



“You are welcome to your country”: initiation and re-encounter in the dramatic world of John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*

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The discussion which follows pursues one possible reading of the opening scene of John Webster's most famous tragedy. Following the precedents of a whole sequence of modern editions of the play,¹ this analysis will maintain the scene division given in the First Quarto (1623) of the play and view the rhyming couplet (“rearing” / “wearing”) at lines 78-79 as signalling the close of this particular cycle of dramatic action. In an early modern playhouse with no means of drawing a front curtain (a familiar practice now facilitated by subsequent changes to theatre architecture), dramatists might all too frequently exploit this poetic device in order to punctuate an intrigue in scenic terms. This can be the case with Webster's contemporaries, such as Shakespeare and Middleton, and is certainly regularly (if not uniformly) the case in the tragedy by Webster under discussion and throughout his dramatic *oeuvre*.²

The structure of the exposition

Before entering into the textual detail of the tragedy itself, it soon becomes apparent from the conventions of introduction and commentary being employed on the arrival onstage of Delio and Antonio at its beginning that we are being initiated into this dramatic world with the assistance of a framing device. There is broad evidence from across the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods that audiences had a good number of opportunities to become familiar with this dramaturgical mode with its deployments of commentators and

¹ See: *Complete Works of John Webster*, ed. David Gunby et al, 4 vols., Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995-2012; John Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi*, ed. Elizabeth M. Brennan, London, Ernest Benn/New Mermaids, rep. 1975, 1st pub. 1964; John Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi*, ed. John and Claire Saunders, Harlow, Essex, Longman, 1987; John Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi*, ed. Leah Marcus, London, Arden/Bloomsbury, 2009. Michael Neill also draws attention to the persuasiveness of Q1's scene division although he does not observe it in his own edition. See John Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi*, ed. Michael Neill, London/New York, W. W. Norton & Company, 2015, p. 15 & notes. In keeping with the editorial practice of the present collection, all references from the play in this discussion are taken from the Norton edition edited by Michael Neill.

² See, for example, in *The Duchess of Malfi* the closing couplets of 2.2, 2.3, 2.4, 2.5 and so on.

choric figures. Shakespeare, for example, had exploited this convention in works such as *Romeo and Juliet*, *Henry V* and later, for the purposes of narrative ellipsis, in *The Winter's Tale*. In the collaborative production *Pericles, Prince of Tyre* in which Shakespeare had a significant hand, such a convention becomes a key axis upon which the dramatic narrative turns to bridge the divides of time and space. Elsewhere, amongst other figures from Webster's contemporaries, we also discover choric devices in evidence in Barnabe Barnes's *The Devils Charter* (1607?), John Day, William Rowley and George Wilkins's *The Travailes of Three English Brothers* (1607?) and Anthony Munday, for example, had earlier drawn upon the resources of a choric Skelton and a Friar Tuck for his Robin Hood plays: respectively, *The downfall of Robert, Earle of Huntington, afterward called Robin Hood of merrie Sherwodde* and *The death of Robert, Earle of Huntington Otherwise called Robin Hood of merrie Sherwodde* (both published in 1601, but may have enjoyed performances in 1598).³ Nonetheless, although Delio intervenes at the very close of the play's action in Webster's tragedy, it is not in order to re-assume the role he interpreted in the opening scene. Thus, to all intents and purposes, Webster's device is a partial frame. This was a form which had had a notable precedent in Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta* (1589-90), for example, where the suave Machiavel, or Make-Evil, both fixes audience attention and may be seen deviously to excite false expectations with regard to the action which follows – but Machiavel does not re-appear to conclude the dramatic action in Marlowe's intrigue. Delio's final appearance in Webster's play does contain some examples of proverbial wisdom, but he is clearly depicted as engaged in or responding to the imperatives of the plot, rather than adopting a vantage point from which to review the preceding five acts of dramatic narrative (see 5.5.107-19).

In whatever ways we encounter Webster's tragedy, whether as audience member in the theatre or as reader, we are compelled to query the necessity, the status and the function of such a framing device at the play's opening. Interestingly, this kind of textual interrogation was clearly in evidence amongst some of the earliest editors in the eighteenth century of early modern English drama. Samuel Johnson found the intervention of Rumour at the beginning of Shakespeare's 2 *Henry IV*, for example, neither "inelegant" nor "unpoetical", but despaired that from a dramatic point of view it proved "wholly useless, since we are told nothing which the first scene does not clearly and naturally discover".⁴ After due reflection, we may, in the manner of Johnson, query the utility of such a device in a play such as Webster's, but we should remain mindful that this device can never constitute a careless intervention on the part of the playwright. It forms an integral part of the narrative decision-making which organizes a dramatic intrigue being prepared for the stage and, in the case of *The Duchess of Malfi*, it wholly shapes our initial encounter with the dramatic world in question.

In considering the opening of Webster's tragedy, we might unpack this decision-making in a number of different ways. If, as many modern readers have noticed, the heroine does not assume a commanding position in the cast list presented in original publications of the playtext, the opening scene dominated by political commentary and some key character introductions compels us to remain in an environment where specifically *male* opinion and *male* experience predominate – indeed, the heroine is not

³ See Andrew Hiscock, "Pericles, Prince of Tyre and the Appetite for Narrative", *Late Shakespeare 1608-1613*, ed. Andrew J. Power and Rory Loughnane, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2013, p. 16-35.

⁴ See Samuel Johnson, *Samuel Johnson on Shakespeare*, ed. H. R. Woudhuysen, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1989, p. 202.

mentioned at all. Moreover, during the length of the tragedy we are never allowed to keep company in a sustained fashion with the female characters, such as Cariola, Julia or the Duchess, independently of the males who engage with them.

If framing devices are widely in evidence in theatre practice across early modern Europe, whether in Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*, Peele's *The Old Wives' Tale*,⁵ Corneille's *L'illusion Comique* or Calderón's *Hado y divisa de Leondio y Marfusa*,⁶ in their many and various ways they establish a supplementary dramatic plane from which to appreciate the ensuing action. On occasions, they may be seen to establish unexpected time and space between the audience and the perceived main forum of dramatic action. However, rather than operating as a Brechtian technique of *Verfremdung*, or alienation, in the theatrical or reading experience, Webster can be seen as strategically positioning guiding principles, or referents, with which to negotiate our entry into this tragic universe. Furthermore, we may, on occasions, wish to understand Delio and Antonio in these opening exchanges as constituting representatives of ourselves on stage, posing necessary questions and appearing hungry for fuller information about the perilous political realities of life lived in Webster's highly fractious Italian states.

The artistic and intellectual culture of these states from the fourteenth century onwards certainly marks the beginning of any given narrative of the early modern or Renaissance period in Europe. At the very outset of this period, this new cultural movement was characterized by the scholarly commitments of the humanists. The painstaking labours of these distinguished, learned figures in Italy (e.g. Petrarch, Poliziano, della Mirandola) and their successors across the continent were dedicated to the promotion of the *studia humanitatis* influenced by classical writers such as Seneca, Pliny, and Plutarch but, above all, Cicero. The many and diverse interests of humanists across Europe in pedagogy, public service, and ambitious intellectual endeavour sought to stress the life- and spirit-enhancing potential of the study of eloquence, of the renewal of ancient wisdom through translation and commentary of ancient pagan and scriptural texts. However, at the heart of this humanist project remained the ideal of intellectual, political and social debate, disputation and exchange amongst the educated (typically, the debaters would be male).⁷ We see this ideal being promoted in Castiglione's *Il Cortegiano* (1528), in More's *Utopia* (1516), in published pedagogical tracts and in staged university disputations across the length and breadth of the early modern continent. In northern Europe, this commitment was notably in evidence in *The Colloquies* (pub. 1518-33) by the celebrated scholar Erasmus of Rotterdam which were explicitly designed to address lively debates surrounding social mores, political misgovernment, and spiritual failings in dialogue form. And it is this humanist ideal of cultivated, educated males drawn amiably

⁵ See Andrew Hiscock, "'Hear my Tale or Kiss My Tail!': *The Old Wives' Tale*, *Gammer Gurton's Needle*, and the Popular Cultures of Tudor Comedy", *The Oxford Handbook of Tudor Literature 1485-1603*, ed. Mike Pincombe and Cathy Shrank, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2009, p. 733-48.

⁶ For further discussion of parallels in the use of framing devices between English early modern drama and the *loa* in Spanish Golden Age drama, see *Parallel Lives: Spanish and English National Drama 1580-1680*, ed. Louise and Peter Fothergill-Payne, Lewisburg, Bucknell University Press, 1991.

⁷ In such matters, we must look to origins of the Western cultural tradition in Ancient Greece: Aristotle had argued in *The Nicomachean Ethics* that "Perfect friendship is the friendship of men who are good, and alike in excellence; for these wish well alike to each other *qua* good, and they are good in themselves" (VIII.3 – 1156b5-10). See Aristotle, *The Complete Works of Aristotle. The Revised Oxford Translation*, ed. Jonathan Barnes, vol. II, Princeton NJ, Princeton University Press, 1984, p. 1827.

into each other's company to reflect upon the character of the times and the plight of nations which is also re-presented at the opening of *The Duchess of Malfi*.

Attending to the speakers

In this introduction to the stage world, the audience is invited to attend to the gentility, equanimity, comradeship (the unstudied courtesy or *sprezzatura*) with which Antonio is greeted by his fellow countryman Delio to his native home – “You are welcome to your country” (1.1.1). Nonetheless, the potential for wry wit in the delivery of this greeting (the polite formula, which would normally be addressed to a visiting guest, would conclude with “to my country”) also renders immediately apparent the cognitive discrepancy at work between the worlds of the stage and the auditorium. We, as audience members, are being *initiated* into the dramatic environment of Webster's *Malfi*, whereas both Delio and Antonio are *re-encountering* it in different ways: they both have in-depth knowledge of this human landscape – however, Antonio's (and the audience's) knowledge is about to be swiftly updated. We learn that Antonio, like Laertes in *Hamlet* (1600-1), for example, has recently returned home from a sojourn in France. If the sixteenth-century civil wars in France had operated as a military finishing school for the aspiring warriors of early modern Europe, both *Hamlet* and *The Duchess of Malfi* draw attention to the enduring reputation of the Gallic kingdom to offer unrivalled opportunities for learning and for improving modish skills in social etiquette. If examples of mocking those returning from France with affectations occur in Jonson's *Every Man out of his Humour* (1599) or Shakespeare and Fletcher's *VIII* (1612-13), for example, Delio's comment (“a very formal Frenchman”, 1.1.3) may refer to his friend's attire or manner, but this remains a kindly jest. It soon becomes apparent that, despite the period of their separation, both men remain quite at ease in each other's company and a bond of affection is expressed in the easy and fluent exchanges of information.

If the historical source for Webster's tragedy looks back some hundred years before the first performances of the play to the disappearance of the Duchess of Amalfi, Giovanna d'Aragona in 1511, the reference to the “French court” takes us into the contemporaneous reality of the young Louis XIII – or, at one remove, to the early Stuart court in London. If, in 1617 (thus, post-dating the earliest performances of the play), there was an attempt to expel foreign influence at the French court (notably with the murder of the Maréchal d'Ancre), the court of James VI/I in London established from the outset a company of royal favourites and self-interested followers (“flattering sycophants, of dissolute / And infamous persons”, 1.1.8-9) which was often vilified in publications and correspondence of the period. In 1603 a silver accession medal was struck, hailing in a Latin inscription “James I, Emperor of the whole island of Britain and King of France and Ireland”, and the son of Norfolk gentry, Philip Gawdy, wrote wittily to his brother that, “The King hath placed in all offices some Scots and put out many English, meaning to make us all one under the name of ancient Britons”, adding:

I doubt not but that you have heard of the multitude of Knightes made in many places [...] I knowe one knighte in Suffolke that followed the courte so long for a knighthood, as whether it wer for want of good lodging, or shifte of rayment, he and his men were so lousye as it was most wonderfull, and yet in the end (paying well for it) he was made a lowsy K[night].⁸

⁸ Philip Gawdy, *Letters of Philip Gawdy of West Harling, Norfolk, and of London to Various Members of his Family 1579-1616*, ed. Isaac Herbert Jeayes, London, Nichols & Sons, 1906, p. 131, 130, 136.

To pay just and due tribute to this growing mood of frantic preferment, in Thomas Middleton's *The Puritan Widow* (1606) playhouse audiences had the opportunity to make acquaintance with one Sir John Pennydub!

Apart from the ongoing newsbooks and pamphlets published on both sides of the Channel in the early modern period, Antonio's and Delio's interest concerning affairs unfolding in the neighbouring nation was not infrequently expressed on the stages of London or Paris. We have the examples of Marlowe's *Massacre at Paris* (1592), the sequence of George Chapman tragedies, *Bussy D'Ambois* (1607), *The Conspiracy and Tragedy of Charles, Duke of Byron* (1608), *The Revenge of Bussy D'Ambois* (1613) and *The Tragedy of Chabot, Admiral of France* (pub. 1639) and, indeed, Webster's own lost tragedy *The Guise* (1615?) in this period. In France, there is the notable example of Antoine de Montchrestien's *L'Écossaise* (1603) which was merely amongst the first of a series of plays produced for the Paris theatres by different dramatists which focused upon key British political figures such as Mary, Queen of Scots or the Earl of Essex.⁹ Nonetheless, whatever the exotic geographical landscape to which early modern English drama transports us, we remain in the London playhouses only ever a step away from a consideration of, a comparison with the life that is lived in the audience's native land.

The establishing shots – concepts and dramatic modes

In *The Nichomachean Ethics*, Aristotle had argued most influentially for later ages (and the early modern age is no exception) in the following manner:

There are three kinds of constitution, and an equal number of deviation-forms – perversions, as it were, of them. The constitutions are monarchy, aristocracy, and thirdly that which is based on a property qualification, which it seems appropriate to call timocratic, though most people usually call it polity. The best of these is monarchy, the worst timocracy. The deviation from monarch is tyranny; for both are forms of one-man rule, but there is the greatest difference between them; the tyrant looks to his own advantage, the king to that of his subjects. For a man is not a king unless he is sufficient to himself and excels his subjects in good things; and such a man needs nothing further; therefore he will not look to his own interests but to those of his subjects; for a king who is not like that would be a mere titular king. Now tyranny is the very contrary of this; the tyrant pursues his own good.¹⁰

Apart from extolling the virtues of benign, paternalistic monarchy ("blessed government", 1.1.16) as the most harmonious form of human government in any given society and reviling the corrupt dealings of tyranny, Aristotle's thinking also underpins the deeply rooted belief in medieval and early modern intellectual traditions that no form of human happiness can be conceived of that is not governed by hierarchical conditions of existence – thus, the "fixed order" (1.1.6) which Antonio celebrates as operating in the northern court across the Alps, but which is about to be radically unsettled in the Italy of the dramatic action which follows.

John Webster has often been recognized for his eagerness to draw upon verbal and narratological sources for the construction of his own playtexts. In the nineteenth century, the notable critic William Hazlitt contended that:

⁹ For further discussion here, see Jane Conroy, *Terres tragiques: l'Angleterre et l'Écosse dans la tragédie française du XVII^e siècle*, Tübingen, Biblio 17, 1999.

¹⁰ *The Nichomachean Ethics* (VIII.10. 1160a32-1160b10). See Aristotle, *Complete Works*, II.1834.

Webster would, I think, be greater dramatic genius than Dekker, if he had the same originality; and perhaps is so, even without it. [...] [*The Duchess of Malfi* and *The White Devil*] are too like Shakespear, and often direct imitations of him, both in general conception and individual expression.¹¹

In the modern period, two pioneering studies from the 1960s highlighted this propensity in the dramatist's work: R. W. Dent's *John Webster's Borrowing* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1960); and Gunnar Boklund's *The Duchess of Malfi: Sources, Themes, Characters* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1962). Both works placed this enquiry at the heart of Webster criticism. Most prominent in the dramatist's favoured dramaturgical repertoire is the important trope of the *sentence*. The regaling of audiences with epigrammatic sayings of proverbial wisdom, or *sententiae*, would have been most frequently encountered in early modern learning environments in the dramas of Seneca (and his imitators, both ancient and early modern). Moreover, offering even greater cultural purchase, a selection of Seneca's revenge tragedies was translated into English by Jasper Heywood (*Tenne Tragedies of Seneca*, London, Thomas Marsh, 1581) in the mid-Elizabethan period and had an enormous influence upon subsequent play-making, clearly shaping the composition of works such as Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* (1592) and *Richard III* (1592-93) as well as Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* (1589?), for example. It is precisely this recourse to *sententiae* which characterizes the dramatic intrigue of *The Duchess of Malfi* from the outset: "a prince's court / Is like a common fountain, whence should flow / Pure silver drops in general", 1.1.11-13). The purposes of the *sentence* may be many and various according to the theatrical context. In this particular instance, the audience may be given to respect the contemplative, judicious statements of these cultivated men which encapsulate acknowledged truths. Indeed, here the *sentence* may constitute a dramatic strategy to endear us to the speakers and/or for us to submit to their authoritative pronouncements. As we have already seen, the audience is being invited to admire the easy friendship of these two figures, but also at this point to appreciate in their interventions what true sovereignty should express to its subjects. Such ideals will, of course, be sorely tested in the subsequent action of Webster's tragedy.

Antonio then alerts the audience once again to the lurking atmosphere of menace which is beginning to characterize this dramatic world: "Death and diseases through the whole land spread" (1.1.15). The sage-like status which Antonio is allowed to assume at this point in the play may be seen to be challenged onstage later when the steward is called upon to interact rather more closely with those around him in his homeland. However, as Antonio draws this particular phase of the dialogue to a close, he highlights yet another key commitment in the humanist project: the significance of the royal counsellor. The tyrant was frequently defined down the ages as the egotistical and bloodthirsty ruler who failed to take counsel from his subjects. Examples of this abound from Tudor drama: from John Skelton's *Magnyfycence* (1515-16) and Thomas Preston's *Cambises* (1569) to Marlowe's *Tamburlaine* (1587-88) and Shakespeare's *Richard III*. However, humanist scholars sought to promote the valuable contributions to be made by the educated and reflective counsellor as a check and balance upon a potentially headstrong, or even tyrannous monarch. Antonio's celebration of a "most provident council" (1.1.17) is at the close of a long-standing humanist tradition investing in the royal adviser as a model servant of the *res publica*. The profile of the latter is exemplified most

¹¹ William Hazlitt, *Lectures Chiefly on the Dramatic Literature of the Age of Elizabeth* (1820). Qtd. in *Webster: The White Devil and The Duchess of Malfi. A Casebook*, ed. R. V. Holdsworth, London, MacMillan, 1975, p. 35-36.

famously for the age in Erasmus' *Institutio principis Christiani* or *Education of a Christian Prince* (1516). In Webster's own play, Antonio underlines that, "It is a noble duty to inform [sovereigns] / What they ought to foresee", 1.1.21-2).

New opportunities for role-playing

Medieval dramaturgical traditions, established over the preceding centuries of playacting, continued to wield enormous influence over the development of theatre practice in the early modern playhouses. Common in moral plays, saints plays and cycle pageants of the Middle Ages, the figure of a Presenter, introducing a given intrigue or identifying protagonists and allegorical characters (vices and virtues) for the audience, constituted in part a medieval counterweight to the presence of the Chorus in classical drama. Both traditions can be seen to have offered paradigms for dramatic representation which lived on into the age of Shakespeare and his contemporaries. We have already alluded to the ways in which choric interventions might be seen to shape the intrigues of some of Shakespeare's History plays and Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta*. In Middleton's tragedy *Women beware Women* (1621?), we do not have a chorus, but we do have allegorical representation in the play's finale and, equally interestingly, we have the heroine, Bianca, and her mother-in-law commenting from a vantage point on the Florentine state procession wending its way through the streets of Florence (1.3) – commenting notably upon the Duke and his entourage who will participate centrally in the play's tragic *epitasis*. We find a similar dramatic format now in the opening scene of *The Duchess of Malfi*. Antonio acts as our guide, our master of ceremonies ("Here comes Bosola", 1.1.22), for the arrival of the play's malcontent, a familiar figure in early modern tragedy: "The only court-gall" (1.1.23). It is at this point that the figurative discourse of disease and pollution, which had already been exploited in the opening exchanges of the play to describe malignant sovereignty in general terms, now begins to penetrate the main intrigue and will continue as a mainstay throughout the length of Webster's tragedy: the Duchess famously discovers subsequently that the apricots she craves were ripened by the gardener "in horse dung" (2.1.137), for example. (In this instance, *fruitful* comparisons might be made with the figurative language of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, for example.¹²)

We may initially be surprised that Antonio appears to have such detailed knowledge at his disposal so shortly after his homecoming, but it is his Presenter (rather than traveller) identity which is now being privileged onstage. Bosola is portrayed by Antonio (1.1.22-28) as a remarkably vocal malcontent, expressing his desires through his complaints and possessing the dangerous potential to yield to a whole range of vices: indeed, René Weis underlines that "It is Bosola particularly who epitomizes 'frail humanity' in collusion with evil".¹³ We are then swiftly introduced to the Cardinal and, at this point, the dramatic planes of experience, hitherto kept separate, begin to merge as Bosola engages in recriminations against the cleric and Antonio subsequently enters the fray, strategically asking questions for his own (and the audience's) interest which will go some way to explaining the motivation of the spurned retainer in the later intrigue. This

¹² On Shakespeare's figurative language, see Caroline Spurgeon's *Shakespeare's Imagery and What It tells Us*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1935 and W. H. Clemen's *The Development of Shakespeare's Imagery*, London, Methuen, 1951. For further discussion, see *The Duchess of Malfi*, ed. Christina Luckyj, London, Continuum, 2011, p. 27ff, p. 81ff.

¹³ See John Webster, *The White Devil, The Duchess of Malfi, The Devil's Law-Case, A Cure for a Cuckold*, ed. René Weis, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1996, p. xxii.

Websterian technique of merging and then elsewhere separating dramatic planes of action has often been remarked upon by critics and inevitably renders our experience of the dramatic world more richly complex. M. C. Bradbrook, for example, argued convincingly in her study of the dramatist that “The legendary, the contemporary, the dramatically ritualistic are laminated, and the inlay increases the dramatic life of the work”.¹⁴

Bosola’s interventions are in prose (rather than verse) in this scene which points to a kind of dramatic hierarchy that may be more familiar from Shakespearean texts where figures belonging to the lower social orders are distinguished in this manner. We may also like to note at this point that the organization of the scene is asking us directly to compare and contrast Antonio and Bosola as figures who have been absent from recent cycles of experience in Italy, but who are returning with an avid interest to participate once again in its political life. Furthermore, Bosola’s initial referencing of “haunt” (1.1.29) may be proleptic in nature, feeding a broader figurative investment in the tragedy and looking forward to the denouement of seemingly ghostly interventions (“echo”) which Delio and Antonio once again are called upon to witness in the “fortification / [...] [which has been constructed] from the ruins of an ancient abbey” (5.3.1-2), for example. Whatever the case, the initial atmosphere of harmonious dialogue has now yielded to the frequently more staccato, broken rhythms of the exchanges between former master and former henchman. In the same way that the audience was previously asked to consider the nefarious effects of corrupt royal government, it is now compelled to witness the degenerative results of malevolent lordship and interest-driven service in the “miserable age” (1.1.31) or “dog days” (1.1.38) of Webster’s tragic landscape. Under these conditions, servant has been transformed into slave, punished for “a notorious murder” (1.1.68) with two years in “the galleys” (1.1.34). Strikingly, the stylistic continuities in the initial dialogue between Delio and Antonio and the present one are now confirmed with the re-affirmation of proverbial wisdom: “Blackbirds fatten best in hard weather” (1.1.37-38). In addition, the Cardinal is neither generous in his manner nor in his participation in the dialogue with the aggrieved Bosola. In this way, the depiction of the taciturn and exploitative cleric (“the greatest devil”, 1.1.45) may indeed be confirming the demonization in many quarters of Elizabethan and Jacobean England of the grand antagonist, the Catholic church, and all those in general who profess allegiance to the Catholic faith. The leading theologian of the Elizabethan settlement, Richard Hooker, had contended fearlessly in *Of the lawes of ecclesiasticall politie* (1594) that “There must bee no communion nor fellowship with Papistes, neither in doctrine, ceremonies, nor government”.¹⁵

The jaundiced retorts of Bosola to the Cardinal’s clipped phrases indicate a thorough acquaintance with a deeply flawed society which sours all forms of human endeavour: “and yet return as arrant knaves” (1.1.41-42). Interestingly, however, like the medieval Vice figure who thrives on chaos, Bosola’s imagination appears richly stimulated by the spectacle of human failing that surrounds him. He offers one of the most vivid and telling insights into the playworld with his evocation of the Duchess’s brothers likened to “plum trees” riddled with disease and spite (1.1.48). We soon learn that if a company of “crows, pies and caterpillars” (1.1.50) constantly waits upon the possibility of a windfall in this rotten orchard, Bosola craves to join its ranks – as Antonio had earlier informed us, the

¹⁴ M. C. Bradbrook, *John Webster. Citizen and Dramatist*, London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1980, p. 147.

¹⁵ Richard Hooker, *Of the lawes of ecclesiasticall politie*, London, John Windet, 1604, p. 172.

disaffected retainer “rails” against that which he most desires for himself. It is also interesting to note the questioning, or interrogative mood, which comes to characterize an aspect of the interventions of Bosola in this scene – a questioning which further intensifies the tense, volatile atmosphere apparent as soon as Delio and Antonio are forced to give place to new arrivals on the stage in this scene.

Bosola’s subsequent complaint that “There are rewards for hawks and dogs [...] but, for a soldier that hazards his limbs in battle, nothing” (1.1.57-59) is a sentiment which is widely in evidence in the literature of the period and is given voice by Webster’s contemporaries. In the non-dramatic narrative *Father Hubbard’s Tales, or The Ant and the Nightingale* (1604) by Thomas Middleton, for example, the ant in question informs the reader that on his return from the theatre of war,

the people gathered, which word “gathering” put me in hope of good comfort that afterward I failed of. For I thought, at first, they had gathered something for me, but I found, at last, they did only but gather about me, some wondering at me as if I had been some sea monster cast ashore, some jesting at my deformity, whilst others laughed at the jests.
(ll. 949-55)¹⁶

Similarly, in the anonymously published “A Pleasant song, made by a souldier” (1614) the returning combatant is “now beaten with his owne rod” and stages his own “repentance” in song “to the tune of Calino”:

When I came home, I made a prooffe
What friends would do if néed should be,
My néerest kinsfolkes look’d aloofe,
As though they had forgotten me.
And as the Owle by chattring charmes,
Is wondred at of other Birds,
So came they wondring at my harmes,
And yeeld me no releefe but words.¹⁷

In this particular instance, the plangent air is in fact a swansong as the ostracised Soldier seeks his own end, offering a final warning to his auditor: “Yet marke the words that I haue said, / trust not to friends when thou art old”.¹⁸ Moreover, when we turn our attentions to the playhouse, Shakespeare’s heroic warrior in *Coriolanus* (1608) and the general Alcibiades in *Timon of Athens* (1605-8), for example, can find themselves in receipt of distinctly cold comfort when they plead their causes in civilian society. Indeed, this kind of complaint might even be heard in the midst of romantic comedy designed for the stage. In Thomas Dekker’s *The Shoemaker’s Holiday* (1599), Rafe returns from the wars an invalid, a sorry figure, who believes himself ousted from the marriage and job markets of a frenziedly mercantile capital city.

In reality, the presence of large groups of unemployed and masterless soldiers returning from conflict zones to the home country remained an abiding concern for the authorities of the day. In February 1592, for example, the authorities voiced anxiety that there were

¹⁶ All references to works by Thomas Middleton are taken from the following: Thomas Middleton, *Thomas Middleton: The Collected Works*, ed. Gary Taylor, John Lavagnino et al, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 2007.

¹⁷ Anon, *A Pleasant song, made by a souldier whose bringing vp had bin dainty, and partly fed by those affections of his vnbridled youth, is now beaten with his owne rod, and therefore tearmeth this his repentance, the fall of his folly: to the tune of Calino*, London, 1614, n. p.

¹⁸ Anon, *A Pleasant song...*, n. p.

persons as wander abroad in the habit of soldiers [...] pretending to have served in the late wars and service [...] and some amongst these have neither been maimed nor hurt nor yet served at all in the war, but take the cloak and color to be the more pitied, and do live about the city by begging and in disorderly manner.²⁹

More generally, in the grim vision of animal predation (1.1.50-51, 57-58) through which Bosola promotes his understanding of daily life in the Italian states, there is little relief to be had for any of the inhabitants. In this vice-ridden world, the malcontent foresees his life at court as destined to misfortune and ultimate destruction, just as the invalided veteran is committed to the infection of a congested hospital (1.1.68) with no hope of recovery.

Dramatic unity and scene resolution

Webster then restores the dramatic symmetry of this scene by leaving Delio and Antonio to command the stage. If the former's referencing of "seven years in the galleys" contradicts the two years' penal sentence that had previously been attributed to Bosola in the scene, this detail does nothing to detract from the thematic structure and unity of the opening encounters in Webster's tragedy. Once again, the audience is asked to attend to: dire evidence of human failing ("a notorious murder", 1.1.68); a specifically Catholic malevolence ("twas thought / The Cardinal suborned it", 1.1.68-69); an interest in French political affairs (1.1.69-71); the collapse of just lordship ("neglected", 1.1.72); and the terrifying potential of this dramatic world to commit evil deeds ("This foul melancholy / Will poison all his goodness", 1.1.73-74). Ominously assuming the choric roles which they initially held, Delio and Antonio offer a final panoramic vision of failing political states which appear to warp all forms of human creativity and dynamism.

At the close of the scene we are left thus with the prospect that the only growth to be expected in such an environment is one which "breeds all black malcontents" (1.1.78). These sentiments are affirmed conclusively with a *sentence* ("Like moths in cloth, do hurt for want of wearing", 1.1.79) and with the authority of a rhyming couplet ("rearing" / "wearing", 1.1.78-79). In this manner, intriguingly, the audience is urged to lament the remorseless decline of human mores in the anxiety-ridden playworld of *The Duchess of Malfi*, while investing trust in the seemingly inviolable wisdom of these two guides who are left reassuringly to preside once again at the close of our first encounter with human society in Webster's tragedy.

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²⁹ "Ordering Examination of Vagrant Soldiers – Whitehall, 28 February 1592". See *Tudor Royal Proclamations. Volume III: the Later Tudors (1588-1603)*, ed. Paul L. Hughes and James F. Larkin, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1969, p. 105.

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