



## The Dialectics of Appearances and Reality (act II, scene i)

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At the end of act I, the Duchess and her steward Antonio married in secret, with Cariola as the only witness of the very private ceremony. Antonio then wished that they might “imitate the loving palms, / Best emblem of a peaceful marriage, / That ne’er bore fruit divided”.<sup>1</sup> The beginning of act II discloses that they did bear fruit together. Bosola, the spy hired by the Aragonian brothers, closely watches the Duchess, tricks her by feeding her apricots, and has the confirmation that she is pregnant, having a “young springal cutting a caper in her belly!” (II.i.148).

At first sight, act II scene i seems to lack unity and be confusing. It opens with a series of dialogues (Bosola/Castruchio; Bosola/Old Lady; Bosola/Antonio) in which Bosola unsurprisingly delivers acerbic, satirical speeches (he satirizes in turn Castruchio, the Old Lady and Antonio). This is followed by a public scene that calls for polished talk and brings together the Duchess, her Ladies and Attendants, Roderigo, Grisolan, Antonio, Delio and Bosola. This is the moment when we witness the spy at work and the Duchess being taken in. However, the different encounters of scene i are pervaded by the themes of simulation and dissimulation, and follow the dialectics of appearances and reality, which creates a sense of unity. Similarly, Bosola’s constant onstage presence brings unity to the scene as he ends up stealing the show.

First, this article examines Bosola’s harsh satire of courtiers and lawyers who would be ostentatiously “eminent”, and the verbal jousting about secret ambition that opposes the spy to the steward. Secondly, it focuses on how pretence comes in a variety of forms: social hypocrisy, protection of privacy (hiding the Duchess’s pregnancy) and meditation on mankind (denouncing “painting” and “rich tissue” as vain covering). Finally, Bosola’s book of diseases, his deciphering and aggravating of the Duchess’s symptoms, and the animal references (“prodigy”) and horticultural metaphors (“grafting”) are used as sarcastic comments upon deformity and hybridization. This reflection is deepened by the intertextual echoes to Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* and *The Winter’s Tale*.

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<sup>1</sup> John Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi*, ed. Michael Neill, Norton Critical Editions, New York and London, Norton, 2015, l.i.469-471. All references to the play are taken from this edition.

## A Fierce Criticism of Ambition (Advancement, Recognition, Ostentation)

Taking old Castruchio as his target, Bosola satirizes both those who attend the Duchess's court and those who attend the law court. He criticizes their main purpose: ambition (and not, as one might expect, the virtuous pursuit of justice or quest for nobleness) that cannot be dissociated from ostentation. In this regard, the repetition of the adjective "eminent" (3, 17) is telling as it means "remarkable in degree" but also (though the sense is now obsolete) "conspicuously displayed".<sup>2</sup> To mock Castruchio's ambition, Bosola emphasises the gap between the reaching subject and the object to be reached. As if he had studied physiognomy – which, in fact, he distrusts and despises<sup>3</sup> – he ironically portrays him as an ass deprived of wit: "Let me see: you have a reasonable good face for't already, and your nightcap expresses your ears sufficient largely" (3-5).<sup>4</sup> Yet Castruchio seems to miss Bosola's ironic tone and foolishly enjoy his cruel teasing. He wants to know more from Bosola, not noticing that Bosola keeps deriding his pretention: "But how shall I know whether the people take me for an eminent fellow?" (16-17).

Ironically enough, the one who mocks Castruchio's desire to be taken for an eminent courtier shares the same thirst for social ascent and recognition. "I will thrive some way" (i.i.37), Bosola told the Cardinal who had just slighted him. The beginning of act II confirms Antonio's description of Bosola as an envious "court gall" (i.i.23), the common stereotype of the malcontent:

Indeed, he rails at those things which he wants  
Would be as lecherous, covetous, or proud,  
Bloody, or envious, as any man,  
If he had means to be so  
(i.i.25-28).

Because Castruchio takes Bosola's ironic bits of advice at face value, he serves as a foil to Antonio who sees through Bosola and can, like him, resort to irony, as when he mockingly asks Bosola whether he is "studying to become a great wise fellow" (76). So when Antonio and Bosola tackle the topic of ambition, their exchange turns into verbal confrontation.

Antonio mocks Bosola's ambition: "You are studying to become a great wise fellow" (76), and echoes Castruchio's ambition to be taken for "an eminent fellow" (17). He uses plain language: Bosola is "[p]uffed up with [his] preferment" (83), though he would "not seem to appear [so] to th'world" (82). Here, he is referring to Bosola's advancement to the position of Master of the Horse at the Duchess's court. Bosola responds with apparent courtesy, showing that he masters courtiers' stock politeness: "Oh, sir..." (77), "Give me leave..." (85). However, he confirms his rhetorical talent as he pretends that he is not ambitious. His speech is pervaded by words such as "simplicity" (78) and "honest" (80, 85). He resorts to the image of the mule going "at a slow pace" (88), and seems to resort to self-deprecation: "Shall I confess myself to you? I look no higher than I can reach" (86-87). But, in fact, he intends "a sharp mockery of Antonio's high position as the chief officer of

<sup>2</sup> OED, "eminent, *adj.*", 4.a.

<sup>3</sup> Bosola to Ferdinand: "There's no more credit to be given to th'face / Than to a sick man's urine" (i.i.229-230).

<sup>4</sup> As Leah S. Marcus explains, "Castruccio evidently wears the close-fitting white cap of serjeant-at-law, which causes his ears to have comical prominence", J. Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi*, ed. Leah S. Marcus, Arden Early Modern Edition, London, Bloomsbury, 2009, p. 170. The comical prominence of his ears may evoke horns; so Bosola may also intend a cuckold joke – in keeping with the name of Castruchio ("castrated"), which suggests sexual impotence.

the court and favourite of the Duchess".<sup>5</sup> He does so to present himself as a foil to Antonio, whom he mocks by endowing him with a fake prestigious family tree: "Oh, sir, you are lord of the ascendant, chief man with the Duchess; a duke was your cousin-german removed. Say you were lineally descended from King Pippin" (93-94). As Leah S. Marcus observes, "Bosola is ironically parodying aristocratic genealogies of the period".<sup>6</sup> More generally, Bosola satirizes those who pride themselves on their aristocratic genealogy, concluding with a derogatory metaphor: "Search the heads of the greatest rivers in the world, you shall find them but bubbles of water" (96-97).

So Bosola professes to teach Antonio a lesson in humility and warns him against *hubris*: "They are the gods that must ride on winged horses; a lawyer's mule of a slow pace will both suit my disposition and business. For mark me: when a man's mind rides faster than his horse can gallop, they quickly both tire" (87-90). This verbal confrontation is fraught with dramatic irony, since Bosola does not know – whereas we spectators/readers do – that Antonio has just married the Duchess in secret and that, just before Antonio agreed to do so, his reticent speech to the Duchess had much in common with Bosola's warning (though he used the metaphors of the madman and the fool, and not that of the man on the winged horse): "Ambition, madam, is a great man's madness" (I.i.408); "he's a fool / That, being a-cold, would thrust his hands i'th'fire / To warm them" (414-416). Those satirical exchanges about who is ambitious and who is not, and about dissimulating one's desire to be "a kind of thriving thing" (I.i.254), that is, to be recognized by the men in high places, are part of a more general dialectics – that opposing truth and appearances.

### The Dialectics of Truth and Appearances

In mocking Castruchio and would-be "eminent" courtiers, Bosola teaches a lesson in appearances: how to behave, how to strike a pose, how to play a part. He teaches the rhetoric of pretence and superficial body language:

I would have you learn to twirl the strings of your band with a good grace, and in a set speech, at th'end of every sentence, to hum three or four times, or blow your nose till it smart again, to recover your memory.  
(II.i.5-8).

Although he is being satirical, Bosola evokes a stage-director advising his actor in a mock courtroom. It is indeed a matter of playing a part: Castruchio is not interested in "being" (1) but in "being taken for" (17) an eminent courtier. Bosola also denounces the perversion of justice and the hypocrisy of magistrates who seem to be the opposite of what they are and thus play a sadistic game: "When you come to be a president in criminal causes, if you smile upon a prisoner, hang him, but if you frown upon him and threaten him, let him be sure to 'scape the gallows" (8-11). Again, Bosola plays an ambivalent role: he criticizes hypocrisy and duplicity, but he knows that he is part of the same game now that he is an "intelligencer" (I.i.254).

As he observes Bosola and "do[es] understand [his] inside" (81), Antonio puts the stress on this contrast between appearances and reality. In his eyes, Bosola pretends to be melancholic – thus following Ferdinand's advice to "[k]eep [his] old garb of melancholy" (I.i.271), a good cover for his spying activities – whereas he is in fact proud with

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<sup>5</sup> David Carnegie, *The Duchess of Malfi: a Guide to the Text and the Play in Performance*, The Shakespeare Handbooks, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, p. 33.

<sup>6</sup> J. Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi*, ed. L. S. Marcus, p. 176.

advancement. This contrast between melancholy (appearance) and ambition (reality) is then reinforced by the opposition between goodness (appearance) and evil (reality), when Antonio tells Bosola: "You would look up to heaven, but I think / The devil that rules i'th'air stands in your light" (91-92). Antonio's intuition is right: we spectators/readers know that Bosola sincerely wished to be virtuous but met the devil in the shape of Ferdinand. Ironically Bosola and Ferdinand clash with one another whereas they are not always poles apart, since Bosola is painfully aware of being Ferdinand's "familiar" (l.i.252) and himself referred to the Duke of Calabria as "the devil [that] / Candies all sins o'er" (268) and "the devil [that] doth preach" (283). So, against all odds, Antonio and Bosola can be regarded as *alter egos* in so far as both denounce social hypocrisy, the manipulation of appearances to dissimulate the truth (although their respective "truths" are rather different). As the Duchess enters, she provides us with another illustration of the dialectics of truth and appearances, but in another key and for different reasons.

The Duchess seems to ignore Bosola's sarcastic allusion: "The Duchess [of Florence] used one [a litter] when she was great with child" (108). She changes the subject addressing a different interlocutor (one of her ladies): "Come hither; mend my ruff—" (109). She then seems to have an interest in sumptuary protocol and raises the question of wearing or not one's hat before the King (114-115, 118-121). To allay suspicion, she focuses on "ceremony" (119), that is, ironically enough, on outward show (mending a ruff, wearing a hat).<sup>7</sup> She also wears, as Bosola notices, "a loose-bodied gown" (68). Clothes, whether as garment or topic of conversation, are used as a diversion from the reality of the pregnant body. At the end of the scene, Delio privately describes the situation to Antonio and clearly betrays the dialectics of simulation and dissimulation: "That *politic safe conveyance* for the midwife / Your duchess *plotted*" (160-161), "that will give some *color* / For her keeping close" (164-165), "you may *pretend*" (166).<sup>8</sup> Delio knows what Bosola strives to discover as a spy.

Bosola's purpose in this scene is to check his intuition that the Duchess, larger in the stomach than usual and frequently sick, is with child:

There's something in't.  
I have a trick may chance discover it,  
A pretty one: I have bought some apricots,  
The first our spring yields.  
(68-71)

Why apricots – or its older form "apricocks", as it appears in the original text?<sup>9</sup> Marcus reports that in the *Dial of Princes* – Thomas North's 1557 translation of Antonio de Guevara's 1529 *Reloj de Principes* – it is claimed that "eating unripe apricots puts a pregnant woman into labour and causes her child to be stillborn".<sup>10</sup> The etymologies of "apricot" are telling in themselves:

<sup>7</sup> But as she asks Antonio to put his hat on and be "the example to the rest o'th'court" (121), thus showing favour to him, her attempt at allaying suspicion may backfire. As John Russell Brown observes: "The duchess wants the private excitement of seeing Antonio with his hat on before the rest of the court as if he were publicly acknowledged to be her equal", J. Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi*, ed. John Russell Brown, The Revels Plays, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1996, p. 46.

<sup>8</sup> My emphasis.

<sup>9</sup> The older form "apricocks" is kept both in J. Russell Brown's and L. S. Marcus's editions.

<sup>10</sup> J. Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi*, ed. L. S. Marcus, p. 175.

[There are] two etymologies for the fruit in early modern England according to Dale B. J. Randall. The first suggests a precocious birth, as “apricots” or “apricocks” could come from “*al-praecox*” (literally, “the premature”); the other linking it to the primeval transgression of Adam and Eve, as the Latin term for the fruit (*Malus armeniaca*) recalled the apple (*malum*) popularly thought to be the Forbidden Fruit.<sup>11</sup>

As soon as she has eaten the fruit, the Duchess experiences the symptoms of premature labour: “This green fruit and my stomach are not friends. / How they swell me!” (151-152). Bosola is like the serpent in the book of Genesis, tempting the Duchess to eat the apricot from the tree of intelligence (a variation of the tree of knowledge). And this triggers the fall of the Duchess and Antonio. Bosola’s conclusion comes at the beginning of the next scene: “So, so: there’s no question but her tetchiness and most vulturous eating of the apricots are apparent signs of breeding” (II.ii.1-2). He sees through appearances and can rightly interpret what is conspicuous.<sup>12</sup> Not only does he prove a talented spy, but he is quite insightful in his reflection on mankind.

The Old Lady’s entrance yields a good occasion for Bosola to attack female “painting” (II.i.21), women’s “colouring of the face or body for cosmetic purposes”.<sup>13</sup> Again the dialectics of appearances and truth is at stake. Bosola exposes her hiding the reality of old age, her use of “scurvy face-physic” (23) to blur her wrinkles, which are very crudely described as “deep ruts and foul sloughs” (25). The adjective “foul” anticipates the comparison of the Old Lady’s closet with “a shop of witchcraft” (35), in which one may find “the fat of serpents, spawn of snakes, Jews’ spittle, and their young children’s ordure” (36-37). This echoes Shakespeare’s “weird sisters” for whom “fair is foul, and foul is fair” (*Macbeth*, I.i.11) and whose cauldron contains, among many other appetizing ingredients, the “[f]illet of a fenny snake” (IV.i.12), “[a]dder’s fork” (IV.i.16), “[l]iver of blasphemous Jew” (IV.i.26) and “[f]inger of birth-strangled babe / Ditch-delivered by a drab” (IV.i.30-31).<sup>14</sup> Bosola’s attack also reminds us of Hamlet’s misogynistic castigation of Ophelia:

I have heard of your paintings too, well enough. God has given you one face, and you make yourselves another. You jig, you amble, and you lisp, and nickname God’s creatures, and make your wantonness your ignorance. Go to, I’ll no more on’t, it hath made me mad. I say we shall have no more marriages.

William Shakespeare, *Hamlet* (III.i.143-148)<sup>15</sup>

Like Hamlet’s, Bosola’s verbal violence gains force from a reminiscence of Puritans’ misogynistic pamphlets against painting.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Yan Brailowsky, “‘True substantial bodies’ in The Duchess of Malfi”, *Webster’s Tragedy of Blood*, ed. Pascale Drouet and William C. Carroll, Paris, Belin, 2018, p. 222.

<sup>12</sup> Yet, ironically, Bosola will momentarily be taken in by appearances at the end of the tragedy, when he falls prey to hallucinations: “Still methinks the Duchess / Haunts me. There, there!—’Tis nothing but my melancholy” (v.v.345-346). As Richard Hillman notes: “It is important to recognise that, in keeping with its Old English etymology, ‘methinks’ means, not ‘I think’, but ‘it seems to me’, thereby calling attention to an ineluctable slippage in perception, the impossibility of affirmation”. Richard Hillman, “Discursive Presence and Absence in *The Duchess of Malfi*”, *Webster’s Tragedy of Blood*, p. 89.

<sup>13</sup> *OED*, “painting, *n.*” 2.b.

<sup>14</sup> William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, ed. Nicholas Brooke, The Oxford Shakespeare, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1994.

<sup>15</sup> W. Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, ed. G.R. Hibbard, The Oxford Shakespeare, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1994.

<sup>16</sup> On this topic, see Farah Karim-Cooper, *Cosmetics in Shakespearean and Renaissance Drama*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2006 (especially Chapter 4, “John Webster and the Culture of Cosmetics”).

After his gender-oriented criticism, Bosola broadens the scope of his moralizing and delivers his meditation on mankind, moving from prose to verse, from aggressive prosaic comments to introspective matters and metaphysical preoccupations. Old age (embodied by both Castruchio and the Old Lady) leads Bosola to meditate upon the fleeting nature of life and its inevitable decay to see “the skull beneath the skin”.<sup>17</sup> Although Castruchio and the Old Lady are still onstage, Bosola probably directs his pessimistic vision, his unflinching view of the world, to the audience.<sup>18</sup> Again he emphasises the discrepancy between “this outward form of man” (45) and the reality of the decaying “rotten and dead body” (57) hidden beneath “rich tissue” (58). Appearances are vain. Bosola logically places himself in the *contemptus mundi* tradition, voicing his contempt of the world and worldly concerns perhaps in an attempt to reach *ataraxia* (a state associated with Stoicism and synonymous with imperturbability).

In his “meditation”, Bosola evokes not only the transience of mankind and the vanity of men, but also “deformity” (50) and “diseases” (52). In fact, the semantic field of sickness and physical alteration pervades the whole scene, as if there were something rotten in the Court of Malfi.

### Something Rotten in the Court of Malfi: Sickness, Deformity and Hybridity

Throughout the scene, Bosola’s speech is fraught with references to diseases: he remembers the case of a French lady having “the smallpox” (26); he mentions “the plague” (39); he refers to diseases having their names taken from beasts such as “the most ulcerous wolf and swinish measles” (54); and he alludes to venereal diseases with the “aches” (62). He is so obsessed by diseases of all sorts that they pervade the metaphorical level of his speech, as when he answers Antonio: “the opinion of wisdom is a foul tetter that reputation runs all over a man’s body” (77-78). And “tetter” (“a general term for any pustular herpetiform eruption of the skin, as eczema, herpes, impetigo, ringworm”)<sup>19</sup> may echo the ghost of Hamlet’s father when he tells his son the foul effect that Claudius’ the “leperous distilment” (*Hamlet*, i.v.64) had on skin: “a most instant tetter barked about, / Most lazar-like, with vile and loathsome crust, / All my smooth body” (71-73). So it comes as no surprise that the trick he uses to disclose the Duchess’s pregnancy should trigger abdominal cramps and “extreme cold sweat” (153). His verbal references to diseases pave the way for the Duchess’s literal sickness, which is the dramatic climax of the scene.

After Castruchio and the Old Lady have left the stage, and before Antonio and Delio step in, Bosola, doctor-like, lists the classic symptoms of pregnancy: “she pukes; her stomach seethes, / The fins of her eyelids look most teeming blue, / She wanes i’th’cheek, and waxes fat i’th’flank” (64-66). The Duchess’s entrance confirms his diagnosis. Her pregnancy should be barely visible on stage and yet visible enough to raise suspicion. But the Duchess betrays herself verbally when she comments upon the alteration of her body and health, thus giving new clues to Bosola: “Do I not grow fat? / I am exceeding short-winded” (104-105), “I am / So troubled with the mother!” (112-113). The “mother” in the sense of a “medical condition was thought to arise from a disorder of the uterus” (later known as hysteria). Here it proleptically announces the “woman in relation to [the] child or

<sup>17</sup> T. S. Eliot, “Whispers of Immortality”, *Selected Poems*, London, Faber & Faber, 1954, p. 42.

<sup>18</sup> Bosola’s pessimistic vision recurs throughout the tragedy and climaxes with his dying speech: “Oh, this gloomy world! / In what a shadow, or deep pit of darkness, / Doth womanish and fearful mankind live!” (v.v.98-99).

<sup>19</sup> *OED*, “Tetter, *n*”, 1.

children to whom she has given birth"<sup>20</sup> – as Bosola's aside, "I fear too much" (113) suggests. Then, decisively, her stomach is "swollen" by Bosola's apricots.

When Bosola earlier told her that "the knave gard'ner ... / ... Did ripen them in horse dung" (137), he intended a joke, not in the best of taste, but with a significant metaphorical meaning. Bosola earlier said to Ferdinand – sarcastically commenting upon his new double status (the noble Provisorship of the Horse, the ignoble spying) – that his "corruption / Grew out of horse dung" (I.i.279-280). "Horse dung" can no longer be associated with positive manure ("ripen", II.i.137), but becomes an objective correlative for contamination. As Bosola was morally contaminated by Ferdinand's "bribes" (I.i.282), the Duchess is physically contaminated by Bosola's "green fruit" (II.i.151) and turns green herself.<sup>21</sup> So the meliorative adjectives that the Duchess uses to qualify the apricots – "wondrous fair" (129), "delicate" (140), "restorative" (141), "right good" (149) – create dramatic irony. And it is also highly ironical that Bosola should be later accused of poisoning the Duchess with the apricots – a false accusation to "give some color / For her keeping close" (164-165) as Delio suggests, but quite appropriate metaphorically speaking to depict the spy's insidious methods. As Bosola sarcastically observes, the Duchess's body is now doubly swollen, by apricots and by male semen. Interestingly, her bodily alteration is both hidden and exposed in a scene in which the notions of deformity and hybridity go hand in hand.

In his meditation, Bosola evokes natural deformity at birth, or what men call "prodigy" (49), that is, "a colt, or lamb, / A fawn, or goat, in any limb resembling / A man" (47-49). What is regarded as "abnormal or unnatural"<sup>22</sup> is what looks like a hybrid combination between the human and the animal species.<sup>23</sup> Bosola then points out that animals' names are appropriated in our linguistic field: "we bear diseases / Which have their true names only ta'en from beasts" (52-53). Finally, he reminds us that "we are eaten up of lice and worms" (55) in a way that evokes Hamlet's provocative description of the food chain: "A man may fish with the worm that hath eat of a king, and eat the fish that hath fed of that worm" (IV.iii.27-28). Particles of organic matters circulate from one species to the other, inviting us to consider hybridization as a natural process that transcends our cultural preoccupations and positioning. In such a context, the Duchess's request for "a litter" (106) becomes ironically fraught with *double entendre*, also referring for animals to "the straw and dung together" and the "act of bringing forth young"<sup>24</sup> – and Ferdinand will later call her children "cubs" (IV.i.33), a metaphor for "bastards" (IV.i.35), and imagine himself transformed into a wolf.

The issue of hybridization recurs when Bosola and the Duchess talk about "grafting" (II.i.142), a topic brought to the fore by Bosola and a practice praised by the Duchess – "a bett'ring of nature" (142). Bosola provides examples that are worth commenting upon,

<sup>20</sup> OED, "Mother, n.1": II.9; I.1.a.

<sup>21</sup> "Green": "Of the complexion: having a pale, sickly, or bilious hue, indicative of fear, envy, ill humour, or sickness" (OED, A.1.3.).

<sup>22</sup> OED, "prodigy, n.", 2.

<sup>23</sup> Although Ambroise Paré's *Des Monstres et Prodiges* (1573) would only be translated into English by Thomas Johnson in 1634, Webster may have heard or catch a glimpse of the French version, in which Paré tries to explain birth defects and hybrid procreations, and produces drawings of them: "Figure d'un poulain ayant la teste d'homme", "Figure prodigieuse d'un Enfant ayant la face dun Grenouille", "Figure d'un enfant demy chien", "Figure d'un monster demy homme et demy pourceau". Ambroise Paré, *Des Monstres et prodiges* (1573), ed. Jean Céard, Genève, Droz, 1971, p. 7, 38, 63, 65.

<sup>24</sup> OED, "litter, n.", 3.b; 5.b.

especially: "To make a pippin grow upon a crab" (143). First, the grafting he refers to is well chosen, since it evokes the hybridization of sweetness and sourness, that is, antagonistic qualities. The pippin, "a kind of *sweet* apple, typically *late-ripening, fine-flavoured*, and having good keeping qualities", contrasts with the crab, "the common name of the wild apple, especially connoting its *sour, harsh, tart, astringent* quality".<sup>25</sup> The implicit idea is that grafting may debase the fine flavour of the pippin and make it less sweet, sourer, as it grows upon the wild apple tree. Here Bosola may mock Antonio's descent a second time: the "King Pippin" (95) he mentioned earlier, King of the Franks, father of Charlemagne, is reduced to a fruit whose taste is altered; the greatest lineages are not immune from astringent grafting. Although Bosola is, at this stage, unaware of the Duchess's marriage with her lowborn steward, his example reads as a horticultural metaphor for social hybridization, and enriches the scene with dramatic irony – he is not in the know yet.

Webster may have taken this idea from Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*, in which the debate on grafting (art versus nature) between Perdita and Polixenes is also rich with social undertones and works as a metaphor for mismatches, there that of a prince (Florizel) with a supposed shepherdess (Perdita). Polixenes speaks highly of grafting to Perdita:

You see, sweet maid, we marry  
A gentler scion to the wildest stock,  
And make conceive a bark of baser kind  
By bud of nobler race. This is an art  
Which does mend nature — change it rather — but  
The art itself is nature ...  
Then make your garden rich in gillyvors,  
And do not call them bastards".  
(IV.iv.92-99)<sup>26</sup>

Ironically, the one who speaks in favour of grafting is the King of Bohemia who will soon oppose the marriage of his son with a "low-born lass" (IV.iv.156). And his rage at discovering that his son was secretly about to marry a shepherdess and his consequent repudiation of him – "we'll bar thee from succession, / Not hold thee of our blood, no, nor our kin" (IV.iv.426-427) – are echoed and pathologically amplified by Ferdinand in Webster's tragedy.

### Conclusion: Light!

We are presented with an ambivalent, destabilizing scene that, at first sight, leaves us, like Antonio, "lost in amazement", "know[ing] not what to think on't" (169): we learn of the Duchess's secret but happy pregnancy, and we nearly see her "fall[ing] in labor" (157), with the *memento mori* background created by Bosola's gloomy meditation on mankind doomed to be "eaten up of lice and worms" (55), as if life and death were part of the same perspective and interchangeable by some kind of visual trick. The switching of foreground and background creates an unstable stage on which appearances and reality are

<sup>25</sup> OED, "pippin, n.", 3.a; "crab, n.2", 1. My emphasis.

<sup>26</sup> W. Shakespeare, *The Winter's Tale*, ed. Stephen Orgel, The Oxford Shakespeare, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2008.



questioned and the games of simulation and dissimulation are exposed. According to Francis Bacon, "the great advantages of simulation and dissimulation are three":

First, to lay asleep opposition, and to surprise. For where a man's intentions are published, it is an alarm to call up all that are against them. The second is, to reserve to a man's self a fair retreat. For if a man engage himself by a manifest declaration, he must go through, or take a fall. The third is, the better to discover the mind of another.<sup>27</sup>

This is illustrated in Webster's act II scene i with the Duchess hiding her pregnancy; Antonio, his intimacy with the Duchess; Bosola, his spying activities. And at the end of the scene, Bosola's "simulation and false profession" prevails over the Duchess's "secrecy by necessity".<sup>28</sup> Bosola's apricot trick functions as a powerful dramatic trigger: it advances the plot. Bosola's next step is now to find out who the father is, but he is not as eager to do this as we might expect. Thus, he concludes: "If one could find the father now! But that / Time will discover" (II.iii.70-71) – this will come to light in act III, scene ii.

The Duchess's cry at the end of act II scene i, "Lights to my chamber!" (154), and Delio's consecutive order, "Lights there, lights!" (155), evoke the Mousetrap scene in *Hamlet*, when Claudius betrays his guilt, shouting: "Give me some light. Away!" (III.ii.253), and is energetically echoed by the Courtiers' "Lights, lights, lights!" (III.ii.254). Like Claudius, the Duchess is now exposed, as she puts it, "undone" (II.i.155), whereas, unlike Claudius, she has committed no fratricide. From this moment on, both in *Hamlet* and *The Duchess of Malfi*, revenge, whether fully justified or arbitrary, looms large. This intertextual resonance with *Hamlet* emphasizes not so much the Duchess's alleged guilt as the trap she has fallen into; and this has an ominous quality – especially if we have perverse Ferdinand's menace-laden warning in mind: "Your darkest actions—nay, your privat'st thoughts— / Will come to light" (I.i.306-307).

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<sup>27</sup> Francis Bacon, *Essays* (first edition 1597; second enlarged edition 1612), Introduction by Michael J. Hawkins, London, J.M. Dent & Sons, 1972, "vi. Of Simulation and Dissimulation", p. 19.

<sup>28</sup> F. Bacon, *Essays*, p. 19, 18.

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