



“A little point, a kind of nothing”: the final scene (v.v) of *The Duchess of Malfi*¹

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“If great art makes us confront the profoundest meanings of life, *Duchess* is hardly art at all; because it literally doesn’t mean much”.² Thus the American literary critic Kenneth Rexroth sums up his reading of the play. He goes on to say that though the play “is not a nerve tonic or a moral stimulant”, it is “very great entertainment and its own excuse for being”. While it would be far-fetched to label John Webster a Wildean aesthete, producing sensational art for art’s sake, there is certainly an impression at least of a moral void at the end of the play. The “abysm of deliberate evil”,³ as Rexroth defines it, ends with the deaths of the main protagonists, including the sources of that deliberate evil, Ferdinand and the Cardinal, as well as its principal agent, Bosola. Previously, it is the innocent who have been its victims – the Duchess, Antonio, their children, the maid Cariola. As the body count grows in the final scene, how does Webster manage the conclusion to his grim, dark tragedy, which, if Rexroth is right, doesn’t mean much? Do Delio’s somewhat prim, moralizing lines in the final speech in the play themselves *mean* anything? How to clear the stage, make a final impression on the spectator, is a major challenge for any dramatist. How does Webster manage it?

Act v, scene v is far from being the longest in the play. Seven other scenes are longer, and four are three or four times longer: I.i, III.ii, IV.ii, V.ii. Yet a huge amount of action is packed into its 120 lines. There are no fewer than four violent deaths; and Antonio had died, killed by Bosola – “Such a mistake as I have often seen / In a play” (a fleeting meta-theatrical instant) – at the end of the preceding scene, barely a dozen lines previously. His lifeless body is present throughout v.v. This is no neat, rule-governed fencing match as in *Hamlet*, but an unruly brawl, worthy of the Capulets and Montagus, with the mad Ferdinand stabbing his brother, already wounded by Bosola, and in the mêlée, also mortally wounding Bosola himself, who has just mortally wounded him (Ferdinand). Recapitulating it thus makes it sound grotesque, almost comical. There is nothing orderly

¹ References are to the Norton Critical Edition: John Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi*, ed. Michael Neill, New York and London, W.W. Norton and Company, 2015.

² Kenneth Rexroth, “*The Duchess of Malfi*”, *The Saturday Review*, 4 March 1967, p. 21.

³ K. Rexroth, “*The Duchess of Malfi*”, p. 21.

or decorous about it. And the chaotic swirl embodies, physically and visually in the theatre, the moral chaos ambient in the play's world. A moral message, or "mean[ing]", in the sense that Rexroth's judgement implies, perhaps there is not. But Webster deftly manages a fitting ending, in perfect keeping with the aesthetic and thematic data, of both his subject material and his handling of it up to this point. I want to suggest that, amid the pile of bodies, and with the bitter aftertaste of the tragedy's action so strikingly *there*, Webster has little choice but to assign to Delio, the only character of consequence still alive, the play's concluding, bleak moral – if that is what it is.

It will be helpful to begin with a few simple statistics concerning the scene's construction. First, though we may note that it is almost entirely in verse, except for the mad speech by Ferdinand (55-60), which all editors have set as prose since Alexander Dyce (1830),⁴ despite its setting as verse in the Quarto of 1623: in this play-world, madmen speak in prose (see IV.ii). The scene is dominated by three characters who are also among the principal personages of the play: the Cardinal, Ferdinand, Bosola. Among them, they speak three-quarters of the 120 lines in the scene: Bosola 42, Cardinal 32, Ferdinand 19 (counting half-lines as whole lines, and taking account of Ferdinand's lines 55-60 set as prose). Thus the three main agents of evil are brought together in the bloody finale. It is the only scene in which these three principals appear together; previously we have seen Bosola with the Cardinal or, more briefly, with Ferdinand, and the two brothers have appeared together several times. It seems that Webster knew that the only possible dénouement was to bring together at last the producers and directors of the multiple acts of horror that have been staged throughout the play – and to have them destroy one another, in a final grotesque orgy.

The other characters in the scene are mere onlookers or commentators, or like the anonymous servant, casual victims of the gratuitous violence that is the very way of this play-world. Not one of them, not even Delio, the sole surviving voice of calm and reason, speaks more than a dozen lines. The corpse-littered stage is mute testimony to the vileness and poison of the play's world, and the strangled, blood-stained remains of all those earlier victims hover, as it were, over the desolate scene. One can imagine a staging in which they return – the Duchess, Antonio, the children, Cariola, Julia – in silent, accusing vigil, like the ghosts of Richard's victims in his dream on the eve of Bosworth in *Richard III*. A thoughtful director might position them on the set so as to recall the appearance of the madmen in IV.ii; perhaps even reprise the "kind of dismal music" in that scene.

It is customary in Elizabethan and Jacobean tragedies and history plays to have a surviving good or sympathetic character, albeit usually a secondary one (as the principals are dead), or an authority figure (ruler, governor, heir to the throne...), or sometimes both, speak the concluding lines, including the inevitable *sententiæ*: for example, Albany (or Edgar, depending on whether one is referring to the Quarto or the Folio text) in *King Lear*, the Bastard Faulconbridge in *King John*, the young Edward III in *Edward II*, Malcolm in *Macbeth*, the Prince in *Romeo and Juliet*, Richmond in *Richard III*, Horatio and Fortinbras in *Hamlet*. In *The Duchess of Malfi*, it is Delio, friend and confidant of Antonio, and apparently guardian of his son (who appears but does not speak in the concluding scene), who delivers the final lines. He may be a secondary character, but Webster has kept him in the

⁴ John Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi*, in *The Works of John Webster: Now First Collected, with Some Account of the Author and Notes*, ed. Rev. Alexander Dyce, 4 vol., London, William Pickering, 1830, vol. 1.

audience's consciousness: he appears in eight of the play's eighteen scenes, including the initial ones in acts III and V, as well as act I. He opened the play with Antonio, he closes it with his friend's son.⁵ The other courtiers, Pescara, Malateste, Roderigo, Grisolan, are too insignificant among the *dramatis personæ* to be given the closing lines, though their presence on stage in the finale is an attempt to create an impression of a sort of continuity and survival, even amid "this great ruin" (v.v.109). These virtually anonymous men – there is no woman present in the play's finale (in fact there is no woman left in the play after Julia's death in v.ii) – seem to represent life as usual, as normal, in this hideously abnormal court. But in the far-from-normal world of Webster's play, and amid the ghastly jumble of corpses at their feet, they are mere ciphers. Webster also has Delio voice what one critic has called the play's central irony, in the oxymoron: "Unfortunate Fortune!" (II.iv.82).⁶ And in the opening scene, he and Antonio give the characters of the principals: Bosola (I.i.22-28), then the three siblings, the Cardinal, Ferdinand and the Duchess (I.i.147-202). After Antonio's death, Delio becomes naturally the sole spokesman for normality; a tough assignment and a precarious podium amid the pools of blood. While it may sound weakly desperate in the context, it is notable that he utters the play's only image of the *sun* in "this gloomy world" of mist, darkness and horror (v.v.114-15), and only at the very end, in an extended simile about the evanescence of worldly power and grandeur:

These wretched eminent things
 Leave no more fame behind 'em than should one
 Fall in a frost and leave his print in snow –
 As soon as the sun shines, it ever melts
 Both form and matter.
 (v.v.111-15)

"These wretched eminent things" echoes that "central irony" that Hereward Price identified. We shall return to that final tableau in conclusion.

The attacks that cause the four deaths that occur in the scene are bunched within the first half: the servant killed by Bosola, his repeated stabbing of the Cardinal, Ferdinand's wild attack upon his brother, the accidental wounding of Bosola, Bosola's fatal wounding of Ferdinand – all occur within thirty densely packed lines (33-63), which seems almost perfunctory. Webster's dramaturgy has sometimes been faulted.⁷ But he is more interested in characterization: the dying speeches of the main characters are accorded several lines each. It is striking that Bosola is given by far the greatest number of lines after receiving his death-wound: after line 60, mid-point of the scene, he speaks no fewer

⁵ Editors have expressed some puzzlement as to the coherence of this remark: although Pescara clearly says (II.105-106) that he is Antonio's son and heir, and Delio then invites the others to assist him to "establish this young hopeful gentleman / In's mother's right", there is an explicit reference by Ferdinand to the Duchess's son by her first marriage, at III.iii.69-70: "Write to the Duke of Malfi, my young nephew / She had by her first husband". What "right" might accrue to this son of the Duchess and Antonio is unclear. He has in any case escaped the slaughter of the children in IV.ii. Historically, the heir to the dukedom, the Duchess's son by her first marriage, succeeded to the throne and reigned until his death in 1559 (see J. Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi*, ed. Brian Gibbons, 4th edition, New Mermaids, London, A&C Black, 2001, p. xi).

⁶ Hereward T. Price, "The Function of Imagery in Webster", *PMLA*, 70, 1955, p. 717-739. Reprinted in *Elizabethan Drama: Modern Essays in Criticism*, ed. Ralph J. Kaufmann, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1961; repr. 1968, p. 225-249, p. 242.

⁷ John Russell Brown surveys succinctly the divided judgements as to Webster's dramatic achievement: J. Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi*, ed. John Russell Brown, The Revels Plays, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1974; repr. 1986, p. xvii-l. J. R. Brown's introduction, and that of B. Gibbons in his New Mermaids edition of the play, both offer perceptive critical commentary.

than 28 lines, in a scene of 120 lines, that is, nearly a quarter of the scene's total, and virtually half of all the lines spoken from that point to the end of the scene. Indeed, he has more than a third of all the lines in the scene. It is almost as if Webster wanted the ambivalent Bosola to appear as the anti-hero of the play, but decorum would not allow it, for he is as guilty as the "Aragonian brethren" (v.v.80) whose instrument he has been, though as a dramatic character he is more three-dimensional than they, and has far more self-knowledge. There is a sense too that after he is mortally wounded, the rest is anti-climactic; Ferdinand then the Cardinal utter their respective dying words, then Bosola is given the final and longest valedictory speech: "In a mist ... Mine is another voyage" (92-103). After that, Delio's voice of reason and faint hope seems feeble indeed, as he stands with a boy amidst the carnage. Bosola has a conscience of a sort, but too little, too late:

He has found something he needs; but he has not changed. He still dissimulates instinctively and murders; although the duchess "haunts" him, his world is still "gloomy" and "fearful". He knows what worthy men should do and that his "is another voyage", to death; he dies, as he had lived, alone.⁸

The scene begins with the Cardinal alone, reading a book. As editors have noted, this is a conventional stage sign of melancholy, citing Hamlet among others.⁹ Reading a treatise, perhaps by the Spanish Dominican Luis de Granada, the Cardinal quickly becomes impatient and discards the book: "Lay him by" (v.v.4). He echoes these very words in his last speech: "Let me / Be laid by and never thought of" (87-88). We may recall, as Webster may well have done, Faustus's impatience with philosophy and theology, as well as the other scholarly disciplines, in the opening scene of Marlowe's play. He too was reading about death, sin and hell: "The reward of sin is death. That's hard. / ... Ay, we must die an everlasting death. / What doctrine call you this ...? / ... Divinity, adieu!"¹⁰ The introduction of allusions to hell in the very first lines of the scene and the Cardinal's admission of a guilty conscience (yet another belated, inadequate confession), set the tone for the ensuing chaos and slaughter, another kind of mad scene, with the bleak absence of any redeeming optimism, despite Delio's rather desperate plea to the survivors at the very end to "make noble use / Of this great ruin" (108-109) and to help him to guarantee the inheritance of Antonio's son. The "thing armed with a rake" (6) that the Cardinal thinks he has seen in his fishpond, seeming to strike at him, will very shortly become embodied – Bosola, armed not with a rake but with a sword, emerging from some "deep pit of darkness" (99), to strike at him, fatally. There is no glimmer of repentance in the Cardinal, despite his acknowledgement of a guilty conscience; so much for the priestly vocation in Webster's utterly fallen world.

The Cardinal's despair – a mortal sin – has its counterpart in his brother's lycanthropy (diagnosed by the Doctor in v.ii) and evident madness. Ferdinand's recourse to animal imagery in his very brief appearance in the scene (46-71) is significant: he first calls for a

⁸ J. R. Brown, "Introduction", J. Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi*, ed. J. R. Brown, p. li.

⁹ See for example J. Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi*, ed. J. R. Brown, v.v.o.1n.

¹⁰ Christopher Marlowe, *Doctor Faustus*, ed. David Bevington and Eric Rasmussen, *The Revels Plays*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1993; A-text, l.i.41-50. While Webster may have had in mind a work of Luis de Granada, it is anachronistic to imagine the Cardinal reading him. The historical events of the play took place near the end of the fifteenth century and in the early years of the sixteenth; Luis lived from 1504 to 1588. There were English translations of some of his works and extracts from others available to Webster; for example, two collections of extracts translated by Thomas Lodge, published in 1601 and 1609.

horse (46), then thinks himself one (64), and likens the world to a dog kennel (65), before seeming “to come to himself” (67) and remembering, at last, his sister (69). It is as if Webster has lost interest in Ferdinand at this point. What is left for him except violent death, with a mere flicker of recognition? “My sister, oh, my sister! There’s the cause on’t”. The proverbial couplet that follows, about diamonds cutting diamonds, hardly constitutes incisive self-knowledge.

Bosola’s case is by far the most interesting, in terms of Webster’s psychological dramaturgy. Una Ellis-Fermor wrote:

Our interest in the figure of Bosola ... is not mainly because, in the service of Ferdinand’s mania, he murders the Duchess and brings about unwittingly the death of Antonio, but because of the strange discrepancy between the man he appears, the man he would be and the man that, unknown to himself, he really is. Our interest is intense, first because we are watching the slow permeation of his outer consciousness by this inner self – “An actor in the main of all, / Much ‘gainst mine own good nature ...” – and then because, when this self-knowledge has cleared away all illusion, he stands for a moment as near to truth as a man can stand ... In comparison with this, the ruin brought upon him by his own belated resolve to “be mine own example” is only incidental ...¹¹

As noted above, Bosola dominates the scene, in terms of lines spoken and action generated, from his dramatic entrance at line 7 with the servant bearing the body of Antonio, just after the Cardinal’s monologue, until his death, the ultimate one of the death-filled play, at line 102. That is, he is onstage, alive and vigorously active, for all but 24 lines of the 120-line scene, four-fifths of the whole. And in fact, in dramatic terms, the final brief exchange between Pescara, Malateste and Delio, with the latter’s concluding monologue, are anti-climactic. The play proper, I would suggest, effectively ends with Bosola’s death. The rest is, if not silence, inconsequential postlude. Why then, in a play entitled *The Duchess of Malfi*, does the author murder the titular protagonist (and her children) in act IV, scene ii, dispose of her sympathetic husband in the penultimate scene, and leave the stage and the rest of the action to her despicable siblings and her murderers? Does the answer lie in John Webster’s curious fascination with evil pure and simple, with motiveless malignity?

In the film *Shakespeare in Love*, a young Jack Webster is shown sitting in the gutter, feeding dead rats to his cat. It is a filmmaker’s in-joke, of course, intended for the *cognoscenti* among the audience. Those who are familiar with Webster’s plays, at least the two best-known, *The White Devil* and *The Duchess of Malfi*, would get the not-so-subtle point about his fascination with the macabre and gruesome, death and violence – the dark side – and hence its later manifestation in his major plays. In the final section of this examination of the concluding scene of *The Duchess of Malfi*, I want to identify the image groups that Webster emphasizes throughout the play, and their culmination in that last scene.

Dr Johnson famously opined that Shakespeare could not resist a pun. We might suggest that Webster could not resist a striking or shocking image. But he was a master of imagery. As Price remarks, critics would do well to “recognize the stern consistency with which Webster developed his elaborate imagery”; if so, he adds, “they would be able to see that Shakespeare was doing very much the same sort of thing”.¹² The density of imagery in *The Duchess of Malfi* is one of its most striking features. Images of disease, decay, putrefaction, and of obscurity, error and deceit occur with such frequency in the

¹¹ Una Ellis-Fermor, *The Jacobean Drama*, London, Methuen, 1936, repr. 1965, p. 176.

¹² H. T. Price, “The Function of Imagery in Webster”, p. 249.

text that they inevitably colour critical readings and aesthetic judgements of the whole work. Nearly as numerous are animal images, often in contexts where they have negative connotations. In the very first scene, Antonio, speaking to Delio of the French court, employs such terms as "poison" (I.i.14), "Death and diseases" (I.i.15), "corruption" (I.i.18), and when Bosola enters, he is "the only court gall" (I.i.23), who "Would be as lecherous, covetous, or proud, / Bloody, or envious, as any man, / If he had means to be so" (I.i.26-28). Bosola himself likens the brothers to "plum trees that grow crooked over standing pools ... stagnant with fruit" (I.i.48-50). "[C]rows, pies, and caterpillars", "horse-leech", "hawks and dogs", "crutches", all figure in his catalogue (I.i.50-63); places at court are likened to beds in hospitals (I.i.65). "Blackbirds", "dog-days", and "devil" (I.i.37-38, 44-45) occur in his short speeches addressed to the Cardinal. Antonio's concluding lines on the subject of Bosola contain the terms "foul melancholy", "poison", "inward rust unto the soul", "black malcontents", "moths in cloth" (I.i.73-79). All of these images are packed into the first eighty lines of the play's first scene.

Images of foulness, excrement and putrefaction are Bosola's normal mode of expression. The evanescence of human existence is a related, persistent theme. They are most strikingly and memorably deployed in his interview with the Duchess just before her murder: "Thou art a box of wormseed, at best but a salvatory of green mummy. What's this flesh? A little crudded milk, fantastical puff paste" (IV.ii.115-117). He had earlier spoken of his corruption growing out of horse dung (I.i.278-279), and tainted his present of apricots to the Duchess, telling her the gardener had ripened them in horse dung (II.i.135-137). He alludes to his own melancholy, noted by Antonio in the opening scene, at the end of act V, scene ii (345). This, with its associations of despair and nihilism, colours his language in his final few speeches. Our title quotes his mocking farewell to the Cardinal: "I do glory / That thou, which stood'st like a huge pyramid / Begun upon a large and ample base, / Shall end in a little point, a kind of nothing" (V.v.74-76). He himself, "i'th' end / Neglected" (84-85), is "in a mist", like the fools whom he scorned in his dirge for the Duchess (IV.ii.175). Dead walls, ruined graves are his dying images of "this gloomy world" (106), "or deep pit of darkness" (107). All of the rotten fruit, the corrupted flesh, the dung, all of the blood, innocent as well as guilty, are swallowed in that gaping pit, the pit of hell itself.

Five bodies lying on the stage (plus the others in previous scenes), and the ring of ineffectual bystanders testify to the pointlessness of it all. It is Bosola's imagery that defines the final tableau. Delio's brave and optimistic lines do little, we must feel, to alleviate the bleakness of the scene, and the absurdity of so many lives ruined and wasted. He even borrows the play's final image from Bosola's nihilistic repertoire, as quoted above: "These wretched eminent things / ... As soon as the sun shines, it ever melts / Both form and matter" (111-115). In the very last lines of *Romeo and Juliet*, the Prince concludes: "A glooming peace this morning with it brings; / The sun for sorrow will not show his head".³³ In Delio's image, the sun does "show his head", but only to melt, obliterate, and annihilate all trace of "form and matter", leaving "a kind of nothing". If there is nothing left, can it *mean* anything?

It is perhaps outmoded, or in any case unnecessary, to seek for *meaning* in *The Duchess of Malfi*. *Must* it *mean*? Not in that sense, necessarily. As the poet and critic

³³ *Romeo and Juliet*, ed. Jill Levenson, The Oxford Shakespeare, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000, v.iii.305-306.

Archibald MacLeish famously asserted, "A poem should not mean / But be".¹⁴ Or, as Rexroth put it, the play is its own excuse for being.¹⁵ Webster's achievement should rather be considered in purely literary terms: dramatic structure, characterization, language, style, imagery, poetics, among others. His sceptical vision, embodied in imagery and language, most notably that of Bosola, is incorporated in the very design and fabric of his play. As Brian Gibbons remarks, in this, "Webster's model is predominantly Shakespeare".¹⁶

¹⁴ Archibald MacLeish, "Ars Poetica", 1926, *Collected Poems, 1917-1952*, Boston, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1985, p. 106, l. 23-24.

¹⁵ K. Rexroth, "*The Duchess of Malfi*", p. 21.

¹⁶ B. Gibbons, "Introduction", J. Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi*, ed. Brian Gibbons, p. xviii.