



Courtly banter in *The Duchess of Malfi* (III.ii.1-57): not “so merry”

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Situated midway through the play in the Duchess's bedchamber, at the epicentre of the household, act 3 scene 2 is the fulcrum of *The Duchess of Malfi*. The Duchess enters the scene and her bedchamber a free woman, she leaves it a virtual prisoner, trapped by Bosola: this scene literalises the Cardinal's warning at the beginning of the play, “the marriage night / Is the entrance into some prison” (I.i.314-315). Coming after two acts that have covered several years since the beginning of the play, this intense night scene unfolds in a relentless succession of sequences, all revolving around the Duchess: a domestic, seemingly lighthearted scene (lines 1-57) in the company of Antonio and Cariola, a confrontation scene with Ferdinand (lines 58-140), followed by a banishment scene which covers up plans for flight (141-206); and, finally, a revelation scene with Bosola (207-317). Within minutes, love and trust tumble into the anticipation of the horror and treachery that will dominate the second half of the play. This essay focuses on the first part of that scene (lines 1-57) and more especially on the use of courtly rhetoric in a domestic context, showing how its position in the play at that moment, and the combined roles of speakers and addressees, suggest that the impression of happiness and the seemingly conventional tropes of a wooing scene are undermined by a sense of jarring displacement and inappropriateness. Webster draws on seemingly recognisable codes to subvert them: the images are there, but in the wrong place and not quite doing what they ought to be doing.

Act III opens with the reunion of Antonio and his friend, Delio, who has been away from the court so long that the Duchess has had two more children: Antonio is grown leaner, “troubled with an old wife” (III.i.15), which suggests both an established marital relationship and the passing of time, and anticipates the Duchess's later, mock serious musing about her hair turning grey (III.ii.58-60), itself pointing forward to the moment when, separated from her husband and children, imprisoned and expecting death, she indeed ages almost overnight. The tone of the conversation between Antonio and Delio moves from self-deprecating bantering to uneasiness over Ferdinand's presence at court that is corroborated by the latter's exchange with Bosola about the “three bastards” (III.i.59) and his refusal to formulate his dire intentions. The mood then switches, in the

opening lines of III.ii, to a bedtime scene – a popular type of scene in Elizabethan and Jacobean drama that associates the combined erotics and vulnerability of the place and moment, frequently inviting confidence and the sharing of secrets between a woman and her maid – as in *Othello*, of course – to a background of heightened dramatic expectations (such as rape, murder or haunting).

The rhetoric and staging of courtship

Moments of privacy are rare in the *Duchess of Malfi* and the very notion of intimacy is essentially an illusion: this is a scene played out before an audience, on a stage where any character may enter at any moment; moreover, this is a scene in a court which resembles medieval and Renaissance homes where there were no genuinely private apartments. Ferdinand's entrance (sd line 58) corroborates the absence of privacy. Nonetheless the play opens on a powerful illusion of intimacy that is heightened by the fact that this is the play's only moment of combined humour and tenderness. The initial mood of this domestic sequence is light. It is so unusually so, in the context of this play, that the Duchess herself draws attention to the light-heartedness with the phrase "I prithee, / When were we so merry?" (III.ii.52-53), which she follows with a homely touch: "My hair tangles". Divesting herself of the trappings – jewellery and formal hairdo – associated with her public persona, asking for her "casket" and "glass" (III.ii.1), the Duchess playfully resists Antonio's desire to spend the night in her room, possibly motivated by an unspoken concern to spare the risk of discovery, since Ferdinand is in the palace. Their teasing slides into a three-part exchange on sleeping, love-making and the sharing of beds into which the maid Cariola is drawn. The easiness contrasts with the powerful combination of formality, passion and final disregard of conventions with which the Duchess had wooed Antonio at the beginning of the play, and his sense of discomfort at the time: these are indeed people who are now comfortable with each other.

This first sequence is closed by a double kiss that introduces a sequence rich in mythological imagery:

DUCHESS I'll stop your mouth.
 [Kisses him.]
ANTONIO Nay, that's but one. Venus had two doves
To draw her chariot. [Kisses her.]
(III.ii.20-22)

The playfulness belongs to the world of courtly comedy – the audience could almost be watching, and the characters performing, a scene from Shakespeare's *Love's Labour's Lost*. Antonio then launches into a demonstration of the superiority of marriage over the "single fate" of women (24), illustrating this with a selection of transformations drawn from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*: Daphne, changed into a "fruitless bay tree" (26) to escape Apollo's advances (*Metamorphoses*, I, 452-561); Syrinx, turned "[t]o the pale empty reed" (27) to escape Pan (*Metamorphoses*, I, 689); and Anaxarete, "frozen into marble" (28) for having scorned the advances of Iphis, who hanged himself outside her house (*Metamorphoses*, IV, 698-771). Through those examples, Antonio – the father of three children – lays emphasis on the barrenness of virginity, which he contrasts with the happier fate of those "Which married or proved kind unto their friends" (30) and were rewarded by being "transshaped into the olive, pomegranate, mulberry" (31), "flowers, precious stones or eminent stars" (32).

As John Russell Brown, Michael Neill and others have pointed out in their respective editions of *The Duchess of Malfi*, Antonio borrows his criticism of chastity and his defence of marriage almost word for word from George Whetstone's *Heptameron of Civill Discourses* (1582):

Whetstone, <i>Heptameron</i> ¹	Webster, <i>Duchess of Malfi</i>
<i>Daphne</i> was metamorphosed into a <i>Bay Trée</i> , ... for the Bay Trée is barren of pleasant fruit, & his plesing words of weighty matter.	We read how <i>Daphne</i> , for her peevisch flight, Became a fruitless bay tree (III.ii.24-25)
Furthermore, what remembrance is theare of faire <i>Sirinx</i> coynesse, refusing to be God <i>Pans</i> wife? other then that she was metamorphosed into a few vnprofitable Réedes:	... <i>Syrinx</i> turned To the pale empty reed (III.ii.25-6)
Or of <i>Anaxaretis</i> chaste crueltie towards <i>Iphis</i> , ouer then that she remaineth an Image of Stone in <i>Samarin</i> <i>Anaxarete</i> Was frozen into marble (III.ii.26-7)
But in the behalf of <i>Mariage</i> , thousands have ben changed into <i>Olyue</i> , Pomegranate, <i>Mulberie</i> , and other fruitfull-trées, swéete flowers, Starres, and precious Stones, by whom, the worlde is beautified, directed and noorished.	... those Which married or proved kind unto their friends Were, by a gracious influence, transshaped Into the olive, pomegranate, mulberry, Became flowers, precious stones or eminent stars. (III.ii.27-31)

The references refract different facets of the Duchess, already expressed in the betrothal scene. No *Anaxarete*, she is determined not to be reduced to “an Image of Stone” (*Heptameron*) nor to “the figure cut in alabaster / That kneels at my husband’s tomb” (I.i.442-443). She refuses to resign herself to being just one more of “suche lyke naked

¹ George Whetstone, *An Heptameron of Civill Discourses...*, London, Richard Jones, 1582, sig. [C4r]. The book was reissued in 1593, as *Aurelia*. See Robert W. Dent, “Webster’s borrowings from Whetstone”, *Modern Language Notes*, 70:8 (Dec., 1955), p. 568-570; John Russell Brown (ed.), *The Duchess of Malfi*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1974 [1996], p. 75, note to lines 24-32; Michael Neill (ed.), *The Duchess of Malfi*, Norton Critical Editions, New York, Norton, 2015, p. 52, note to lines 24-32. All references to the play are to Neill’s edition, unless otherwise indicated. *Heptameron* is available online at <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A15034.0001.001?view=toc> and in a critical edition, Diana Shklanka (ed.), *A Critical Edition of George Whetstone’s An Heptameron of Civill Discourses (1582)*, PhD, The University of British Columbia, 1977, <https://open.library.ubc.ca/cIRcle/collections/ubctheses/831/items/1.0094440>.

Monumentes" (*Heptameron*): hers is a young widow's body ("This is flesh and blood, sir", I.i.441) which, united to her husband's like "the loving palms" (469), has been "transshaped" into fecund, fruit-bearing motherhood. As Ralph Pater notes, "all the fruits in [the] first two acts have deeply negative connotations. And one wonders about this reversal of the usual connotations of fresh fruit".² Through the fruitful transformation she embodies, as Antonio suggests in this scene, the Duchess seems to be endowed with a talent to counter the play's earlier tree imagery, to reverse once again those "deeply negative connotations" and restore a sense of wholesomeness.

Displaying the sound common sense that spectators expect of a maid on the early modern stage, Cariola is unimpressed and rejects this "vain poetry" (33). At the same time, playing along with the spirit of nocturnal misrule, she asks how she might choose between "wisdom, riches, and beauty / In three several young men" (34-35) – a situation that Antonio chooses to understand as an inversion of the judgement of Paris. In the bedchamber context, he introduces an erotic fantasy that draws on Renaissance iconography made familiar through household tapestries, paintings or panellings, where Juno, Venus and Minerva are depicted naked or near-naked, exposed to the young shepherd's critical gaze:

For how was't possible he could judge right,
Having three amorous goddesses in view,
And they stark naked?
(III.ii.38-40)

The association of the three goddesses and nakedness runs through the poetry of the time, as in Thomas Heywood's *Troia Britanica* (1609), "Three Goddesses, stript naked to your eie".³ Antonio's lines seem to echo the opening scene in William Alexander's play, *Julius Caesar* (1607): "No wonder too though one all judgement lost, / That had three naked goddesses in sight".⁴

The whole scene could read almost as a selection of conversational court games, in which fine and witty speech is the mark of a gentleman, intended to encourage social interaction, more especially between the sexes. Played out as it is here within the intimate space of the bedchamber, drawing the faithful maid into the exchange, the game also explores the place of Eros within the sphere of marriage, the interaction of "love" and "friendship". The erotic references are condoned by the setting – a bedchamber, at night – and by the peculiar situation of Antonio within the marriage, a secret husband of the night who, as a steward, here authorises himself the freedom of a "lord of misrule" (III.ii.7). A servant by day, in the service of the Duchess, he is her husband by night. Although she shows clearly that she continues to rule over this intimate space, the way she openly acknowledges her sensuousness ("Alas, what pleasure can two lovers find in sleep?" III.ii.10) recognises him as a consort: the bedchamber is his court within the court, the only place where he too can divest himself of his public persona – that of a discreet steward – and allow himself the freedom to indulge in civil conversation, to play out courtesy games

² Robert Palter, *The Duchess of Malfi's Apricots, and Other Literary Fruits*, Columbia, University of South Carolina Press, 2002, p. 275-276. References to trees in *The Duchess of Malfi* include apricots, pippins, damson, crab apples (II.i, II.iii), lemons (II.i), orange trees (II.ii).

³ Thomas Heywood, *Troia Britanica*, canto x (London: Jaggard, p. 220).

⁴ William Alexander, Earl of Stirling, *The monarchicke tragedies Croesus, Darius, The Alexandraean, Iulius Caesar. Newly enlarged by William Alexander, Gentleman of the Princes priue chamber* (London, Valentine Simmes for Edward Blount, 1607), sig. Q2r.

and to joke. Through his peculiar position, Antonio brings into the inner circle of the private sphere what are more usually forms of public, conversational interaction to which he, as a steward, has no access except through uninvited overhearing.⁵

Within that context, his praise of marriage appears as indeed fitting, as are the borrowings from Whetstone's *Heptameron*, the subject of which, Neil Rhodes writes, "is, quite simply, marriage", and very much a celebration of Protestant marriage, through "dialogues that are 'civill discourses' because marriage is the Christian institution on which civil society is founded".⁶ This choice of Whetstone thus appears as being in keeping with the stress that Antonio and the Duchess lay on "the sacrament of marriage" (I.i.377) in the betrothal scene and their insistence that "We now are man and wife" (475). Antonio's self-definition as a Protestant also seems to echo Whetstone's dictum that marriage can either be hell or paradise: "DUCHESS. What do you think of marriage? ANTONIO. I take't as those that deny purgatory: / It locally contains or heaven or hell; / There's no third place in't", (I.i.383-386):

(Courteous Reader) thou haste heare, the honorable institution of Marriage, so perfectly Anatomed, as a veye weake Iudgement, may see the causes, which make Houshold quarrelles, to resemble Hell. Againe, the man, which is willing to liue happily, may here learne such directions, and lawes, as will chaunge his priuate house, into a Paradiſe on earth. ("Unto the friendly Reader, wealth and welfare", [Aiiiiir])

Subverting the conventions of courtship

The way this scene is performed on stage is apt to draw the audience into a relationship of empathy with the characters, and point in subtle ways to the pathos of the play's last, rare moment of domestic felicity. In seventeenth-century performances, the lighthearted touch would have been emphasised by the fact that the Duchess and Cariola were played by boy actors: the text Webster borrows from Whetstone (and the phrase "three amorous goddesses in view, / And they stark naked") has a Lylyan touch, a lightness that recalls set pieces such as those one finds in *The Woman in the Moon*, intended both to display young actors' virtuosity and to create a comedic and erotically suggestive contrast between their youthfulness and the more or less explicitly sexual content of the dialogue. In Maria Aberg's 2018 production for the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC), the mythological language was elided – as if no longer relevant, or as if the director did not quite know what to make of it – and replaced by soft lighting, dancing and music that conveyed intimacy and pathos. Yet the very presence, within the privacy of the domestic environment, of this rhetoric and these games of courtesy, which are more usually intended for a larger, public company (as in Whetstone's *Heptameron*), makes them seem doubly out of place within that space. The courtly game is played by Antonio, initially no gentleman but a steward, by Cariola, a maid performed by a boy actor, while another boy actor, cast as the Duchess, is reduced to a role of bystander and commentator rather than addressee.

⁵ On the liminality of the steward, see Barbara Correll, "Malvolio at Malfi: Managing Desire in Shakespeare and Webster", *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 58:1 (2007), p. 65-92. Long extracts are published in Michael Neill (ed.), *The Duchess of Malfi*, p. 355-378.

⁶ Neil Rhodes, *Common: The Development of Literary Culture in Sixteenth-Century England*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2018, p. 247. See also Janet Clare, "in Whetstone's work a strong defence of marriage runs through the dialogues and story-telling", *Shakespeare's Stage Traffic: Imitation, Borrowing and Competition in Renaissance Theatre*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2014, p. 197.

While Antonio may have read the argument in defense of fecundity and marriage in the *Heptameron*, he seems here to have forgotten Whetstone's warnings against marriages with a difference of social status between a wife and her husband, warnings that Whetstone illustrates with a reference to the Duchess of Malfi's secret marriage (Q2v):

But admit, by the example of other mens Aduancements, that the meanest may be raised, by the yeelding fancye of the mightie: I prophesie that such an vpstarte, had more néede of ten Eyes, to warde the mallice of his Wiues kindred, then one tongue to moue her to kindnesse. A woman cannot myslike affectionated profers, because they procéde of loue: But her kindred disdaineth his attempte, for that the conclusion, tendeth both to their and her dishonour: A woman séeing her seruants passions, cannot but sustaine him with pittie, her Kindred séeing him in good way to bee beloued, will lye in waite for his lyfe: For though she may dispose of her affection, her kindred hath an interest in her honour, which if she consent to staine, or deminishe, shee dooth iniurie to her whole house.

The *Cardinal of Aragon*, aduenged the base choice of his Sister, the Duchesse of *Malfy*, with the death of her selfe, her Children, and her Husband: and alleadged in defence, that he had done no iniurie to Nature, but purged his House of dishonour: for Nature (quoth he) is perfect, and who blemisheth her is a monster in Nature, whose head, without wrong to Nature may be cut off.

Yea (quoth *Soranso*) but, this Cardinall, for all his habit, and glose of Iustice, is for this Act, so often registred for a Tirant, as I feare méee he will neuer come among y^e number of Saints, But the example of these Mariages are vsuall, and such ensuing vengeaunce is but rare, and besides her espetiall contentment, a woman looseth none of her general titles of dignitie by matching w[ith] her inferior.

In déede (quoth *Dondolo*) in common curtesie she enioyeth them, but in the strickt construction of the Law, she is degraded. And by this meane is bounde to intertaine the meaner, with familiaritie, least, they (being prowde, or reputed her scornfully) doo crosse her over the thumbe with y^e follies of her fancy. But admit y^e meane seruant, marrie his Mistresse, and escapeth the mallice of her friends: which successe, one amonge tenne suche Suters hardly attaineth. ("The [Fyfth] Dayes Exercise, Qiiv-Qiir)⁷

Whetstone is summarising the story of the Duchess of Malfi as it reached Webster and others mainly through William Painter's story. Pinpointing the danger that the family represent to any marriage that does not conform with expectations, he is also signifying, through Soranso, that such extreme forms of "vengeaunce" by a relative bent on "purg[ing] his House of dishonour" are "but rare". He also suggests that a woman marrying with an "inferior" "looseth none of her general titles of dignitie". Webster is close to Whetstone in that both of them, in their discussion or staging of the story, steer away from the received version both of English authors and of the Duchess's brothers, that she should "yield to her follies and shameless lust", as in William Painter's translation of the story from Belleforest. While considering that a woman who marries beneath her station "dooth injury to her whole house", and that social and family pressure is such that only one in ten of such marriages is successful, Whetstone distances himself from the Cardinal's justification of his vengeance, even while acknowledging, through Dondolo, that some might consider that such a wife "is degraded" and that such marriages are rarely successful. As Rhodes points out, "Whetstone works through different types of

⁷ The running titles for sig. Qiiv and Qivv in the 1582 edition (STC 553 :03) mistakenly read "The Fourth" instead of "The Fifth".

dysfunctional relationship, referencing them to a moral and social order which is ultimately set out in a 'Table of Housholde Lawes'".⁸

Whetstone's text about chastity and marriage is a didactic dialogue between Ismarito and Faliero, with, as we have seen, a moralistic intent: the characters do not question the examples used, but debate about the argument they are supposed to push forward, and it is on that debate that the reader is invited to focus, not on the analogies used by the speakers. If Faliero says that Daphne and Syrinx stand for barrenness, and Anaxarete for hard-heartedness, the reader takes this at face value. If trees are used to illustrate fecundity, the reader acquiesces. Although organised as a dialogue, the structure is purely rhetorical and enclosed on itself. Transposed to the theatre, the text takes on a different meaning: early modern audiences were accustomed to expect a wide range of takes on mythological matter, from the mechanicals' comedic deconstruction of Pyramus and Thisbe in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, or the deflationary play on the myth of Hercules in *Love's Labour's Lost*, to ironic or countercurrent allusions, as in *Antony and Cleopatra*. Texts are not static, they change when they are lifted into a different context, especially when the transposition involves generic change.

The context is doubly thwarted. The place for Antonio's rhetoric of wooing is wrong: we are in the bedchamber, where the clandestine marriage was performed. He is addressing a maid, Cariola, and using the courtly language of seduction to argue against virginity, similar to the poet's invitation to the young man to procreate in Shakespeare's Sonnets (as in Sonnets 1 and 9). Yet he is not trying to seduce her. And the recipient of the poetry has little patience with such rhetoric, which she dismisses as "vain poetry". Unlike Whetstone's debaters, Cariola contests not so much the ideas as the rhetoric: the chosen examples mean nothing to her.

Antonio's borrowing of mythological references in praise of marriage from Whetstone acts as a kind of subtext to the play that becomes problematic through displacement. At first sight, his mythological allusions seem to work. His account of the first three metamorphoses (Daphne, Syrinx and Anaxarete) is operational: Daphne was changed into a bay tree to escape Apollo and bay trees are indeed "fruitless"; Syrinx was changed into a reed, again not a fruit-bearing plant; and Anaxarete was changed to stone, not exactly an image of fecundity.

For the next three examples, Antonio, still following Whetstone, no longer recalls metamorphosed figures but points to the end result of supposed metamorphoses as "proof" of fruitful marriage, of wives "kind unto their friends": "the olive, pomegranate, mulberry" (31); "flowers, precious stones or eminent stars" (32). Antonio seems to get off to a good start with the olive, which is eminently connotated in a positive manner, since associated with Minerva and therefore with wisdom rather than fruitfulness. Yet even the olive can prove an ambiguous plant, owing its fruitfulness on occasion to unnatural causes. Reversing the course of nature and substituting unwholesome knowledge for the wisdom of Minerva, who represents herself in a tapestry creating an olive-tree loaded with fruit by smiting the earth with her spear (*Met.* VI, 78-81), Medea plunges a withered olive branch in her magic brew and changes it to a green one bearing leaves and a wealth of olives (*Met.* VII, 273-281). The only other, briefly signalled instance of transformation has no bearing on marriage and indeed undercuts the courtly mood, since it is that of an offensive shepherd, turned into a wild olive tree whose fruit taste as bitter as the coarse language he used with

⁸ Neil Rhodes, *Common: The Development of Literary Culture in Sixteenth-Century England*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2018, p. 247.

nymphs (*Met.* XIV, 517-526). The pomegranate is not the result of a transformation: associated with marriage, through the union of Proserpine and Pluto, a sterile marriage of imprisonment away from life and the light of day, it carries conflicting connotations of fertility and death, hence its use in paintings such as Sandro Boticelli's "Madonna of the pomegranate" (1487) to signify the passion of Christ.⁹ The mulberry sees its flowers changed from white to purple when stained with the blood of Pyramus: again this is not the result of a fruitful transformation, but a witness of Pyramus and Thisbe's love and death that becomes an emblem of mourning. As with the pomegranate, the mulberry runs counter to Antonio's mythological program in that it is associated with blood ("mora cruenta", "blood-red mulberries", in *Appendix virgiliana*, "Copa", 21) and often carries the same signification as and association with death.

The flowers are even more problematic: Adonis is changed into an anemone, Narcissus into an eponymous flower, Clytie wastes away into a heliotrope (*Met.* IV, 190-273). They are all instances of single figures who either prove unable to requite someone else's love (Adonis, Narcissus) or experience unrequited love (Clytie): they are neither "kind unto their friends" nor have friends kind unto them. As for precious stones, they are mineral, recalling therefore Anaxarete. In this scene, they also point back to the jewels that petrify the Duchess into a public persona, and forward to the moment when she anticipates her death: "What would it pleasure me to have my throat cut / With diamonds? [...] or to be shot to death with pearls?" (iv.ii.159-161). Finally, the stars are unattainable testimonials of Jupiter's unsuccessful conquests (Callisto and her son Arcas), of friendships that end in death (Castor and Pollux), of heroes (Hercules, Perseus), more rarely of "kind" loves (Andromeda).

While seeming to refer to actual myths, none of those examples speak of metamorphoses that might, to an audience, be instantly recognisably "kind unto their friends". The way Webster takes those references to Ovidian myths from Whetstone, at one remove instead of firsthand, and does something different with them is in keeping with his creative process as described by Yves Peyré in his introduction to *The White Devil*: Les réseaux de correspondances symboliques qu'avait tissés la Renaissance, époque où tout avait sa place et sa valeur, n'ont plus cours: le sens prolifère, des symboles contradictoires se superposent, les signes sont gauchis, déplacés, inversés, et plus rien n'a de sens. ... Le décentrage et la multiplication des perspectives, le bourgeonnement anarchique des systèmes symboliques et l'effondrement des certitudes créent un terrain de jeu pour le maître de métamorphoses [qu'est Webster].¹⁰

The transshaping takes place, not in Ovid's stories, but in Antonio's rhetoric, which is mined from within; shifting the potentially Ovidian matter from Whetstone, where it is already irrelevant, to the context of *The Duchess of Malfi*, further "transshapes" it, exposing the symbolism Antonio reads in it as unstable. While seeming to favour social interaction, Antonio's string of analogies reveals how spoken words can turn against what one is trying to say. Language is unreliable – and all the more so when it is imported wholesale from

⁹ Sandro Boticelli's "Madonna of the pomegranate", Uffizi, Florence.

¹⁰ "The webs of symbolical correspondences woven by the Renaissance, where everything had its place and significance, are no longer relevant: meanings proliferate, contradictory symbols are superimposed, signs are thwarted, displaced, inverted, nothing means anything any longer. ... The decentring and proliferation of perspectives, the anarchic budding of symbolic systems and the collapse of certainties create an experimental field for that master of metamorphoses [Webster]". Yves Peyré, "Notice sur la pièce" [Introduction] and Notes, *Le Démon blanc [The White Devil]*, in Line Cottagnies, François Laroque and Jean-Marie Maguin (eds), *Théâtre élisabéthain*, vol. 2, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, Paris, Gallimard, 2009, p. 1696-1710, p. 1697.

another context, where it is already used at one remove: it becomes an agent of tragedy, since communication no longer works, even with the people to whom one seems to be closest. Antonio means one thing, the audience hears another.

The Duchess and Antonio's love is kept secret, like that of Pyramus and Thisbe, and that of Romeo and Juliet, where the reference to the pomegranate tree outside the bedchamber marks the moment when Romeo must leave, after their one night of love (III.v). Romeo's presence in Juliet's chamber was a source of danger to both of them, because of the banishment order and because the marriage had been performed in secret. Similarly, Antonio's and the Duchess's marriage is transgressive, even though it is legitimated through the exchange of vows and the hasty ceremony over which Cariola presides in I.i. As the debate in Whetstone suggests, it is even more transgressive than Romeo and Juliet's because of the inequality of status between husband and wife that challenges an established hierarchy. Through her marriage, the Duchess is defying established social conventions, and not just her brothers: "I hope in time 'twill grow into a custom, / That noblemen shall come with cap and knee / To purchase a night's lodging of their wives" (III.ii.4-6). Until that time comes, a marriage like hers is a source of danger to herself, her husband and her children.

Paris' impossible choice

Problematic in themselves, creating an unsettling sense of deregulated symbolism, Antonio's misreadings of transshapings are further destabilised by the intimations of destruction that lurk beneath the jocular image of Paris blinded by the attractive figures of three naked goddesses: audiences well knew that his choice of Venus, who rewarded him with Helen, led to the destruction of Troy, and within its walls, of loving, faithful wives and mothers such as Andromache, Hector's wife, and of children such as theirs, Astyanax. The intimations of destruction awaiting the Duchess and her family are well-nigh unescapable, and the undercurrent of premonitory tragedy throws a dark shadow across the lighthearted humour.

Furthermore, Paris' judgement, significantly situated at the heart of the play, encapsulates the Duchess's personal quandary, her own inability to choose, and the tragic outcome: the play reveals the impossibility to combine "riches" and power (Juno), "wisdom" (Minerva) and "beauty" (Venus). Those qualities that the ruler (the Duchess) should combine in her own person (public and private) cannot be reconciled in the context of this tragedy; in choosing one of the three, one loses the other two, it is impossible to preserve all three. Paris' choice, in the play, is assigned to the Duchess. In marrying her steward Antonio, she turns away from the "wisdom" associated with Minerva (unlike Olivia who never contemplates marrying Malvolio).¹¹ When she orders, at the beginning of the scene, "Bring me the casket", and removes her jewels, she is divesting herself of her regal, Juno persona and the "wealth" associated with her. And when she asks for her glass and openly expresses her sensuality, she states once again that she has chosen Venus: but even then she fails, since she notes how she is losing her "beauty".

The sequence discussed here is framed by the Duchess's references to her personal appearance. It opens with the Duchess's instructions to Cariola: "Bring me the casket hither, and the glass" (III.ii.1), which are frequently staged as the moment when she moves from the public into the private sphere, where she authorises herself, as mentioned

¹¹ On Malvolio reappearing as Antonio, see Barbara Correll, "Malvolio at Malfi", p. 65-92.

earlier, to remove her jewellery and to unpin her hair. It closes with the Duchess shown on stage sitting before a mirror: "When were we so merry? – My hair tangles. [DUCHESS tends to her toilette.] [...] Doth not the colour o' my hair begin to change? / When I wax grey, I shall have all the court / Powder their hair with orris, to be like me." (III.ii.53-60). As she speaks, to her loved one, as she thinks, Ferdinand enters – the agent of death. The effect is one of anamorphosis: the sense of distortion and displacement already present in Antonio's courtly rhetoric deepens the transition from a young, beautiful, loving, laughing woman's face into that of a grey-haired woman staring into the face of death. The Duchess at her toilette, gazing into her mirror where she sees not her love or her own beauty but death and intimations of her own ageing, recalls the popular theme, a century or so earlier, of allegorical paintings on vanity and the passing of time, such as Hans Baldung Grien's "The Three Ages of Woman and Death" (1510), in which a young woman is holding a mirror with possibly a death head reflected in it; or Jan Sanders van Hemessen's "Vanitas" (c. 1535-1540), where the skull is clearly reflected in the mirror.¹²

The reference to tangled hair may also proleptically announce her, and two of her children's, deaths, while simultaneously recalling Absalom's death in Samuel 2 18:9-14, which occurs when he is stabbed after being caught by his locks of hair in a tree – an apt death when one considers his pride in his beauty and his usurpation of his father's crown. George Peele effectively links Absalom's death to the erotic suggestiveness of tangled hair in his play, *The Love of King David and Fair Bethsabe With the Tragedie of Absalon*, which was published in 1599 and may have been written a decade or so earlier. The verb "tangle" is used three times in the play, once to refer to Bethsabe's hair, in which David sees his "longings tangled" (sig. B2v) and twice to Absalom's: "His haire was tangled in a shadie oake" (H4r) and "the Lord hath tangled in a tree / The health and glorie of thy stubborne heart" (G3v). Absalom's fate thus appears as a divine punishment that is sent both on him and his father David in punishment for their respective hubris and lust.¹³

The tangling, or undoing of hair is a signifier of intimacy, of the private person (as in Desdemona's "Prithee unpin me", IV.ii.20, which may apply to her clothing or to her hair). It can also initiate a sequence of despair and/or folly (as with Constance or Ophelia). Once again, Webster's transformation of the possible allegorical and biblical readings of the Duchess's greying, tangled hair is, and isn't, appropriate: the Duchess will never live into old age, and never need to impose grey hair on her court. But her hair *will* turn grey, as the mental ordeal she endures prematurely ages her; and its tangling may point to her death by strangulation, with her unkempt hair about her ears. Once again, this scene anticipates what is to come and more specifically the persecution to which she is submitted in act IV, when she asks, first Cariola, then Bosola, "Who do I look like now?" (IV.ii.32) then "Who am I?" (114). Cariola compares her to her "picture in the gallery", or "rather like some reverend monument / Whose ruins are even pitied" (IV.ii.31, 32-33). Bosola compares the heavens to the soul's "looking-glass", that "only gives us a miserable knowledge of the small compass of our prison" (IV.ii.120-123), and goes on to describe her as "some great woman, sure, for riot begins to sit on thy forehead, clad in grey hairs, twenty years sooner than on a merry milkmaid's" (IV.ii.125-127). She may be "Duchess of Malfi yet" (131), she has been

¹² Hans Baldung Grien, "The Three Ages of Woman and Death", Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna; Jan Sanders van Hemessen, "Vanitas", Palais des Beaux-Arts, Lille.

¹³ George Peele, *The Love of King David and Fair Bethsabe With the Tragedie of Absalon*, London, Adam Islip, 1599. I wish to thank the readers of my essay for suggesting the reference to Samuel 2: 9-14, which led me to Peele.

transshaped into an elderly woman mourning (so she thinks) her children and husband – once again a childless widow, but no longer beautiful. Props and gestures are transformed and distorted. The glass is replaced by the poniard with which Ferdinand threatens her; loving handclasps are replaced by a dead man's hand (IV.i). Through these changes, Ferdinand transforms the bedchamber into a tomblike "room ... as our anchorites / To holier use inhabit. Let not the sun / shine on him till he's dead" (III.ii.102-104). This distortion was already anticipated through a similarly loaded play on words in the betrothal scene – "DUCHESS. In a winding-sheet? ANTONIO. In a couple" (I.i.380) – and a reference to "banishment" (387). After III.ii, the sheets of the marital bed will never again shelter the Duchess and Antonio, and the love bantering gives way to Antonio's fake banishment by the Duchess to hide his flight.

From Antonio's rhetoric to the props, the dramatic effect is one of displacement, a shimmering of mythological and allegorical references, so that words, images and physical objects simultaneously seem familiar and distorted, an invitation and an illusion – just like the whole of this opening sequence of a decisive bedchamber scene. Transformations occur, but not where Antonio would invite us to see them. The Duchess's transformation into the fruit-bearing tree of motherhood proves illusory since her inability to reconcile the virtues of the three goddesses leads her two youngest children to their death. As Palter notes, the "negative connotations" of the earlier references to trees grown in dung "are just the prelude to the even more repellent and violent character of the animal imagery that pervades the play (and culminates in the lycanthropy of Ferdinand)".¹⁴ Antonio's mythological banter has failed to reverse that reality, and the most evident, explicit transformation in the play is not that of the Duchess into a fruit-bearing tree full of promise, but that of Ferdinand into a (self)-devouring wolf. And as the love-bantering sequence is obliterated by a sequence of witchcraft, sexually obsessive images and threats that announce Ferdinand's transformation and his destruction of his sister and her family, the spectators still hear the Duchess's "When were we so merry?" (III.ii.53). The answer, they know, is "never again".

¹⁴ Palter, *The Duchess of Malfi's Apricots, and Other Literary Fruits*, p. 275-276.