



## Webster's Horse-Play

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In the final scene of John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*, Duke Ferdinand summons a horse. Hearing the Cardinal's cries for help, Ferdinand enters as if to a battle and exclaims: "Th'alarum! Give me a fresh horse! / Rally the vaunt-guard, or the day is lost!" (v.v.47-48).<sup>1</sup> The scene is set in the "fortification" of the military "camp" where the Cardinal, installed as a "soldier ... with sword, helmet, shield, and spurs", has been sent by the Emperor (v.iii.1, v.ii.128, iii.iv.6SD). The audience might be forgiven, then, for hearing Ferdinand's lines as an echo of early modern English plays about Richard III and joining the duke in imagining horses just off stage.<sup>2</sup> Moments later, however, the scene reveals an equine body on stage when Ferdinand imagines that he is himself a horse. Fatally wounded, Ferdinand says, "Give me some wet hay – I am broken-winded" (v.v.64), referring to an ailment that afflicts horses and its prescribed remedy.<sup>3</sup> Given Ferdinand's previous diagnosis of lycanthropia, his transformation from equestrian to equine might appear no more than further proof of his "melancholic humor" (v.ii.9).<sup>4</sup> Yet Ferdinand's wild imaginings must be understood within the play's pervasive

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<sup>1</sup> John Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi*, ed. Michael Neill, Norton Critical Edition, New York, Norton, 2015. All in-text citations refer to this edition. All other early modern sources will be quoted with modernized spelling and punctuation.

<sup>2</sup> Editors often identify Ferdinand's line as an echo of Richard's famous words, "A horse, a horse, my kingdom for a horse" in William Shakespeare's *Richard III*, ed. Thomas Cartelli, Norton Critical Edition, New York, Norton, 2009, v.iv.7. However, Ferdinand's line more closely echoes "A horse, a horse, a fresh horse!" in anonymous, *The True Tragedie of Richard the Third*, ed. Cartelli, xviii.1. Both lines are dramatic inventions; see Ceri Sullivan, "A horse, a horse, my kingdom for a horse!", *Notes and Queries*, 60, 3, 2013, p. 400-401, p. 400, doi:10.1093/notesj/gjt118.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Blundeville's *The Four Chiefest Offices Belonging to Horsemanship*, London, 1566, recommends wet hay to treat convulsive muscles and sinews (p. 21r), inflammation of the throat (p. 45v), difficulty breathing with a cough (p. 47v), and "foundering behind", or being wind-broken, for which a horse should eat "in winter wet hay, and in summer grass" (p. 91v). Such prescriptions were popularized by Gervase Markham, whose books of horsemanship were reprinted throughout the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

<sup>4</sup> If the dry cough that results from "some gross and tough humor" goes untreated, a horse may "break his wind altogether" (Blundeville, *Four Chiefest*, p. 46v).

imagery of horses and horsemanship. Beginning in act I, Webster refers repeatedly to equestrian activities and equine bodies to create a tragic world for his creaturely characters.

Equine and equestrian imagery recur in *The Duchess of Malfi*, especially in the opening scene.<sup>5</sup> Drawing on recent animal studies in early modern English and European literature and culture, this article argues that relations between humans and animals, in particular horses, are pivotal to Webster's worldmaking and construction of character.<sup>6</sup> The staggering number and variety of animals named in *The Duchess of Malfi* provide a clue to the significance of human-animal relations in the play.<sup>7</sup> In act I Webster names sheep, dormice, blackbirds, crows, magpies, toads, a crab, caterpillars, and a spider as well as horses. While references to equestrian activities and equine bodies represent a fraction of the play's animal imagery, listening for horses and horsemanship in *The Duchess of Malfi* produces new understandings of Webster's tragic dramaturgy and discursive construction of character.

In her dramaturgical reading of *The Duchess of Malfi*, Inga-Stina Ewbank draws on the play's imagery of perspective to argue that Webster "dramatis[es] a genuine vision of life", that is, "a realism at the heart of which lies, not certainty, but a question about what is the real nature, the real estimate, of man".<sup>8</sup> Shifting from a visual to an auditory frame of reference reveals the extent to which Webster's realism is bound up with creaturely relations and dramatic conventions. The sounds of horses and horsemanship not only produced a sense of the familiar for early modern audiences but also created a world controlled by the demands of tragedy, in particular revenge tragedy. Modern ideas about human agency are challenged by the inevitability of tragic form as well as by a pre-modern conception of humanity as not wholly separable from other creatures.<sup>9</sup> Webster wrote *The Duchess of Malfi* prior to René Descartes's division of humans and animals into

an either/or metric of just two categories, or kinds. One was autonomous, a pure mind for which embodiment was beside the point and even unnecessary; the other was a mindless automaton for whom the material constraints of the body set an absolute limit on existence.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>5</sup> I follow Neill in reading act I as one extended scene (J. Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi*, ed. M. Neill, p. 14n).

<sup>6</sup> The work of Erica Fudge, "certainly the preeminent contemporary thinker about animals and animal-human relations in early modern England" (Rebecca Ann Bach, review of *Brutal Reasoning: Animals, Rationality, and Humanity in Early Modern England* by Erica Fudge, *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 58, 3, Autumn 2007, p. 402-404, p. 402), underlies this essay and much of the scholarship cited throughout. See Erica Fudge, *Perceiving Animals: Humans and Beasts in Early Modern English Culture*, Basingstoke, Macmillan, and New York, St. Martin's, 2000, rpt. Champaign, University of Illinois Press, 2002, and *Brutal Reasoning: Animals, Rationality, and Humanity in Early Modern England*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2006.

<sup>7</sup> Eighty-six, according to Penelope Meyers Usher, "'I Do Understand Your Inside': The Animal Beneath the Skin in Webster's *Duchess of Malfi*", *Medieval and Renaissance Drama in England*, 30, 2017, p. 105-125, p. 105.

<sup>8</sup> Inga-Stina Ewbank, "Webster's Realism, or, 'A Cunning Piece Wrought Perspective'", *John Webster*, ed. Brian Morris, London, Ernest Benn, 1970, in J. Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi*, ed. Neill, p. 260, 262.

<sup>9</sup> For a discussion of this critical history and an embodied approach to tragic character, see Emma Smith, "Character in Shakespearean Tragedy", *The Oxford Handbook of Shakespearean Tragedy*, ed. Michael Neill and David Schalkwyk, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2016, p. 89-103.

<sup>10</sup> Laurie Shannon, *The Accommodated Animal: Cosmopolity in Shakespearean Locales*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 2013, p. 1.

The play is, instead, a product of an earlier period when, as Karen Raber explains, "the boundary that divides human from animal is neither fixed nor stable ... but in the process of being established".<sup>11</sup> According to Bruce T. Boehrer, this "interspecies continuum" shaped early seventeenth-century notions of character based in the material body and group dynamics rather than an internalized and individualized self.<sup>12</sup> In *The Duchess of Malfi* physical and symbolic relations between humans and horses shed light on Webster's construction of characters as embodied, ethical, and social creatures. The characters are at their most tragic and their most "real", their most human, when they interact with and as horses.

### Trampling and Tragedy

It is difficult to overstate the importance of horses in the early modern world. Horses contributed in crucial ways to rural, urban, and court life, where they served both practical and ideological purposes. As scholars of horses and horsemanship have shown, the horse in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, like the automobile today, was indispensable to ways of being in the world, from the movement of people and goods, to constructions of social status, to conceptions of national identity.<sup>13</sup> To listen for horses in *The Duchess of Malfi* thus requires the modern-day reader or playgoer to imagine a world in which the sounds of equestrian activity and equine bodies are omnipresent.

The noise of horses would have been especially inescapable in early seventeenth-century London. Due to increased popularity of coaches and other horse-drawn vehicles, horses became all the more conspicuous contributors to the acoustic experience of the city. In 1619, for example, residents of Blackfriars petitioned the Lord Mayor about traffic to and from the theatre: "such multitude of coaches (whereof many are hackney coaches, bringing people of all sorts) that sometimes all our streets cannot contain them".<sup>14</sup> It is easy to imagine "the roar of the wheels and the clatter of hooves ... stretching [a] tentacle of noisiness" into not only residential houses but also, as Briony Frost proposes, the theatre "as the performance progressed".<sup>15</sup> Rather than fight such acoustic infiltration, playwrights incorporated London's soundtrack into their plays. Indeed, in *The Duchess of Malfi*, which was performed at Blackfriars theatre, characters routinely take stately carriages (I.i.215) and "ride post" (II.ii.61;

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<sup>11</sup> Karen Raber, *Animal Bodies, Renaissance Culture*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013, p. 10.

<sup>12</sup> Bruce Thomas Boehrer, *Animal Characters: Nonhuman Beings in Early Modern Literature*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010, p. 17.

<sup>13</sup> Joan Thirsk, *Horses in Early Modern England: For Service, for Pleasure, for Power*, Reading, University of Reading, 1978; Peter Edwards, *The Horse Trade of Tudor and Stuart England*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1988; Peter Edwards, *Horse and Man in Early Modern England*, London, Continuum, 2007.

<sup>14</sup> Quoted in Andrew Gurr, *Playgoing in Shakespeare's London*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 35. Citing Edward Howes' 1631 additions to Stow's *Annales*, Gurr also notes that the "ordinary use of caroches" began in 1605 (p. 266, n. 36).

<sup>15</sup> Briony Frost, "'O'erwhelmed with Noise': Sound-Houses and Sonic Experiments in Ben Jonson's *Epicene*", *Shakespeare Bulletin*, 35, 4, Winter 2017, p. 541-574, p. 553. Frost talks about the Whitefriars but conditions in the Blackfriars were similar.

II.iii.72; III.ii.161; IV.ii.358), thereby tapping into a normative feature of the early modern acoustic world.<sup>16</sup>

John Webster was intimately familiar with London's soundscape and especially the noises of equestrian travel. The Webster family ran a successful coach and carting business. In addition to building, selling, and renting vehicles, from luxurious caroches to humble wagons, the Websters dealt in the horses that drew these vehicles. Their trade also involved horses to be ridden, whether by well-heeled courtiers, hurried messengers, or offenders sentenced to ride with their faces to the horses' tails. Leah S. Marcus entertains the possibility that the "many references to coaches, caroches and post-horses [in Webster's plays are] a seventeenth-century version of product placement – inspiring desire for the sumptuous vehicles referred to (but not as a rule displayed) onstage".<sup>17</sup> While early modern English dramatists were certainly not above self-promotion in their plays, to make horses and horsemanship in *The Duchess of Malfi* about the author exclusively is to risk occluding the way horses saturate the play and link the dramatic world on stage to the "real" world just off stage.

Peter Womack introduces his study of the off-stage with the stage direction "A trampling of Horses heard" in John Marston's *The Insatiate Countess*, a Jacobean revenge tragedy first performed around 1607 that also features a noblewoman who marries as she wills. Womack argues that the sound of horses does not mark the limits of what can be brought on the early modern English stage. "Rather, some of the theatre's objects are produced as off-stage; their concealment is not so much prohibitive as constitutive: not to be seen is, so to speak, the making of them".<sup>18</sup> In *The Duchess of Malfi* no stage directions call for equine or equestrian sound effects, such as galloping hooves or rumbling carriage-wheels, let alone for horses to be brought on stage – a rare but not unheard-of occurrence.<sup>19</sup> Yet references to equestrian travel, as well as other horse-related actions, literary allusions, and socio-political symbolism, create a palpable sense of off-stage space. Like the "real" world of early modern London, the theatrical world of *The Duchess of Malfi* is suffused with the animal life with which humans routinely and intimately interact.

Webster's horse-play does not present a boundless world of unlimited freedom, however, as references to equestrian flight make evident. In *The Duchess of Malfi* flying denotes riding in haste, often under duress and in terror, not to the controlled jumps and hops of equestrian ballet, which require riders to manage the fear of their mounts.<sup>20</sup> After the

<sup>16</sup> Here, I am nodding to Bruce R. Smith, *The Acoustic World of Early Modern England: Attending to the O-Factor*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1999. According to the account of one Neapolitan chronicler, the historical Duchess of Malfi took a carriage during her feigned pilgrimage to Loreto, possibly prompting Webster's line that "she make[s] religion her riding hood" (III.iii.60); see John Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi*, ed. Leah S. Marcus, Arden Early Modern Drama, London, Arden Shakespeare, 2009, p. 17.

<sup>17</sup> J. Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi*, ed. L. S. Marcus, p. 4.

<sup>18</sup> Peter Womack, "Off-Stage," ed. Henry S. Turner, Oxford Twenty-First Century Approaches to Literature, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013, p. 71-92, p. 89, original emphasis.

<sup>19</sup> Alan C. Dessen and Leslie Thomson, *A Dictionary of Stage Directions in English Drama 1580-1642*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999, s.v. "horse", "noise", and "trample".

<sup>20</sup> On "flying" in equestrian ballet, see Elisabeth LeGuin, "Man and Horse in Harmony", *The Culture of the Horse: Status, Discipline, and Identity in the Early Modern World*, ed. Karen Raber and Treva J. Tucker, Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2005, p. 175-196, p. 190-192.

Duchess insists to Ferdinand, in a different idiom, that the horse is already out of the barn, she nonetheless takes precaution against her brother's ire by directing Antonio to "fly to ... Ancona" while she takes "flight" to Loreto (III.ii.172, 297).<sup>21</sup> This flight fails, and after their banishment from Loreto, the Duchess, "suspect[ing] some ambush", tells Antonio to "take [his] eldest son and fly towards Milan" (III.v.53-55). Webster's sources make much of Antonio's and his son's steeds, which enable them to outride the "hundred and fifty ... horse" that Ferdinand brings from the military camp and presumably puts under Bosola's command (III.iii.75).<sup>22</sup> In fact, the Duchess's reference in this scene to "thunder", which term frequently describes galloping and neighing, leads one scholar to propose that equine sound effects precede Bosola's entrance with "a troop of armèd men" (III.v.97, 90).<sup>23</sup> Yet as Robert N. Watson writes in another context, "No physical rush to horseback [on stage] can overcome the laws of this symbolic pattern".<sup>24</sup> References to traveling by horse contribute to the creation of off-stage space, albeit one delimited by tragic necessity.

Even as Webster's characters fly, they get nowhere. In the embodied cyclicity characteristic of revenge tragedy, they physically return and repeat rather than escape the past.<sup>25</sup> After Antonio heeds the Duchess's warning and narrowly evades Bosola, he returns to parlay with the Cardinal. Unwittingly he approaches the Duchess's grave and hears an echo, like his "wife's voice", warn him to "fly" (V.iii.27, 35). The Duchess's spirit remains imprisoned in the tragic world of the play. So too Antonio stays and is killed at the hand of the very character who wishes to "save" him (V.iv.51). Antonio's dying words aim to prevent his eldest son from repeating his parents' failures: "let my son fly the courts of princes" (V.iv.68). This does not occur, and in the play's final moments, "his son and heir" (V.v.106) is brought on stage. Rather than fly the court, the Duchess and Antonio's son is immured in it where he is immediately put to "noble use" as the locus for consolidation of political power (V.v.108). Equestrian travel in *The Duchess of Malfi* thus generates a world at once familiarly dynamic

<sup>21</sup> "Alas, your shears do come untimely now / To clip the bird's wings that's already flown" (III.ii.84-85).

<sup>22</sup> See 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, in J. Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi*, ed. M. Neill, p. 152-153; Simon Goulart, *Admirable and Memorable Histories*, trans. Edward Grimston, London, 1607, in J. Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi*, ed. M. Neill, p. 162.

<sup>23</sup> David Carnegie, *John Webster: The Duchess of Malfi*, The Shakespeare Handbooks, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, p. 56. In the first part of *Tamberlaine the Great*, which was performed in 1587, horses breath and movement are described in terms of thunder: "from [horses'] nostrils breathe / ... dreadful thunderbolts" and "Tartarian steed[s] ... stamped on others with their thund'ring hooves" (Christopher Marlowe, *Tamburlaine the Great*, ed. J. S. Cunningham and Eithne Henson, Revels Student Editions, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1998, v.i.297-298, 331-332). These examples are especially relevant in light of *Duchess's* possible allusion to this play, as discussed below.

<sup>24</sup> Robert N. Watson, "Horsemanship in Shakespeare's Second Tetralogy," *English Literary Renaissance* 13, 3, 1983, p. 274-300, p. 295. In this study of equestrian metaphors in Shakespeare's history plays, Watson argues that just as a horse, no matter how noble and rational, needs a rider moved by neither emotion nor appetite, so too the true king must exert control over himself, or be thrown off by his own moral shortcomings, and over his people, who invariably need rei(g)ning (in). While this essay emphasizes embodiment rather than psychology, it shares Watson's appreciation for the way early modern dramatists made virtue of theatrical necessity.

<sup>25</sup> See Marissa Greenberg, "Revenge Tragedy," *A New Companion to Renaissance Drama*, ed. Arthur F. Kinney and Thomas Warren Hopper, Hoboken, NJ, Wiley-Blackwell, 2017, p. 403-416.

and tragically restrained, a world in which the experiences, norms, and ideals of early modern audiences are reined in by the play's adherence to form.

### Of Horses and Riders

An incomplete literary allusion forms the first reference to horses in *The Duchess of Malfi*. In act I Bosola confronts the Cardinal and accuses him of ignoble ingratitude. Bosola reminds the Cardinal that he has failed to reward Bosola's "service", in this case, military duty leading to capture and enforced corporeal labour:

I have done you  
Better service than to be slighted thus.  
(...)  
I fell into the galleys in your service, where, for two years together, I wore two towels instead of a shirt, with a knot on the shoulder, after the fashion of a Roman mantle. Slighted thus?  
(l.i.29-20, 34-37)

The Cardinal's indifference in the face of Bosola's bodily risk and suffering on his behalf is indicative of the Cardinal's corruption. As Bosola explains, both the Cardinal and Ferdinand

are like plum trees that grow crooked over standing pools; they are rich and o'erladen, stagnant with fruit, but none but crows, pies, and caterpillars feed on them. Could I be one of their flattering panders, I would hang on their ears like a horse-leech till I were full, and then drop off ... What creature ever fed worse than hoping Tantalus? Nor ever died any man more fearfully than he that hoped for pardon. *There are rewards for hawks and dogs*, when they have done us service; but for a soldier that hazards his limbs in a battle, nothing but a kind of geometry is his last supportation.  
(l.i.48-51, 55-60, emphasis added)

In the first Quarto of *The Duchess of Malfi* printed in 1623, another "and" follows the phrase "for hawks and dogs".<sup>26</sup> John Russell Brown cites the state of Quarto 1 and early modern print practice to support the conjecture that this second "and" indicates a missing word.<sup>27</sup> Brown follows R. W. Dent in positing that the missing word is "horses", citing a passage in Michel de Montaigne's *An Apology for Raymond Sebond*. In John Florio's translation, which was published in 1603 and reprinted around the same time as the initial performance of *The Duchess of Malfi*, the relevant passage reads:

The men that serve us do it better cheap and for a less curious and favourable entreating than we use unto birds, unto horses, and unto dogs ... We share the fruits of our prey with our dogs and hawks, as a meed [i.e., recompense] of their pain and reward of their industry.<sup>28</sup>

Audience members familiar with Montaigne's *Essays* might discern the omission of "horses" from the litany of service animals. Just as likely, they would hear in Bosola's lines the broader critique mounted in Montaigne's description of proper relations between service animals and

<sup>26</sup> J. Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi*, ed. M. Neill, p. 13n.

<sup>27</sup> J. Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi*, ed. John Russell Brown, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., The Revels Plays, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2009, p. 86n.

<sup>28</sup> Michel de Montaigne, *Essays*, trans. John Florio, London, 1613, p. 236.

their human masters. In *An Apology for Raymond Sebond*, Montaigne explains that just as human masters "serve", or care for, their service animals, so too princes are beholden to "govern" and "serve" their (human) servants.<sup>29</sup> The Cardinal, who repeatedly denies compensation for Bosola's service, falls well short of this standard of princely care.

In this same speech, Bosola's identification with the "horse-leech" contributes to a similar critique within *The Duchess of Malfi* and independent of audience members hearing allusions to contemporary texts. In the early seventeenth century, a horse-leech was one of several names for a horse doctor (*OED*; see V.ii.315-317). Bosola does not use the term, however, to present himself as healer of the diseased state. Indeed, because the Cardinal exits midway through Bosola's reminder about the obligation of princes to servants (see I.i.43), Bosola's potentially healing words literally go unheard. This failure of a head of state to listen to council sets the Italian court in stark contrast to the French court. At the outset of *The Duchess of Malfi*, Antonio describes the French court as a paragon of health because its "judicious king" dismisses "flatt'ring sycophants" and welcomes "provident council[ors]" (I.i.6, 8, 20). Bosola, who is talking to Antonio, imagines himself a bloodsucking worm taking the nourishment due to but denied him. If Bosola is a horse in his service to the Cardinal and therefore deserving of reward, he is a horse-leech in his intent to feed from the very "ears" of those who fail to hear and heed his council.

The word possibly missing from Quarto 1 might not be "horse" but its acoustic double: "whores". Popular in early modern English drama, these homophones occasioned bawdy, often misogynistic wordplay. The equivalence of horses and women is introduced in act I when Castruchio pivots between talking about his wife and his "Spanish jennet" (I.i.112). In an extended series of puns, Castruchio's wife and horse are described as creatures ruled by passion rather than reason and in need of manly riders, whether skilled chevaliers or potent sexual partners.<sup>30</sup> Castruchio does not appear to be up for mounting either his wife or his horse. Silvio quips that Castruchio "reels from the tilt often" (I.i.116), playing on "tilt" as the covering of a cart or wagon, the site of jousting, and sexual intercourse.<sup>31</sup> This pun invites audience members to listen for the metonymic chain of reference in Bosola's missing word. Having been refused reward for legitimate service, Bosola wishes he could be "one of [the Cardinal's] flattering panders", or self-pimping courtiers, such as those whom Ferdinand chastises for laughing at Silvio's quip when he, their master, does not (I.i.118-120). If whores are horsey because they are ridden hard and often, courtiers become whores when they do any service in the prospect of favour or reward.

Bosola imagines himself in relation to a horse, a horse-leech, and a whore, but when Ferdinand "procures for [him] ... the provisorship o'th'horse" in the Duchess's household, Bosola becomes a "creature" (I.i.280). In the speech that we have been examining, "creature"

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<sup>29</sup> Montaigne, *Essays*, p. 256.

<sup>30</sup> Frankie Rubinstein, *A Dictionary of Shakespeare's Sexual Puns and Their Significance*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1989.

<sup>31</sup> The *OED* dates the first usage of "tilt" as the covering of a cart or wagon in 1620, but the connection to cloth-covered booths, or tents, such as the courtiers discuss in relation to Castruchio's wife, goes back much further (*OED*, s.v. "tilt", n.1). This sense fits with the wider equestrian context of the dialogue more so than the covering of boats (J. Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi*, ed. M. Neill, p. 15n).

refers to a human spirit (Tantalus) but in a broader context of animal bodies (crows, magpies, caterpillars, a horse-leech, hawks, and dogs). This moment thus reflects on Rebecca Ann Bach's argument that the early modern imagination conceived of a "creaturely world" shared by humans and animals "of practical use" rather than a Cartesian world divided between thinking, "disembodied humanity" and irrational, machine-like animals.<sup>32</sup> Bosola rails against the Cardinal for failing to reward him for risking "his limbs in battle" (I.i.59) like a war-horse and labouring on a galley like a beast of burden. Now, after Ferdinand provides him with "gold" and a "place" in present compensation for future service, Bosola inveighs against his corrupt creation, which he equates to the spontaneous generation of flies and other vermin "out of horse dung" (I.i.240, 278, 280). This image picks up on Bosola's assertion that Ferdinand "would create me / One of your familiars" (I.i.252), or incarnate demons, such as appear as dogs, birds, and flies in early modern English drama and whose devilish shenanigans sometimes involve enchanted horses.<sup>33</sup> The key point here is that Bosola's imagery is more than figurative. Not merely like an animal, whether horse or leech or fly, Bosola is literally a creature like other (non-human) creatures in his bodily service and corruption.

This is not to suggest absolute equivalence among all creatures. As Raber notes, in the early modern world, "the body is a site of shared (but not necessarily identical) experience" between humans and animals.<sup>34</sup> Bosola's "use" takes the form of decidedly human modes of violence. After Ferdinand gives him gold but prior to announcing his new place, Bosola assumes that he is being hired to commit murder. Their exchange couches the service expected of Bosola in subtly yet persistently equine terms:

BOSOLA Never rained such showers as these at court  
Without thunderbolts i'th'tail of them:  
Whose throat must I cut?  
FERDINAND Your inclination to shed blood rides post  
Before my occasion to use you.  
(I.i.240-244)

Editors tend to gloss Bosola's reference to thunderbolts as an allusion to the myth of Jupiter and Danaë, and Bosola's query about throat-cutting seems fairly straightforward. Yet Ferdinand's chastisement that Bosola's "inclination ... rides post" in advance of his "use" invites reconsideration of this exchange in terms of Bosola's responsibilities as the Duchess's horse-master. Early modern English writers routinely analogize the sound of galloping hooves to thunder, a bestial reading prompted here by the phrase of "i'th'tail" and the possible auditory pun on "rained"/reined. So too "cut" was "'A familiar expression for a common or labouring horse' (Nares)" in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (*OED*), possibly related to conventional care of horses, which includes paring hooves, docking tails and ears, and gelding. As master of the Duchess's stables, Bosola would be responsible for cutting horses in

<sup>32</sup> Rebecca Ann Bach, *Birds and Other Creatures in Renaissance Literature: Shakespeare, Descartes, and Animal Studies*, New York, Routledge, 2018, p. 3.

<sup>33</sup> See Christopher Marlowe, *Dr. Faustus* (1594), Ben Jonson, *The Alchemist* (1610), and William Rowley, Thomas Dekker and John Ford, *The Witch of Edmonton* (1621).

<sup>34</sup> K. Raber, *Animal Bodies*, p. 30.



these ways. As Ferdinand's spy, however, he is responsible for curtailing the Duchess, specifically, her embodied sexuality (see I.i.244-249).

If Bosola is an abused and corrupted service animal, Antonio is one of the noble steeds of epic romance. According to Webster's primary source, William Painter's *Palace of Pleasure*, "Nature having travailed and displayed her treasure house for enriching of him, he had by art gotten that which made him most happy and worthy of praise", including skill in war, music, letters, and equestrianism ("for riding and managing of great horse, he had not his fellow in Italy").<sup>35</sup> Antonio's many admirable traits inspire the Duchess, Painter explains, to "giv[e] over all them which vaunted upon their jennets, Turkey palfreys, and other coursers along the city of Naples".<sup>36</sup> Webster's opening act affirms Antonio's personal qualities, including his equestrian expertise, as reasons for the Duchess's choice of marital partner. During the chivalric competition that precedes the dramatic action, Antonio "took the ring oft'nest" for which he is given a "jewel" (I.i.85, 87). This equestrian feat and its reward are echoed later in the scene when the Duchess gives Antonio her "wedding ring" (I.i.396) and, punning on "ring" as vaginal and anal orifices, her body.<sup>37</sup>

Before turning to that exchange, we must consider Antonio and Ferdinand's discussion of horsemanship. Ferdinand appears to hold chivalric competition in low esteem. After rewarding Antonio for his courtly victory, Ferdinand expresses his eagerness for an activity with higher stakes, namely, war: "When shall we leave / This sportive action and fall to action indeed?" (I.i.87-88). Antonio remains silent throughout the ensuing conversation until Ferdinand fronts him and says:

FERDINAND You are a good horseman, Antonio. You have excellent riders in France. What do you think of good horsemanship?

ANTONIO Nobly, my lord. As out of the Grecian horse issued many famous princes, so out of brave horsemanship arise the first sparks of growing resolution that raise the mind to noble action.

FERDINAND You have bespoke it worthily.  
(I.i.137-141)

Antonio's words may be heard in two ways. Ferdinand seems to hear them as an endorsement of martial enthusiasm. The confined space of the tournament arena, like the Trojan horse, excites in horsemen a desire for battle. Another way to understand Antonio's response, prompted by Ferdinand's comment about the "excellent riders in France", is in relation to Antonio's description of the French court at the scene's outset. Antonio suggests that "sportive action" constitutes not only physical but also mental preparation for "action indeed", here glossed as "noble action." As an expert horseman, Antonio would know that the ideal relationship between rider and mount is achieved through mutual service and open communication. So too princes create a healthy state by rewarding servants and listening to councilors. Possibly in response to contemporaries who represent horsemanship as militarily insignificant and chivalry as socially irrelevant, Webster puts in the mouth of his chief courtier-

<sup>35</sup> W. Painter, *The Palace of Pleasure*, in J. Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi*, ed. M. Neill, p. 128. Bosola echoes this description at III.ii.242-261.

<sup>36</sup> W. Painter, *The Palace of Pleasure*, in J. Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi*, ed. M. Neill, p. 132.

<sup>37</sup> F. Rubinstein, *A Dictionary*, p. xv-xvi.

rider the notion that learning to ride a horse prepares a prince to rule during times of war and peace.<sup>38</sup>

The difference between these understandings of “good horsemanship” sheds light on the bodily and social dynamics of the Duchess and Antonio’s relationship. Like Ferdinand, Antonio does not presume absolute equity between humans and horses, let alone among different classes of humans. Unlike his future brother-in-law, however, Antonio establishes human and animal relations according to a notion of harmony within hierarchy. This notion is evident in numerous early modern equestrian tracts. In *The Art of Riding*, for example, John Astley describes the ideal relationship between horse and rider as one in which “he [the horse] will accompany you [the rider], and you shall accompany him in time and measure, so as to the beholders it shall appear that he and you be one body, of one mind, and of one will”.<sup>39</sup> Antonio encounters this harmony within hierarchy not only in chivalric competition and at the French court but also when the Duchess woos him.

Seemingly echoing her brother, the Duchess uses the imagery of martial virtue to raise her mind to the action of wedding and bedding Antonio.

If all my royal kindred  
Lay in my way unto this marriage,  
I’d make them my low footsteps; and even now –  
Even in this hate – as men in some great battles,  
By apprehending danger, have achieved  
Almost impossible actions – I have heard soldiers say so –  
So I, through frights and threat’nings, will assay  
This dangerous venture.  
(I.i.331-338)

As Michael Neill observes, here the Duchess “imagines her courtship of Antonio in the heroic masculine language of chivalric romance”.<sup>40</sup> Webster also infuses his character with a more militaristic vitality. Embedded within the Duchess’s erratic speech is an image born of Christopher Marlowe’s mighty line. Her proposal to make her brothers “low footsteps” to marriage echoes Tamburlaine’s use of a captive king as a “footstool ... That I may rise into my royal throne”.<sup>41</sup> Webster’s Duchess might be said to go behind, rather than step on, her brothers’ backs when she raises Antonio to “[her] second husband” (I.i.398; see I.i.407). It is appropriate, then, that her method of wooing is based in imagery of celestial harmony (I.i.466-68), not god-like, thundering force.

Nevertheless, their marriage presents a socio-sexual hierarchy in which she is the noble rider and he, the servicing mount. The Duchess commands Antonio to “lead” her “by the hand / Unto your marriage-bed” (I.i.478-479). In a later intimate scene, Antonio jokes that,

<sup>38</sup> Bruce Thomas Boehrer, “Shakespeare and the Social Devaluation of the Horse”, *Culture of the Horse*, ed. K. Raber and T. J. Tucker, p. 91-101. See also Gavin Robinson, “The Military Value of Horses and the Social Value of the Horse in Early Modern England”, *Horse as Cultural Icon: The Real and Symbolic Horse in the Early Modern World*, ed. Peter Edwards, Karl A. E. Enekel and Elspeth Graham, Intersections, Leiden and Boston, Brill, 2011, p. 351-376.

<sup>39</sup> John Astley, *The Art of Riding*, London, 1584, p. 57.

<sup>40</sup> J. Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi*, ed. M. Neill, p. xxxi.

<sup>41</sup> C. Marlowe, *Tamburlaine the Great, part 1*, IV.ii.14-15.

whenever he "lie[s] with" the Duchess, he is a "Laboring [man]" (III.ii.16-17). His labours do lead, of course, to hers: as a result of Antonio's sexual service, the Duchess becomes pregnant and bears several children over the course of the play. The Duchess's ostensible reason for giving her wedding ring to Antonio is, in fact, that his eyes become bloodshot upon contemplation of paternity, specifically the thought of a son "rid[ing] a-cockhorse / Upon a painted stick" (I.i.392-393). Thought becomes a human body and the toy, a living animal that their son learns to ride, like his father. Rather than be managed and gelded like a horse, the Duchess proves an able equestrian and a breeder of horsemen.

The early modern ideal as harmony within hierarchy linked horsemanship to music and dance. All three activities were understood to require "physical discipline as internalized social control".<sup>42</sup> The Duchess exercises this dual command, in particular in her death. Despite exposure to dissonant music and disorderly dance, she remains self-possessed, famously pronouncing "I am the Duchess of Malfi still" (IV.ii.131). By contrast, Ferdinand fails to maintain self- and social command. Over the course of the play, Ferdinand's inability to manage his passions and his perversion of the relations of service cause him to become first a literal, then a theatrical tyrant. The character who enthuses for "action indeed" ends up mistaking his brother as an enemy combatant and himself as a warhorse. Dying at the hand of his own creaturely servant and the play's avenger, Ferdinand brings together the worlds of Webster's horse-play. When Ferdinand not only calls for but becomes a horse on stage, the play's "realities" of equestrian imagery and tragic form converge in his equine character.

### **"Play-wright, Cart-wright"**

Astley's lexicon of "time and measure" – of feet, rhythm, and meter – link horsemanship to not only dance and music but also poetry.<sup>43</sup> More broadly, in the early modern period, riding and writing were understood as coextensive activities with overlapping methods and motives. For example, Montaigne describes how an accident on horseback, caused by an ill-treated horse, generates the very project of the *Essays* and underlines his reason for and process of composition.<sup>44</sup> Sir Philip Sidney introduces *An Apology for Poetry* with his conversation with an actual, prominent horse-master. This conversation frames Sidney's definition of the good poet – a definition that echoes Antonio's description of "good horsemanship":

[Poets] range, only reined with learned discretion, (...) for these indeed do merely make to imitate, and imitate both to delight and teach: and delight to move men to take that goodness in hand, which without delight they would fly as from a stranger, and teach, to make them know that goodness whereunto they are moved.<sup>45</sup>

For both Montaigne and Sidney, riding is not merely an allegory for writing but what enables writing's generation and proper use.

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<sup>42</sup> E. LeGuin, "Man and Harmony", p. 176.

<sup>43</sup> Bruce R. Smith, "Finding Your Footing in Shakespeare's Verse," *The Oxford Handbook of Shakespeare's Poetry*, ed. Jonathan Post, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013, p. 323-339.

<sup>44</sup> Ken Keffer, "Riding Out the Renaissance with Montaigne", *Romance Notes* 37, 1997, p. 339-345.

<sup>45</sup> Sir Philip Sidney, *An Apology for Poetry (or The Defence of Poesy)*, ed. Geoffrey Shepherd, rev. and exp. R. W. Maslen, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2002, p. 87.

It is perhaps not surprising, then, that Webster uses horses and horsemanship to create character in *The Duchess of Malfi*. In addition to possessing direct knowledge of the business of equestrian travel, Webster was well-versed in many forms of poetry, including encomium, tragedy, and comedy, which he wrote independently and collaboratively. Marcus cites early seventeenth-century satires, such as dub Webster “*Play-wright, Cart-wright*”, to propose that his “dual professions undercut one another and make him impossible to categorize”.<sup>46</sup> Marcus resolves this apparent taxonomic problem by proposing that Webster’s business savvy qualified him to better satisfy audience tastes. Listening to the horse-play in *The Duchess of Malfi* introduces an alternative interpretation: Webster’s professions were creatively, not just commercially, reinforcing. In the early modern world, horsemanship and authorship were mutual modes of service from which Webster could fashion the characters of his plays and his audience.

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<sup>46</sup> Henry Fitzgeffrey, *Certain Elegies, Done by Sundry Excellent Wits* (1618), quoted in J. Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi*, ed. L. S. Marcus, p. 6.

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