegie* for King James, the playwright Thomas Heywood, who had been one of Henry's elegists, would nostalgically repeat the phrase, celebrating "what doth grace even Princes honesty, / Integrity of life". Thomas Heywood, *A Funeral Elegie Upon the Much Lamented Death of the Trespassant and Unmatchable King, King James...*, London, Thomas Harper, 1625, sig. B4.

life by the madmen who are sent to torment the imprisoned Duchess) dismisses all ambition as “a *great* man’s madness ... girt / With the wild noise of prattling visitants, / Which makes it lunatic beyond all cure” (I.i.408-412); and it is Antonio who, at the point of death, dismisses life itself as a deluded “quest of *greatness*” in which “We follow after bubbles blown in th’air” (V.iv.64). “*The great are like the base*”, Antonio reflects, pondering the Duchess’s efforts to conceal her pregnancy, “*nay, they are the same, / When they seek shameful ways to avoid shame*” (II.iii.51-52).

The “integrity of life”, which for Delio sets the Duchess apart from such folly, self-consciously translates the famous opening of Horace’s *Odes*: “Integer vitae, scelerisque purus”.<sup>47</sup> With its implicit rejection of martial greatness, the phrase becomes a reminder of the way in which the Duchess’s course of life has rewritten the heroic aspiration expressed in her wooing of Antonio (“as men in some *great* battles...”, I.i.334-351); and it reaches back to the question with which Cariola opens the play’s debate about the nature of greatness: “Whether the spirit of *greatness* or of woman / Reign most in her, I know not” (I.i.487-488). In recent criticism the play’s apparent endorsement of the Duchess’s secret marriage is often read as a response to “women’s issues”;<sup>48</sup> and it is admittedly crucial to the playwright’s purpose that Delio’s final speech should promise to establish Antonio’s surviving son “In’s *mother’s* right” (V.v.111, my emphasis). In Webster’s sources, by contrast, this son was “forced to fly out of Milan, to change his name, and to retire himself far off, where he died unknown”,<sup>49</sup> while the Duchess, along with her murdered husband and her other strangled children, was reduced to a “ruin” that set an “example to all posterity”.<sup>50</sup> But in the play’s characteristic oxymoron it is the corpses of those “wretched eminent things” (V.v.111), Ferdinand and the Cardinal, that are consigned to the oblivion of “graves / ... ruined” (V.v.95-96), while the play itself, with its wholesale reimagining of the Duchess’s story, becomes a monument to the unbroken “integrity” that defines her greatness. Webster’s proto-feminism is easily exaggerated, however; and the much less generous treatment of figures like Julia, or Vittoria Corombona in his earlier tragedy, *The White Devil*, suggests that his sympathy for the Duchess was inspired by something other than straightforward indignation at the plight of women.

It was less the inequities of gender than the tyrannies of rank that seem to have stirred the playwright’s resentment, as we can see from the dedicatory epistle, addressed to “*To the Right Honorable George Harding, Baron Berkeley of Berkeley Castle, and Knight of the Order of the Bath to the Illustrious Prince Charles*”, that framed *The Duchess of Malfi*’s published text. Beginning in the deferential manner expected of such appeals for patronage, Webster breaks into a sudden truculence that is unlikely to have pleased his aristocratic addressee: “I do not altogether look up at your title, the ancientest nobility being but a relic of time past. And the truest honor indeed being for a man to confer honor on himself”.<sup>51</sup> But this, significantly, is

<sup>47</sup> Horace, *Odes*, I.22, l. 1.

<sup>48</sup> J. Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi*, ed. Leah S. Marcus, p. 13.

<sup>49</sup> Simon Goulart, *Admirable and Memorable Histories*, trans. Edward Grimston (London, 1607), reprinted in J. Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi*, ed. M. Neill, p. 163.

<sup>50</sup> William Painter, *The Second Tome of the Palace of Pleasure, Containing Store of Goodly Histories, Tragical Matters, and other Moral Argument, Very Requisite for Delight and Profit* (London, 1567), reprinted in J. Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi*, ed. M. Neill, p. 160.

<sup>51</sup> J. Webster, [Dedication], *The Duchess of Malfi*, ed. M. Neill, p. 5, l. 9-12.

the same attitude expressed in one of the satiric diatribes given to the villain-hero, Bosola, when he confronts Antonio early in the second act:

A duke was your cousin-german removed[?] Say you were lineally descended from King Pippin – or he himself; what of this? Search the heads of the *greatest* rivers in the world, you shall find them but bubbles of water. Some would think the souls of princes were brought forth by some more weighty cause than those of meaner persons. They are deceived: there's the same hand to them; the like passions sway them. The same reason that makes a vicar go to law for a tithe pig and undo his neighbours makes them spoil a whole province and batter down a goodly city with the cannon.

(II.i.94-103, my emphasis)

If titles, like ruined monuments, are no more than “relic[s] of time past”,<sup>52</sup> for Bosola the order of degree, on which others set so much store, amounts to nothing more than a hierarchy of humiliation: “for places in the court are but like beds in a hospital, where this man's head lies at that man's foot, and so lower and lower” (I.i.64-66).

Webster's choice of a story to illustrate this contentious attitude to rank was hardly an obvious one: a century after her death, the history of Giovanna D'Aragona, the widowed Duchess of Malfi – of her marriage of disparagement to her steward, Antonio da Bologna, of her honour-killing at the behest of her jealous brothers, with the butchery of her children, and the hunting down of her husband – had become widely known. But, told and re-told by a succession of moralising writers in Italian, French, and English, it was typically offered as an admonition to the great – and to great women in particular – against the danger of subordinating public duty to private emotion and to the “shameless lusts”, “libidinous appetite”, and “ticklish instigations of ... wanton flesh” denounced in William Painter's *Palace of Pleasure*.<sup>53</sup> In the hands of Webster, as he adapted Painter's version for the London stage, the meaning of the story was effectively turned on its head. It is true that the play's opening dialogue seems at first to recall the source writers' warnings: “a prince's court”, the audience is reminded, “Is like a common fountain ... if't chance / Some cursed example poison't near the head, / Death and diseases through the whole land spread” (I.i.11-15). But it is the Duchess's brothers who, shortly afterwards, are made to voice the familiar denunciations of her behaviour: it is the hypocritical Cardinal who insists that she must be governed by the obligations of rank, demanding that his sister allow nothing “without the addition, honor, / [to] Sway [her] high blood” (I.i.288-289); it is the psychopathic Ferdinand, tormented by his own incestuous fantasies, who rails against the weakness of her female flesh, declaring that “They are most luxurious / [who] Will wed twice” (I.i.289-290). The play, by contrast, with its defiant insistence upon the Duchess's “integrity of life”, becomes a subversive celebration of all that Painter and others had deplored, even as it invites scorn for the vanities of rank that so possess the Aragonian brothers.

The corollary to Bosola's levelling invective against the imaginary greatness attributed to “the souls of princes” is to be found in act III, scene iii, where Bosola's indignation at Antonio's

<sup>52</sup> J. Webster, *The Devil's Law-Case*, 1617, ed. Elizabeth M. Brennan, New York, Norton, New Mermaids Series, 1976, I.i.33-34.

<sup>53</sup> W. Painter, *The Palace of Pleasure*, p. 136, 146, 132.

betrayal by the Duchess's officers prompts a diatribe against the obsequious hypocrisy of the court world:

... these are rogues, that in's prosperity,  
But to have waited on his fortune, could have wished  
His dirty stirrup through their noses ...  
Would have prostituted their daughters to his lust;  
Made their firstborn intelligencers; thought none happy  
But such as ... wore his livery.  
(III.ii.224-231)

And when the Duchess defends her apparent banishment of Antonio with a reminder that "he was basely descended" (III.ii.250), Bosola responds with an expression of disdain for the "painted honors" (III.ii.267) by which social status is proclaimed: "Will you make yourself a mercenary herald, rather to examine men's pedigrees than virtues" (III.ii.251-252).

The reason for Bosola's uncharacteristically sincere riposte is that Antonio's apparent disgrace allows him to recognise in the steward's base descent – and consequent vulnerability to the whims of the great – a mirror for his own condition. But the cruel irony of the scene lies in the fact that it is precisely this spontaneous outburst of feeling, breaking through Bosola's politic mask, that tempts the Duchess into revealing the secret that all his intelligencer's wiles could not uncover: "This good one that you speak of is my husband" (III.ii.263). However, Bosola's wonder that "this ambitious age" can "prefer / A man merely for worth" (III.ii.264-266) will not allow him any escape from the treadmill of "courtly reward, / And punishment":<sup>54</sup> if Antonio looks like his own virtuous *alter ego*, then Bosola's accidental killing of "The man I would have saved 'bove my own life" (v.iv.51) simply epitomises his own self-destructive career. It is easy to recognise a Calvinistic determinism in his tormented recognition "we cannot be suffered / To do good when we have a mind to it!" (IV.ii.344-345); but this "perspective / That shows us hell" (IV.ii.343-344) is as much social as it is theological.

In his recent *Age of Anger* Pankaj Mishra explores the present-day predicament of the educated precariat, "superfluous young people condemned to the anteroom of the modern world" and possessed by the *ressentiment* that arises from "the contradiction between extravagant promise and meagre means"<sup>55</sup> – outcasts who remind him of that archetypal figure from nineteenth-century literature, Turgenev's Rudin, an "alienated young man of promise [who] ... educated into a sense of hope and entitlement, [but] rendered adrift by his limited circumstances, [finds himself] exposed to feelings of weakness, inferiority and envy ... [and becomes] the wandering outlaw of his own dark mind".<sup>56</sup> Alienation of the kind Mishra describes is hardly peculiar to the social crises of the nineteenth and twenty-first centuries, however: and much of what he has to say about the bitter discontents of life in the societal antechamber could readily be applied to the group whom M. H. Curtis once described as "The Alienated Intellectuals of Early Stuart England"<sup>57</sup> – well-educated and talented young men to

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<sup>54</sup> J. Webster, *The White Devil*, 1612, Webster: *The White Devil and The Duchess of Malfi*, ed. R. V. Holdsworth, London and Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1975, I.i.3-4.

<sup>55</sup> Pankaj Mishra, *The Age of Anger: A History of the Present*, London, Penguin Books, 2017, p. 330-331.

<sup>56</sup> P. Mishra, *The Age of Anger*, p. 23, and cf. p. 296.

<sup>57</sup> M. H. Curtis, "The Alienated Intellectuals of Early Stuart England", *Past and Present*, 23, 1962, p. 25-43.

whom the cash-strapped Jacobean state offered no secure employment. 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 – an Inns of Court man who, apparently finding no proper career in the law, became the jobbing writer famously sneered at by a more privileged contemporary as “Crabbed *Websterio*, / The Play-wright, Cart-wright”.<sup>58</sup> Bosola’s too is an anger that results from frustrated social ambition: a university graduate whose determination to seek the favour of the great has made a murderer of him, and won him nothing better than a seven-year sentence to the galleys (I.i.30-35, 67-69), he first appears railing bitterly at the master who suborned his crime:

I have done you  
Better service than to be slighted thus.  
Miserable age, where the only reward  
Of doing well is the doing of it!  
(I.i.29-32)

In III.iii, Delio supplies Pescara and Silvio with a revelatory back-story for this malcontent:

I knew him once in Padua – a fantastical scholar, like some who study to know how many knots was in Hercules’ club, of what color Achilles’s beard was, or whether Hector was 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.  
(III.iii. 41-47)

Webster’s tragedy is named for a royal Duchess; but this low-born, frustrated scholar becomes her rival as tragic protagonist, since the catastrophe of the last act effectively belongs to him. Looked at from this perspective the play becomes what (adapting a term from the lexicon of comedy) we might call a “citizen tragedy”. It was not that the playwright chose to flout the proprieties of what Sir Philip Sidney had called “the high and excellent tragedy”:<sup>59</sup> there was to be no question of re-locating tragic action to the bourgeois world of generic outliers like *Arden of Faversham* or *A Woman Killed with Kindness*. Indeed Webster would surely have concurred with Sidney’s claim that the principal function of tragedy was precisely to make “kings fear to be tyrants”, exposing their vulnerability by showing “upon how weak foundations gilden roofs are builded”;<sup>60</sup> it is the “great Cardinal”, after all, with his “large and ample base” who is reduced to “a little point, a kind of nothing” (V.v.76-77), exposed as a superfluous man who now longs only to be “laid by and never thought of” (V.v.88); it is the “great Duke” who dismisses himself as a diamond “*cut with our own dust*” (V.v.71); while it is the Duchess who recognises in her own fate an exemplum of “The misery

<sup>58</sup> Henry Fitzgeffrey, *Satyres and Satyricall Epigrams: with Certaine Observations at Black-Fryers* (1617), *Webster: The White Devil and The Duchess of Malfi*, ed. R. V. Holdsworth, London and Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1975, p. 30. For further discussion of this aspect of Webster’s writing, see M. Neill, “‘Crabbed *Websterio*’: *The Duchess of Malfi* and the Character of a Dramatic Poet”, *The Duchess of Malfi: Webster’s Tragedy of Blood*, ed. P. Drouet and W. C. Carroll, p. 31-44.

<sup>59</sup> Sir Philip Sidney, “An Apology for Poetry”, *English Critical Essays (Sixteenth, Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries)*, ed. Edmund D. Jones, London, Oxford University Press, (1922) 1959, p. 26.

<sup>60</sup> P. Sidney, “An Apology for Poetry”, p. 26.



of us that are born great" (I.i.429), just as in the murder scene Bosola points to her "grey hairs" (IV.ii.126) as evidence that "Thou art some great woman, sure" (IV.ii.125). But it is also the Duchess whose parable of the salmon and the dogfish invites reinterpretation of her apparent downfall: "*There's no deep valley but near some great hill*" (III.v.139).

With her parable the Duchess makes explicit the question on which the action of the tragedy proves to turn: "I prithee, who is greatest, can you tell?" (III.v.118); and Webster addresses this question from the resolutely sceptical perspective of one whose allegiance was to the values of the (overwhelmingly Protestant) urban middle class – a man who, on the title-page of the civic pageant he wrote for the Lord Mayor was proud to call himself "John Webster Merchant-Taylor". Announcing his citizen credentials as a member of the very company to which the Lord Mayor himself belonged, he was at pains to remind his audience that, like Edward III and others in its "Royall conventicle of Kings", Prince Henry himself was a member of the livery company, into which he had been inducted as a freeman in 1607.<sup>61</sup> The "Monument of Gratitude",<sup>62</sup> spoken by the chivalric hero Amade le Grand (Amadis of Gaul), presents Henry as "of al your Brother-hood the joy": boasting that "our Company / Have not forgot him who ought ne'er to dye", it offers him, like the Duchess, as an exemplar of "Integrity that keeps / The safest Watch and breeds the soundest sleeps".<sup>63</sup> *The Duchess of Malfi* itself is not – at least in any straightforward way – a contribution to the extended chorus of lament for the dead prince; but, as I have tried to show, it is a work profoundly inflected by the grief into which his death plunged the nation; and it remains Webster's greatest monument to the values for which Prince Henry had, in the minds of his admirers, come to stand.

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<sup>61</sup> Gregory McNamara, "Grief was as clothes to their backs': Prince Henry's Funeral viewed from the Wardrobe", *Prince Henry Revived: Image and Exemplarity in Early Modern England*, ed. Timothy Wilks, Southampton, Southampton Solent University and Paul Holberton Publishing, 2007, p. 259-279, p. 260. See also Nigel V. Sleigh-Johnson, "The Merchant Taylors Company of London, 1580-1645", unpublished PhD thesis, University College, London, 1989.

<sup>62</sup> J. Webster, *Monuments of Honor*, sig. C, C2.

<sup>63</sup> J. Webster, *Monuments of Honor*, sig. C2.

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