



The Martyred Duchess¹

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When Duke Ferdinand stands over the body of his sister, systematically tormented and finally murdered on his orders, he cannot bear the sight: "Cover her face," he tells his henchman Daniel Bosola, "mine eyes dazzle: she died young" (IV.ii.249).² The moment comes in act IV, scene ii, of John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*, surely the most sustained study of individual persecution in all of Renaissance tragedy. For marrying against the wishes of her malignant brothers, the Duchess is stalked, imprisoned, psychologically tortured, and killed. Painting with lurid colours, Webster offers the audience a mounting series of moral outrages that climax when she, followed by two of her children and her lady-in-waiting, are strangled. The weight of those crimes, and the suffering they provoke, is so great as to eventually break the very men who orchestrated them: Ferdinand goes mad with guilt, while Bosola pursues a pointless course of vengeance in her name.

We might expect that the culture which produced this harrowing play to be almost inured to terrible spectacles of persecutory violence, given that such things were meted out by the state on the bodies of criminals in numbers that strain modern credulity.³ However, at least one category of such executions did not sit easily on the collective conscience. In a country that had changed its religious identity several times across the reigns of Henry VIII and his children, the deaths of religious dissidents, far from consolidating sympathy with the authorities, had the power to unsettle it.⁴ It is not just that their coreligionists proclaimed

¹ The following essay is largely based on the third chapter of my book, *Martyrs and Players in Early Modern England: Tragedy, Religion and Violence on Stage*, Farnham, Ashgate, 2014, p. 123-150.

² All quotations are from John Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi*, ed. Michael Neill, Norton Critical Editions, New York and London, W. W. Norton, 2015.

³ See Molly Smith, "The Theatre and the Scaffold: Death as Spectacle in *The Spanish Tragedy*," *SEL*, 32, 1992, p. 217-232, p. 217.

⁴ The sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries witnessed the failure of religious execution in England: deaths that were supposed to encourage conformity were instead the site of division, due to a growing ambivalence within the culture over the moral legitimacy of violence in matters of Christian conscience. The second is that early modern

them martyrs for true religion. In Webster's lifetime, Protestants who watched an Anabaptist burned at the stake or a Catholic priest hanged, drawn and quartered, could look back on a time not too many decades distant when many of their own side had been made to pass through the fire because of fidelity to the gospel.⁵ The memory of those men and women was kept evergreen, thanks in large part to the wide and deep impact of John Foxe's *Acts and Monuments*, more commonly known as *The Book of Martyrs*.⁶ The *Acts* challenged the way violence was understood in the culture. Though his work was undertaken from a position of security as a revered figure in Elizabeth I's Protestant church, Foxe maintained a disarmingly simple thesis towards persecutory violence: "For as he that in suffering patiently for the gospel of God is thereby known to be of Christ, even so in likewise is the persecutor of him known to be a member of Antichrist".⁷ Doctrine mattered to Foxe, but violence mattered even more as a marker of the true church, which was always to endure it and never to inflict it. Persecution, Foxe believed, was Rome's hallmark, and he protested on those occasions when his own government reverted to it.⁸ The effects of his theology of suffering were profound: the promulgation of a radically victim-centred theology, following a strand of doctrine going back to the Gospels, which sees the true church as a suffering minority, persecuted for Christ's sake. This article offers a reading of Webster's play, and most particularly of act IV scene ii, alongside certain vignettes from Foxe. It does not suggest that Webster intended explicit parallels between his Duchess and Foxe's martyrs, but rather that there are Foxian themes of

tragedians reflected and amplified this ambivalence for dramatic purposes. See Anderson, *Martyrs and Players*, p. 25-78.

⁵ During the Reformation the formal persecution of heretics reached its peak in the middle of the sixteenth century and then gradually tapered off. Some 3000 men and women, largely in the Empire, Switzerland, France, the Netherlands and England, went to the stake rather than recant between 1523-1565. Between 1567-1574 1100 people were burned, largely in the Low Countries, while the pan-European numbers fell to 280 after the turn of the century. Of this total, only a third were so-called Magisterial Protestants, and the rest were Anabaptists, the radical Protestants who were persecuted by both Catholics and other Protestants. William Monter, "Heresy Executions in Reformation Europe, 1520-1565", *Tolerance and Intolerance in the European Reformation*, ed. Ole Peter Grell and Bob Scribner, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 48-64, p. 49. For figures in England, see John Coffey, *Persecution and Toleration in Protestant England, 1558-1689*, New York, Longman, 2000, p. 90-99.

⁶ See Patrick Collinson, "Truth and Legend: the Veracity of John Foxe's Book of Martyrs", *Clio's Mirror: Historiography in Britain and the Netherlands. Papers Delivered at the Eighth Anglo-Dutch Historical Conference*, ed. A. C. Duke and C. A. Tamse, Zutphen, De Walburg Pers, 1985, p. 20-40, p. 31.

⁷ John Foxe, *Acts and Monuments* [...], *The Variorum Edition*, accessed 1 November 2018, URL: <http://www.hrionline.shef.ac.uk/foxe/>, p. 2139. All references to Foxe are from the online 1583 edition. The spelling and typography of *The Acts* have been modernised.

⁸ The most noteworthy example of Foxe's humanity and of the debate over the excessive use of violence is found in a pair of 1575 Latin letters he wrote, one to the queen and one to the council, upon the arrest of a group of Flemish Anabaptists, five of whom were sentenced to burn as heretics: "I defend them not: these errors should be repressed, and I rejoice that no Englishman is infected therewith. It is the manner of their punishment which shocks me. To burn up with fiery flame, blazing with pitch and sulphur, the living bodies of wretched men who err through blindness of judgement rather than deliberate will, is a hard thing and belongs more to the example of Rome than to the spirit of the gospel ... And so I dare for Christ's sake beseech your majesty to spare, if it may be, the lives of these wretched men, at least so far that this horror may be stopped, and changed into another kind of punishment". Quoted and translated in J. F. Mozley, *John Foxe and His Book*, New York, MacMillan, 1940, p. 86-87. See also G. R. Elton, "Persecution and Toleration in the English Reformation", *Studies in Church History* 21: *Persecution and Toleration*, ed. W. J. Shiels, Oxford, Blackwell, 1984, p. 163-187, p. 173-174.

complicity and community, sympathy and purgation, running deep in the culture, that inform the nature and meaning of her suffering.

The Duchess in Darkness

Set in the dungeon, act IV scene ii depicts the last moments of the Duchess' life. At the opening of the prior scene, Bosola tells Ferdinand that his sister bears her imprisonment "Nobly" (IV.i.2). She looks forward to death, and the end of her suffering, but she gives "a majesty to adversity" (6). In the darkness Ferdinand pretends to forgive her, which allows him to trick her into grasping a dead man's hand in place of his own. He has a curtain drawn back to reveal wax likenesses of what the Duchess is told are her husband and children. Ferdinand explains to Bosola that his goal is "To bring her to despair" (118) in order to damn her. He nearly succeeds. Outwardly, the Duchess maintains her self-possession, but hopelessness overwhelms her: "I'll go pray", she says, only to give in to her anguish: "No, / I'll go curse" (92-93). The seasons and the stars fall under her imprecation, which culminates in the plea, "Let heaven, a little while, cease crowning martyrs, / To punish them" (IV.i.104-105). So great is her unjust suffering, she implies, that God himself must be the enemy of innocent victims, rather than their champion. She seems to be as close to surrendering to damnable despair as Ferdinand could wish.

Her final hour is portrayed in scene ii. Perhaps the fullest expression we have of John Webster's darkly creative genius, the scene is by turns cruel, moving, absurd and surprising. It begins with the Duchess discussing her misery with her waiting woman, Cariola. "I am not mad yet", she explains, continuing, "Th'heaven o'er my head seems made of molten brass, / The earth of flaming sulfur, yet I am not mad" (24-25). Fire will not, in the end, be what kills the Duchess, but her psychological state is not unlike that of a woman facing martyrdom, her faith slipping away: fire kindled beneath her while the heavens above seem angry, rather than inviting, threatening a second burning in the life to come. Ferdinand has almost realized his design. When a servant enters to initiate the gruesome masque of madmen the Duchess again invokes the image of a martyr's immolation, telling him "I am chained to endure all your tyranny" (59). The madmen's chatter is all of damnation, devils, and torment – "Hell is a mere glasshouse, where the devils are continually blowing up women's souls on hollow irons, and the fire never goes out" (76-78). There is no conversation here, only the lurid and disjointed ramblings of broken men who talk not to one another but themselves, and it serves to emphasize that the essence of the Duchess' torment is isolation. She may speak to Cariola, Bosola and others in the dungeon but every aspect of her imprisonment is designed to tell her, "you are alone". The real world in which you lived, loved, bore children, mixed with others, has cast you out.

Bosola makes this clear when he enters, disguised as an old man. "I am come to make thy tomb", he tells her (111). She is like one already dead, he explains in a short sermon, "a box of worm seed" (115), continuing, "Didst thou ever see a lark in a cage? Such is the soul in the body" (119-120). She may as well shuck it off, he suggests, and slip out of the world that no longer has a place for her. However, the Duchess recognizes her former Gentleman of Horse, and this stirs her to tighten her grip on the identity Ferdinand wants to prise away. "Am I not thy duchess" she asks, famously declaring when he obfuscates, "I am Duchess of Malfi still"

(124, 131). Men arrive with her coffin and a cord for her throat, and Bosola rings a bell and chants a dirge over her. Cariola is dragged away. The Duchess forgives her executioners, welcomes death and tells the men who loom before her that they will have to “pull heaven down upon [her]” (217). She checks herself however, suggesting that it may not be so far off after all: “Yet stay. Heaven gates are not so highly arched / As princes’ palaces; they that enter there / Must go upon their knees” (218-220). She kneels, and they strangle her, but both the kneeling and the final insight that prompts it, tell us that she does not die in a state of hopeless fatalism. “[S]ome other strangle the children”, Bosola says (224).

Cariola is brought back, to be murdered next to her mistress. Now Ferdinand can return to survey his henchmen’s work. The result is as unexpected for him as it is for us. Stricken by the sight of his sister’s face, he does not repent – it is surely beyond him – but he does lament. He condemns Bosola for obeying his orders, and the two argue over Bosola’s fee, which Ferdinand now refuses to pay. Eventually, Bosola is left alone beside the corpse of his victim-mistress, who revives. He can do no more than lie to her – the children live still, Ferdinand and Antonio are reconciled – and she dies with the final word, “Mercy!” (338). Bosola ends the scene in soliloquy, describing his bottomless guilt and his intention first to obey the Duchess’ wish that her body be prepared for burial by “some good women” (357), and then to have revenge on the ones who used him to destroy her.

Cleansing Fire

So what brings them all to this dreadful hour? When he hears of his sister’s first pregnancy, Ferdinand’s reaction is terrifying and violent. After her death, he admits that he wanted to control the great fortune that would fall to him had the Duchess remained unmarried (IV.ii.267-271). It is a comprehensible motive, but it fails to account for the tidal wave of rage that overtakes him when he learns she has disobeyed him, to say nothing of the cruelty with which he punishes her. As he sees it, her disobedience is not just an impediment to his designs; she has polluted him. The lowborn husband the Duchess has chosen is construed as an infection by a man who is pathologically obsessed with the purity of his blood. Ferdinand excites himself by imagining her lover as “some strong thigh’d bargeman; / Or one o’th’ wood-yard” (II.v.42-3). The Cardinal, coolly and deliberately inflaming his brother’s wrath, wonders, “Shall our blood, / The royal blood of Aragon and Castile, / Be thus attainted? (21-23)”. Ferdinand seizes on the metaphor of tainted blood and declares:

Apply desperate physic:
We must not now use balsamum, but fire,
The smarting cupping-glass, for that’s the mean
To purge infected blood, such blood as hers: –
There is a kind of pity in mine eye,
I’ll give it to my handkercher; and now ‘tis here,
I’ll bequeath this to her bastard.
(II.v.23-29)

The Duchess is strangled, rather than burned, but this fiery language complements the metaphors of burning that she uses in the dungeon. For Ferdinand it is burning in aid of cleansing. Indeed, though brim-full of hatred, Ferdinand nevertheless fantasizes about a

notably clinical act of purgation divorced from emotion. His sister has become a blood infection that must be painfully expelled from a patient. Moments later Antonio and the Duchess are construed as plague-infested corpses that must be destroyed to save a town: "I would have their bodies / Burnt in a coal-pit, with the ventage stopp'd, / That their curs'd smoke might not ascend to heaven" (66-68). Ferdinand continues with the metaphors of burning – the bedclothes the Duchess lies in with her lover should be set alight, their child should be boiled "to a cullis" (69-70, 71) – but the coal-pit fantasy is particularly telling. In it, as Frank Whigham notes, Ferdinand articulates the goal of quarantine.⁹ He wants to destroy the Duchess, her husband and her children, and then erase the evidence. He is imagining an act of cauterizing violence that is, at the same time, sealed off and set apart, that cannot be avenged and, recalling his "handkercher" remark, will not be pitied.

None of this makes the Duchess a martyr as such. But there are nevertheless dynamics in her persecution and death that harmonize with the deep music of Foxe's martyrology. Burning was a special form of execution, reserved for those who had committed crimes of belief, as opposed to crimes of behaviour. On the pragmatic side, the shocking pain it entailed, often drawn out for an hour or more, was a vivid warning to any who might have been tempted to follow the victim in their error. The manner of death also made important symbolic statements about the one who suffered it. First, it foreshadowed the eternal and infinitely worse flames that were to come: William Hunter, a young man martyred during the reign of Mary Tudor was told by a priest, "look how thou burnest here, so shalt thou burn in hell".¹⁰ Second, as Steven Mullaney puts it, burning signified "the total annihilation of the physical body, an erasure of it from existence and memory".¹¹ Thus, the metaphors used by authors in the period and modern historians alike are invariably medical and surgical: the heretic was a tumour that must be excised or a gangrenous limb that must be removed.¹² "Unlike other criminals, whose bodies could be exposed and left to rot", writes David Nicholls, "the heretic had to be utterly destroyed".¹³ He posed the gravest danger to the souls of everyone around him.

⁹ Frank Whigham, *Seizures of the Will in Early Modern English Drama*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 197-198.

¹⁰ J. Foxe, *Acts and Monuments*, p. 1562.

¹¹ Steven Mullaney, "Reforming Resistance: Class, Gender, and Legitimacy in Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*", *Print, Manuscript, & Performance: The Changing Relations of the Media in Early Modern England*, ed. Michael D. Bristol and Arthur F. Marotti, Columbus, Ohio State University Press, 2000, p. 235-251, p. 240.

¹² In 1535, Francis I had declared that he wanted heresy banished from France "in such manner that if one of the arms of my body was infected with this corruption, I would cut it off, and if my children were tainted with it, I would myself offer them in sacrifice". Quoted in Benjamin J. Kaplan, *Divided By Faith: Religious Conflict and the Practice of Toleration in Early Modern Europe*, Cambridge, Belknap, 2007, p. 1.

¹³ David Nicholls, "The Theatre of Martyrdom in the French Reformation", *Past and Present*, 121, 1988, p. 49-73, p. 50. Nicholls writes that burning was "an honour otherwise reserved for witches, homosexuals and those guilty of bestiality, underlining the connection with impurity and 'unnatural acts.' The records of their trials were burned along with them and the ashes scattered to the winds, thereby preventing their burial ... even their memory was meant to be destroyed along with all physical evidence of their existence on this earth and in this polity. This could go as far as pulling down houses" (p. 50).

Family Bonds

Nothing in this cruel play is crueller than the way in which the Duchess' younger children are made suffer and die alongside her. The following exchange takes place when Ferdinand comes to her in the darkness:

FERDINAND Where are your cubs?
 DUCHESS Whom?
 FERDINAND Call them your children;
 For, though our national law distinguish bastards
 From true legitimate issue, compassionate nature
 Makes them all equal.
 (IV.i.33-37)

"Cubs" dubbed children for courtesy's sake. It will not be the last time Ferdinand describes them with such imagery. "The death / Of young wolves", he tells Bosola, "is never to be pitied" (IV.ii.243-244). To him they are predatory vermin, let loose upon his family's lands, and must be culled. However much he believes this, though, the duke's malice is most vivid in the way he uses their suffering to intensify that of their mother. The conversation, in all its transparently false magnanimity ("Call them your children"), is meant to inflame further the wound he is making in her soul. It precedes the unveiling of the waxen likenesses of her dead family, the purpose of which was to make her die without grace.

Foxe ends the 1583 edition of the *Acts and Monuments* by reprinting an oration given by John Hales on the accession of Elizabeth. Hales accuses the old regime of many outrages, among them the violation of familial bonds:

It is a horrible cruelty for one brother to kill another, much more horrible for the children to lay violent and murdering hands on their parents, but most horrible of all to murder the children in the sight of the parents, or the parents in the sight of their children, as these most cruel tormenters have done.¹⁴

Hales' words describe Ferdinand equally well: he does not just destroy the Duchess and the children he refers to as "cubs"; he uses the suffering of her family as an implement of torture. She will ache for what he does to them but even more importantly she will recognize herself to be cut off from the world. If her husband and the children are dead, then the Duchess' most important link to it is severed. And as Ferdinand implies, those links were a sordid embarrassment: the children, as the fruit of an illegitimate union, never should have existed anyway.

Katharine Eisaman Maus notes how Foxe "dilates almost endlessly" upon the martyrs' farewells to their loved ones.¹⁵ Foxe takes especial care to stress moments when a martyred member of the clergy bids family members goodbye in defiance of those who, much like Ferdinand with the Duchess, refuse to acknowledge the legitimacy of clerical marriages or the offspring of such marriages. Indeed, we will see below that the brother's expectations regarding the unmitigated chastity they expect of their sister makes the comparison an

¹⁴ J. Foxe, *Acts and Monuments*, p. 2139.

¹⁵ Katharine Eisaman Maus, *Inwardness and Theater in the English Renaissance*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1995, p. 41.

especially apt one. Rowland Taylor had preached against clerical celibacy in the year following Mary Tudor's accession. When he was examined for heresy in 1554, Taylor was asked if he was married and responded, "I am married indeed, and I have had nine children in holy matrimony, I thank God: and this I am sure of, that your proceedings now at this present in this realm against priest's marriages is the maintenance of the doctrine of devils."¹⁶ At the place of execution Taylor saw his boy Thomas standing with his servant and declared to those assembled, "good people, this is mine own son, begotten of my body in lawful matrimony: and God be blessed for lawful matrimony".¹⁷ When another Marian martyr, Laurence Saunders, was imprisoned and awaiting death, his wife came to visit him carrying their child. Foxe writes that the guard allowed Saunders to hold his child, whereupon the father said he "rejoiced to have such a boy" and asked those present, "what man fearing God would not lose this life present, rather than by prolonging it here, he should adjudge this boy to be a bastard, his wife a whore, and himself a whoremonger?".¹⁸ To apostatize, Saunders knew, would not only mean the betrayal of what he took to be the true faith; it meant tacitly conceding that he was never properly married.

At stake for Foxe's martyrs, as for Webster's Duchess, is not just the affirmation of particular attachments but an abiding sense of interpersonal belonging. Death may change the manner of relation, but not the nature of the relationship. Foxe's recurrent emphasis on the martyrs' families goes beyond debates about clerical celibacy and even beyond his constant effort to depict the Roman church as an institution defined by cruelty and the systematic persecution of the Gospel. Ultimately, it has to do with maintaining the victim within the true church's communal fabric. If the bonds between an executed man or woman and those with whom they were closest can be broken and rendered illegitimate, then the burning merely makes explicit the claim that this person has no place in this life, or in the afterlife. Their membership within the human family is denied, and their status as an irritant or infection to be excised, confirmed. For Foxe's protagonists, though, that membership is sacrificially legitimated even at the very point of death. It is so for the Duchess. Webster's heroine could declare, just like Taylor, "these are mine own children begotten of my body in lawful matrimony" in the teeth of Ferdinand's program of separation and de-legitimization. Indeed, she as much as does so. "You violate a sacrament o' th' church" (IV.i.38) she tells Ferdinand in response to his mention of bastardy. And in the most moving lines in the play, moments before the cord encircles her throat, her thoughts stretch out towards her children, telling Cariola, "I pray thee, look thou giv'st my little boy / Some syrup for his cold, and let the girl / Say her prayers, ere she sleep" (IV.ii.190-192). This expression of an utterly quotidian, domestic instinct may mean that the Duchess has discerned the fraudulence of the "bodies" she was shown. It is more likely though, given her relief at the repentant Bosola's admission after her temporary revival that they were wax models, that she is simply distracted in this moment by confusion and pain. Regardless, the maternal urge she voices here carries with it a commitment to the lives of her dear ones and to life itself. She is still a mother. Death may end her life, and theirs, but in an important sense it cannot sever the ties between them.

¹⁶ J. Foxe, *Acts and Monuments*, p. 1522.

¹⁷ J. Foxe, *Acts and Monuments*, p. 1525.

¹⁸ J. Foxe, *Acts and Monuments*, p. 1497.

Demystified Death

The Duchess's small but telling gesture is of the utmost significance, given the nature of the crime Ferdinand attributes to her. Aristocratic anxiety about the purity of a bloodline is coherent enough. However, his fantasies of cauterization and erasure bespeak the fear of one who sees not merely a piece of his property, but a piece of his own body, escaping his control, inciting a rebellion that may spread to the other members. Whatever the Duke's surface-level motives about inheritance or the family's pedigree, for the Duchess his prohibition against marriage amounts to a prohibition of life itself. The brothers expect a particular kind of purity and perfection from their sister that would lift her out of the natural stream of birth, fruitfulness, death and decay. They want her frozen. "Marry! they are most luxurious / Will wed twice," remarks Ferdinand, continuing, "Their livers are more spotted / Than Laban's sheep" (I.i.289-290, 290-291). She is expected to remain set apart, and she realizes it. When she woos Antonio, she tells him:

This is flesh and blood, sir;
'Tis not the figure cut in alabaster
Kneels at my husband's tomb. Awake, awake, man!
I do here put off all vain ceremony,
And only do appear to you a young widow
That claims you for her husband, and like a widow,
I use but half a blush in't.
(I.i.441-447)

She is not made of stone, and she will suffer for it. She is mutable and therefore both fallible and mortal. The Duchess is martyred by the ultra-fastidious Ferdinand and the cold, emotionless Cardinal because she refuses to be other than human – imperfect, impulsive, "flesh and blood". Her alleged transgression comes in her very normalcy, insofar as the brothers have decided that the desires that she shares with the audience members are criminal. She asks Ferdinand, "Why should only I, / Of all the other princes of the world, / Be cas'd up, like a holy relic?" (III.ii.136-138). Ferdinand does not wait until the third act to begin dehumanizing the Duchess; she is already dehumanized for him, as a statue is dehumanized. Her comparison of herself to a relic is an apt one. A relic is a holy object, but it is also a dead one, and the form of purity expected of her has much less to do with sanctity than lifeless sterility, a sterility that Ferdinand, all but choking on images of burning and cleansing, will try to encompass with her death when his threats are known to have failed. The Duchess may actively put herself in jeopardy by breaking the prohibition she is under, but we have to identify with her, because she wants to identify with us: the prohibition she faces is a prohibition of life. For defying it, she is tortured and murdered.

When the Duchess ignores his demand of perpetual celibacy, Ferdinand tries despair: if she will not live as a monument, petrified, let her soul be petrified within her. Both attempts fail. When bidding Cariola farewell, the Duchess notes with mingled irony and tenderness that she is unable to leave any inheritance for the loyal waiting-woman (IV.ii.186-189). If the thought is a grim one, it also reflects a sense of mindfulness that, whatever her suffering, she is not alone in the world. The lines precede that last remark to Cariola about the children. These statements, along with her "I am" declaration, the prayers that succeed the period of

cursing, and even the macabre drolleries she trades with Bosola on the subject of her coffin (IV.ii.140-153), all suggest a continued refusal to comply with the brothers' wishes and subtract herself mentally from existence before the garrotte encircles her neck.

In such moments, the Duchess participates in what I have elsewhere identified as a theme of demystification, a marked preoccupation of Foxe's martyrology.¹⁹ There is nothing otherworldly about the Duchess in her last minutes. Though she draws back from life-hating nihilism she is not transported by visions of radiant bliss but is anchored in the world. Before and after she regains her composure with Bosola she voices a desire to die, however the tenor in which she does so is different. In act IV, scene i she fantasizes darkly about various modes of death, finally demanding of Bosola, "Who must dispatch me? / I do account this world a tedious theatre, / For I do play a part against my will" (80-82). After the consolidation of her spirits in the next scene, she talks about death in a different tone. "Peace", she tells Cariola, who quails when Bosola states that time is up, "it affrights me not" (160). A little later Bosola probes for anxiety asking, "Doth not death fright you?" (196). She responds: "Who would be afraid on't, / Knowing to meet such excellent company / In th'other world" (197-199). She does not seek death out, but she is reconciled to it, indeed it is the "best gift" her brothers can now give her (211). The shift marks the difference between seeing death as a rejection of a life made hateful – "I long to bleed" (IV.i.106) – and seeing it as an end to suffering and perhaps a removal to a better world.

The Duchess walks what may seem a questionable line between the martyr and the suicide: the one allowing her life to be taken, in defence of conviction, the other throwing her life away. Montaigne in the *Essays* or John Donne in *Biathanatos*, his unpublished defence of suicide, thought the barrier between them was porous, but writers in the martyrological tradition went to some lengths to defend their subjects from any charge that they wanted death for its own sake.²⁰ Nevertheless, in recounting the martyrs' tribulations Foxe never shrinks from moments where the victims express a desire for a quick death to end their pain. When Nicholas Ridley faced burning in 1556 he told the blacksmith chaining him to the stake, "good fellow knock it in hard, for the flesh will have his course".²¹ Ridley expected no miraculous gift of fortitude to prevent him from feeling the terrible heat of the flames and recoiling from them.²² John Knott notes that in the *Acts and Monuments* there is nothing like

¹⁹ David K. Anderson, *Martyrs and Players*, p. 113-116.

²⁰ In "A Custom of the Isle of Cea," Montaigne catalogues classical cases of suicide with circumspect admiration and notes the ancient Christian custom of honouring as martyrs women who killed themselves in order to preserve their chastity. Michel de Montaigne, "A Custom of the Isle of Cea," *Essays*, trans. Donald M. Frame, New York, Everyman's Library, 2003, p. 305-318, p. 312. Donne's *Biathanatos*, a thorny, perplexing and deliberately equivocal defense of self-inflicted death, also questions the line between suicide and martyrdom, suggesting that the latter offered the early Christian a manner of dispensing with his life which the prohibition against suicide had otherwise foreclosed. John Donne, *Biathanatos*, ed. Ernest W. Sullivan, Newark, University of Delaware Press, 1984, p. 70. In his magisterial survey of pan-European martyrdom in the Reformation era, Brad Gregory notes that Protestant writers, wary of the charge that their subjects willingly sought death, tended to figure martyrdom in terms that were almost "exclusively negative", as "a duty not to compromise the Gospel rather than avidly to pursue the supreme act of self-sacrifice". Brad S. Gregory, *Salvation at Stake: Christian Martyrdom in Early Modern Europe*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1999, p. 280.

²¹ J. Foxe, *Acts and Monuments*, p. 1770.

²² Foxe records a number of cases where a victim would be offered a bag or bladder of gunpowder in order to hasten the burning and allow for a quicker death, which in no way compromised their status as martyrs in his eyes.

the “analgesic state” found in medieval martyrologies, where pain is miraculously transmuted into a rapturous, and often eroticized union between God and the victim.²³ Foxe’s martyrs generally feel pain, and often give voice to that feeling, but they do not recant. The altogether sympathetic desire that the act of dying be as quick as possible exists alongside the firm resolve to face it with constancy. Their faith is proved not because they transcend the agony, but because it is borne with prayerful dignity.

The Duchess does not transcend her circumstances or her execution, but neither do they reduce her; they stain Bosola and the brothers, but they do not stain her. She is enhanced by the ugliness of her last moments. Dressed as an old man, Bosola toys with her before the end and recites a dirge about the necessity of death:

Of what is’t fools make such vain keeping?
Sin their conception, their birth weeping;
Their life a general mist of error,
Their death a hideous storm of terror.
(IV.ii.173-176)

In the previous scene the Duchess might have acceded to this view of life, but now her comportment gives it the lie. There are no storms of terror when she is strangled; she simply kneels and lets them kill her (223). Her refutation of the last line implicitly refutes the other claims in the passage: the Duchess’s life was not a mist of error, nor were the conceptions of her children sin. One can assume that Ferdinand wanted her death to be more like Cariola’s, who tries to be brave, claiming, “I will die with her” (189), but falters badly. When the executioner approaches her, Cariola begs, lies (inventing an engagement and a pregnancy), bites, and scratches (225-240). No one could be faulted for panicking in this moment, but Webster clearly wants to distinguish her desperation from the Duchess’s composure. The manner in which the Duchess undergoes her unjust death, calmly, with neither fear nor grandiosity, blights Ferdinand’s desire that she die as a damned criminal, as though in validation of her murder. In a sense, her bearing, unaided by supernatural palliatives, is as great a vindication as the heavens opening above her would be. In accepting and even welcoming death it is as though she looks past it, at the life for which she so readily risked all – life risked on behalf of life, lived fully and according to her own, not Ferdinand’s, sense of its right constitution. Instead of the rupture Ferdinand desires, we have continuity with that life. The woman kneeling before the strangler is “Duchess of Malfi still”, the young woman who used but “half a blush” in paying court to the man she loved, the wife who jested with her husband at her toilette, the mother who tried desperately to shepherd her children away from the predators that stalked them. And so now, more than ever, the audience’s sympathy is alienated from Ferdinand’s program. Pity cannot erase the Duchess’s suffering, but it can affirm her, and refute the lie that her death is a necessary good.

See the case of John Hooper, one-time bishop of Worcester and Gloucester, put to death in the Marian persecution. Hooper refused to recant but accepted gunpowder from a sympathetic guard. Gunpowder was no guarantee of a speedy end, however, and Foxe gives us a grueling account of what Hooper suffered in the fire when the bladders broke, and it was carried away by the wind. Foxe extols Hooper’s patience throughout the grievous process, as he prayed for God’s mercy. However, Hooper also begged the onlookers to hasten his death, crying “For God’s love (good people) let me have more fire”. J. Foxe, *Acts and Monuments*, p. 1533-1535.

²³ John R. Knott, “John Foxe and the Joy of Suffering”, *Sixteenth Century Journal*, 27, 1996, p. 721-734, p. 723.

Pity finally escapes from the handkerchief and overtakes Ferdinand himself, sliding between his ribs like a dagger, from behind. "Why didst not thou pity her?" he asks Bosola, going on to explain that the latter should have defied him, and rescued the sister from her brother's malice. As though he had inadvertently stepped into a massacre he had no role in perpetrating he asks, in a complete abdication of responsibility, "By what authority didst thou execute / This bloody sentence?" (iv.ii.282-283). There is nothing redemptive in the pity Ferdinand feels now; it only fills his mind with something like the torment the Duchess has escaped from. The man who had referred to the children he murdered as "wolves" and "cubs" will shortly beg for swords to "Rip up his flesh", and try to kill the wolf inside of him (v.ii.19). However, the Jacobean audiences who first watched the tragedy, might have been provoked by more than just pity. They might have found it powerful in part because it hinted at other victims, all too real, who had been made to suffer and die for crimes of conscience, not far from the Blackfriars theatre. Webster's *Duchess* fits neatly into conception of human dignity that was especially resonant in this moment of Christian history, following a century when hundreds of ordinary men and women had been burned or eviscerated in attempts not just to punish their error but to excise them from the human community. It was part of Foxe's mission to assert that they were rooted in that community more deeply than their persecutors knew. So too is the Duchess.

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