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**'The Duchess of Malfi: *a Theological Approach*'**

UNTIL COMPARATIVELY RECENTLY the standard view of The Duchess of Malfi was of a melodrama distinguished by its poetry. Today the tendency is to see the play in more or less existentialist terms. To John Russell Brown, for instance, the play is 'a unity of empirical, responsible, sceptical, unsurprised, and deeply perceptive concern for the characters and society portrayed'.[**(1)**](http://www.johnwebster.galeon.com/40_essays.htm#(1)) Similarly J. R. Mulryne speaks of the dramatist's 'restless, mocking intelligence', [**(2)**](http://www.johnwebster.galeon.com/40_essays.htm#(2)) while Robert Ornstein believes that Webster

presents in art the skeptical, pragmatic nominalism of the late Renaissance; the weariness with meaningless abstraction and endless debates over words. [**(3)**](http://www.johnwebster.galeon.com/40_essays.htm#(3))

To my mind the more recent view is as far from the truth as the older one. Although they contain characters like Flamineo, Bosola, and Romelio, Webster's plays reveal, I would argue, an outlook not pragmatic but dogmatic, not wearily nominalist but vigorously didactic, not sceptical but fideistic. And the faith upon which Webster's world-view rests is, it seems to me, that of Jacobean Anglicanism. By discussing *The Duchess of Malfi* in the light of the views of the Jacobean Church of England, particularly on providence and free will, grace, security, and despair, the limitations of evil and the sovereignty of God, I hope to demonstrate what seems to me basic to an understanding of the play-that it is essentially a work of theodicy.

An examination of the character and motives of Ferdinand might seem an unpromising first step towards justifying this assertion. The Duke's behaviour is so irrational, his reaction to his sister's marriage so disproportionately violent, that it seems inexplicable except as insanity. The problem is aggravated by Ferdinand's reluctance to explain his actions (see, for instance, I.i.275-6 and III.ii.127 ff.), and by his one muddled and unconvincing attempt to 'examine well the cause' of his behaviour. His admission of avarice, of hopes —'(Had she continu'd widow) to have gain'd / An infinite masse of Treasure by her death,' (IV.ii.303-4), [**(4)**](http://www.johnwebster.galeon.com/40_essays.htm#(4)) reads like evasion, or an attempt to rationalise motives too terrible to face.

What these motives are Webster reveals obliquely, through images of fire, storm, darkness, hell, and animal savagery. [**(5)**](http://www.johnwebster.galeon.com/40_essays.htm#(5)) Closely patterning these images, Webster establishes, within the frame work of theme and character, three interrelated levels of motivation, all of them contributing to an understanding of. the suffering and death of the Duchess, and of the remorse and retribution attending her murderers.

At the simplest level, it is clear that with Ferdinand Webster started from the traditional concept of the choleric man, just as he based the Cardinal on the phlegmatic, the Duchess on the sanguine, and Bosola on the melancholic. The images of fire which characterise the Duke's speech thus aptly mirror his fierce energy and ungovernable temper. From the touchy rebuke of I.i.124-6 to his final admission that he is consumed by 'a fire, as great as my revenge, / Which nev'r will slacke, till it have spent his fuell' (IV.i.168-9), we see the accuracy of Pescara's comment:

Marke Prince *Ferdinand*,   
A very *Salamander* lives in's eye,   
To mocke the eager violence of fire. (III.iii.58-60)

In revealing what Antonio rightly calls a 'perverse, and turbulent Nature', the storm imagery is equally appropriate. The Duchess is optimistic that 'time will easily / Scatter the tempest' (I.i.539-40), but in II.v Ferdinand loses control of himself so completely that his brother has to rebuke him for making himself 'So wild a Tempest' (II.v.24). The Duke himself seizes on the metaphor:

Would I could be one,  
That I might tosse her pallace 'bout her eares,  
Roote up her goodly forrests, blast her meades,  
And lay her generall territory as wast,  
As she hath done her honors. (II.v.25-9)

The fire and storm images symbolise more than choler, however. In II.v a second level of motive emerges with Ferdinand's obsessive linking of fire with his sister, the Duchess. When the Cardinal says, 'Shall our blood / (The royall blood of *Arragon*, and *Castile*) / Be thus attaincted?' (II.v.30-2), Ferdinand cries,

Apply desperate physicke—  
We must not now use Balsamum, but fire,  
The smarting cupping-glasse, for that's the meane  
To purge infected blood, (such blood as hers:)  
(II.v.33-6)

A little later he implies that the fire is burning within himself:

Goe to (Mistris.)  
'Tis not your whores milke, that shall quench my wild-fire,  
But your whores blood. (II.v.62-4)

It is not only the link between fire and blood which is significant, but also the different meanings which blood has for the brothers. To the Cardinal it is synonymous with rank or lineage; but to Ferdinand it is, as Inga-Stina Ekeblad first pointed out, literally his sister's blood. [**(6)**](http://www.johnwebster.galeon.com/40_essays.htm#(6)) This distinction is part of the evidence adduced by critics in favour of incestuous jealousy as Ferdinand's motive for persecuting his sister. Since the play has been thoroughly combed for signs of this unnatural (and perhaps unconscious) passion, the matter need not be gone over in detail. [**(7)**](http://www.johnwebster.galeon.com/40_essays.htm#(7)) All that needs saying here is that the fires and storms which rage inside Ferdinand are those of lust as well as of choler.

Alongside this complex pattern of motives and emotions, resting on the twin connotations of storm and fire as metaphors for anger and lust, Webster develops a third level, more important than either:

I would have their bodies  
Burn't in a coale-pit, with the ventage stop'd,  
That their curs'd smoake might not ascend to Heaven:  
Or dippe the sheetes they lie in, in pitch or sulphure,  
Wrap them in't, and then light them like a match: (II.v.87-91)

Webster draws on the traditional association of fire and wind with hell to reinforce the frequent images of devils and witchcraft, and to establish them in the pattern of meaning and motive. The relationship is brought out explicitly in V.iv, when the courtiers comment on the storm which had raged earlier:

*Grisolan:* 'Twas a foule storme to-night.  
*Roderigo:* The Lord Ferdinand's chamber shooke like an Ozier.  
*Malateste:* 'Twas nothing but pure kindnesse in the Divell,   
To rocke his owne child. (V.iv.23-6)

One might not, perhaps, take seriously this hint at a direct relationship between Ferdinand's violence and that of the elements, and of demonic origins for both, were it not part of an elaborate and carefully articulated pattern. Through this pattern is revealed the fundamental reason for the brothers' persecution of their sister.

A second storm image involves witchcraft in the pattern. When Ferdinand loses control of himself in II.v, his brother reproves him in these terms:

How idlely shewes this rage!—which carries you,   
As men convai'd by witches, through the ayre,   
On violent whirle-windes— (II.v.65-7)

The remark is apt, for Ferdinand early reveals his obsession with witchcraft, particularly in relation to his sister. In I.i he warns her that

... they whose faces doe belye their hearts,  
Are Witches, ere they arrive at twenty yeeres,  
I: and give the divell sucke. (I.i.343-5)

This tells us more about Ferdinand than about the Duchess. So too does his involuntary cry, 'The witch-craft lies in her rancke b[l]ood' (III.i.94), which follows a casual reference to witches in another context. The principal significance of the repeated references to witchcraft, however, lies in the Jacobean belief that witches were demonically possessed. It is no coincidence that the offering of the severed hand and the use of the wax effigies are related to the rites of witchcraft (see IV.i.65-6 and 73-6), for as will become clear, Ferdinand is himself possessed by the Devil, and his torment of his sister is explicitly antireligious.

Moving from the storm images to those of fire, we find the same relationship with the idea of hell and devils. The comment of the Second Madman tells us that

Hell is a meere glasse-house, where the divells are continually blowing up womens soules, on hollow yrons, and the fire never goes out. (IV.ii.81-3)

Behind this, as behind the ravings of the other madmen, lies an important statement. For along with a topical reference to the glass factory and a stock comment on feminine vanity, we are offered a mirror to Ferdinand's actions. In seeking to destroy his sister's soul, Ferdinand is creating a hell on earth, a hell whose fires burn within himself. In this connection it is important to note Webster's borrowing from Deuteronomy to describe the Duchess's plight: [**(8)**](http://www.johnwebster.galeon.com/40_essays.htm#(8))

Th'heaven ore my head, seems made of molten brasse, the earth of flaming sulphure, yet I am not mad: (IV.ii.27-8)

Here, then, is the deepest motive underlying the actions of Ferdinand and his brother. For even if incestuous feelings are admitted as implicit in the Duke's conduct, and if the choleric element in his nature is acknowledged; and, equally, if pride of lineage and a cold selfishness born of his phlegmatic temperament are put forward to explain the Cardinal's behaviour, it is nonetheless clear that Webster's fundamental concern is with a conflict between good and evil, in which the brothers are demonically impelled to destroy good, in the person of the Duchess, through an unwilling Bosola. The metaphoric and dramatic means by which Webster makes this clear must now be considered.

First Webster constantly and directly associates both Ferdinand and the Cardinal with the Devil. Bosola says of the Cardinal:

Some fellowes (they say) are possessed with the divell, but this great fellow, were able to possesse the greatest Divell, and make him worse. (I.i.45-8)

The malcontent's bitter jibe is quickly reinforced by Antonio's estimate:

Last: for his brother, there, (the Cardinall)  
They that doe flatter him most, say Oracles  
Hang at his lippes: and verely I beleeve them:  
For the Divell speakes in them. (I.i.187-90)

During Bosola's interview with Ferdinand later in the scene, frequent reference is made to hell and devils. Bosola accuses the Duke of making him 'a very quaint invisible Divell, in flesh: / An intelligencer', and at first refuses payment, saying

Take your Divels  
Which Hell calls Angels: these curs'd gifts would make  
You a corrupter, me an impudent traitor,  
And should I take these, they'll'd take me [to] Hell. (I.i.285-8)

But driven to accepting a post which will enable him to spy on the Duchess, and make him in his own eyes 'the divells quilted anvell', he comments bitterly:

... Thus the Divell  
Candies all sinnes [o'er]: and what Heaven termes vild,   
That names he complementall. (I.i.299-301)

However, the most illuminating comment in the earlier part of the play, because of the light it sheds on the relationship of Ferdinand to Bosola, is made by Antonio:

You would looke up to Heaven, but I thinke  
The Divell, that rules i'th'aire, stands in your light. (II.i.97-8)

Having thus established Ferdinand and the Cardinal on the side of hell in this conflict, Webster sets up in opposition to them the positive goodness of the Duchess and Antonio. Virtue and serenity are keynotes in Antonio's praise of his mistress in I.i:

Her dayes are practis'd in such noble vertue,  
That sure her nights (nay more her very Sleepes)  
Are more in Heaven, then other Ladies Shrifts. (I.i.205-7)

This impression is strengthened by subsequent images, by Antonio's vow that he 'will remaine the constant Sanctuary' of the Duchess's good name, and the Duchess's plea that Ferdinand explain

Why should onely I,  
Of all the other Princes of the World  
Be cas'de-up, like a holy Relique? (III.ii.I60-62)

Later, when the Duchess confesses to Bosola her secret marriage, she receives even from him an apparently sincere tribute:

Fortunate Lady,   
For you have made your private nuptiall bed  
The humble, and faire Seminary of peace, (III.ii.323-5)

The irony is bitter, since this peace is already threatened.

Webster develops this contrast between the order of the Duchess's life and the disorder of her persecutors', between peace and conflict, religion and anti-religion, by employing in imagery and action the archetypal symbols of good and evil—light and darkness. It is significant how much of the action of *The Duchess of Malfi* takes place either at night; (five scenes: II.iii, II.v, III.ii, V.iv, and Vv) or in the gloom of prison (two scenes: IV.i and IV. ii). It is significant, too, that in at least two of these scenes (II.iii and V.iv) there are storms in progress. It is against this background that the gentle and luminous figure of the Duchess, who in Antonio's loving words, 'staines the time past: lights the time to come' (I.i.214), faces the persecution of the brothers who threaten to 'fix her in a generall ecclipse' (II.v.102).

In IV.i this threat comes closer when Ferdinand visits his sister under cover of darkness. His ostensible reason for doing this announced by Bosola:

Your elder brother the Lord *Ferdinand*  
Is come to visite you: and sends you word,  
'Cause once he rashly made a solemne vowe  
Never to see you more; he comes i'th' night:  
And prayes you (gently) neither Torch, nor Taper  
Shine in your Chamber: he will kisse your hand:  
And reconcile himselfe: but, for his vowe,  
He dares not see you: (IV.i.25-32)

The Duchess agrees, the lights are removed, and Ferdinand enters. His first words, 'This darkenes suites you well', reveal his perverted values: it is he whom the darkness suits; it was he who requested it, unable to face his sister without its protection. He is closer to the truth when he says:

It had bin well,   
Could you have liv'd thus alwayes: for indeed  
You were too much i'th' light: (IV.i.48-50)

For behind the pun lies the irony of an attitude akin to that of Iago's resentment of Cassio: 'He hath a daily beauty in his life / That makes me ugly.' It is significant, too, that Ferdinand needs darkness for his diabolical trick of giving his sister the dead hand. As she calls distractedly for lights and he rushes from the room, we feel the devilishness of behaviour which seems surely inspired by more than mere anger or unnatural lust.

I have suggested that 'Th' Arragonian brethren' are diabolically driven la persecuting their sister. The time has now come to elaborate on this motivation. Ferdinand, it has been said, is usually reluctant to explain his actions. But on one occasion, in IV.i, he makes an explicit, if gnomic, confession:

*Bosola:* Why doe you doe this?  
*Ferdinand:* To bring her to despaire. (IV.i.139-40)

That this statement is to be interpreted in a specifically religious sense can be inferred from Bosola's earlier reproof of the hysterical Duchess

O fye: despaire? remember  
You are a Christian. (IV.i.87-8)

The importance of Ferdinand's admission lies in the fact that bringing man to despair was considered one of the Devil's chief aims, since in despairing of God's mercy, his love, or even his very existence, man lost all hope of salvation.[**(9)**](http://www.johnwebster.galeon.com/40_essays.htm#(9)) For parallels in the drama we have Marlowe's *Faustus* or Massinger's *A New Way to Pay Old Debts*, where Sir Giles Overreach, the incarnation of anti-religion, bids his servant Marrall go to the scapegrace hero, Wellborn, and 'do anything to work him to despair' (II.i.66). [**(10)**](http://www.johnwebster.galeon.com/40_essays.htm#(10)) When Marrall tries to carry out his master's commission, Wellborn rejects his advice as 'the Devil's creed', commenting:

'Twill not do; dear tempter,   
With all the rhetoric the fiend hath taught you.  
I am as far as thou art from despair. (II.i.120-22)

Ferdinand's intentions are, I suggest, the same as Overreach's. Certainly the Duke is contemptuous in speaking to Bosola of 'that which thou wouldst comfort, (call'd a soule)' (IV.i.148).

To find the positive values which the play offers, we must first consider the character of the Duchess and then her relationship with Bosola. I do not intend to discuss the already exhaustively treated —and it seems to me, peripherical— questions of the Duchess's guilt, or the propriety of the remarriage of widows. [**(11)**](http://www.johnwebster.galeon.com/40_essays.htm#(11)) It is obvious, after all, where our sympathies are meant to lie: the moral issues are never in doubt. For present purposes the Duchess's remarriage is important only in that it highlights three important traits of character: her courage, pride, and wilfulness. We see these traits equally displayed in her refusal to be swayed by her brothers' threats,. her determination that 'if all my royall kindred / Lay in my way unto this marriage: / I'll'd make them my low foote-steps' (I.i.382-4). There is evidence of her pride in her Wooing, too. For although she claims to 'put of[f] all vaine ceremony, / And onely... appeare... a yong widow', she nonetheless raises the kneeling Antonio with

Sir,  
This goodly roofe of yours is too low built,  
I cannot stand upright in't, nor discourse,  
Without I raise it higher: raise your selfe,  
Or if you please, my hand to helpe you: so. (I.i.478-82)

It is no accident that we are never told the Duchess's name, for here she is very much the great lady, acutely conscious of her status, even in love, while later, isolated and facing death, she reaches a state of humility such that she wants nothing more than anonymity, and, reversing her earlier gesture, kneels to enter heaven. We can chart the full distance of the spiritual pilgrimage revealed by these two acts, by considering her relationship with Bosola, particularly in III.v, IV.i, and IV.ii.

Bosola is generally recognised as a man divided against himself. Forced by penury to serve a cause he knows to be wrong, he mitigates when he can the effects of the evil he is doing. Webster uses this conflict to demonstrate that a man can be at once an agent of God and of the Devil. Bosola torments the Duchess yet comforts her, destroys yet saves her. In a conflict like this the Jacobeans firmly believed that God could always nullify the intrigues of the Devil. As Calvin put it:

Now when we say that Satan resisteth God, that the works of Satan disagree with the works of God, we doe therewithall affirme that this disagreement and strife hangeth vpon the sufferance of God. [**(12)**](http://www.johnwebster.galeon.com/40_essays.htm#(12))

Through Bosola this is demonstrated, not crudely, as in the homilectic tales of Thomas Beard or in a play like Massinger and Dekker's *The Virgin Martyr*, but subtly, presenting divine providence in its continuity rather than as random miraculous intervention.

We find clear indications of this continuity in III.v. First Antonio and the Duchess acknowledge the existence of divine order in their lives. Antonio says:

Best of my life, farewell: Since we must part,  
Heaven hath a hand in't: but no otherwise,  
Then as some curious Artist takes in sunder  
A Clocke, or Watch, when it is out of frame  
To bring't in better order. (III.v.74-8)

The Duchess is similarly convinced that her suffering is not without purpose:

Must I like to a slave-borne Russian,  
Account it praise to suffer tyranny?  
And yet (O Heaven) thy heavy hand is in't.  
I have seene my little boy oft scourge his top,  
And compar'd my selfe to't: naught made me ere  
Go right, but Heavens scourge-sticke. (III.v.90-95)

Here too we see Bosola for the first time as agent of providence. For when the Duchess breaks down he arrests her hysteria through her pride:

*Bosola:* Fye (Madam)  
Forget this base, low-fellow.  
*Duchess:* Were I a man:  
I'll'd beat that counterfeit face, into thy other—(III.v.139-42)

The crisis passes, and the scene ends with one of the tales to which so many critics have taken exception. As a recent editor of the play has noted, however, this is more than the 'apparently simple fable':

the Fisher is God; the gathering in of the fishes is a harvest at which not wheat and tares, but good and bad fish are to be judged; the Market is the Judgement; the Cook is another symbol for God; the fire represents hell-fire: at the Judgement one is as close to hell as to the joys of heaven. [**(13)**](http://www.johnwebster.galeon.com/40_essays.htm#(13))

In the remaining acts this separation and judgement of the good and the bad is demonstrated. But before the Duchess can enter heaven she must pass through severe trial; since

when God will send his own servants to heaven, he sends them a contrary way, even by the gates of hell. [**(14)**](http://www.johnwebster.galeon.com/40_essays.htm#(14))

In IV.i the gates of hell gape wide, for through his elaborate torments Ferdinand almost succeeds in breaking the Duchess's spirit. She wishes only for death:

That's the greatest torture soules feele in hell,  
In hell: that they must live, and cannot die:  
*Portia*, I'll new kindle thy Coales againe,  
And revive the rare, and almost dead example  
Of a loving wife. (IV.i.82-6)

At this point Bosola steps in, reproving her for giving way to despair, and offering what comfort he can to divert her from thoughts of suicide. The Duchess, however, lapses into hysteria and self-pity, wishing on the world the chaos which seems to fill her own life:

*Duchess:* I could curse the Starres.  
*Bosola:* Oh fearefull!   
*Duchess:* And those three smyling seasons of the yeere   
Into a Russian winter: nay the world  
To its first Chaos. (Iv.i.115-19)

Bosola's reply, 'Looke you, the Starres shine still', has often been taken, as by F. L. Lucas, to express 'the insignificance of human agony before the impassive universe'. [**(15)**](http://www.johnwebster.galeon.com/40_essays.htm#(15)) But it is also a further attempt to strengthen the Duchess in her suffering; an affirmation of faith in the divine order which still exists, undisturbed by the chaos around her. In this one great line Bosola's double role is epitomised.

Towards the end of the scene we are given a clear indication that in future Bosola's help to the Duchess will be more direct. Revolted by what is happening, he protests to Ferdinand, and when his protests are dismissed, bluntly declares the terms on which he will continue to carry out the Duke's orders:

*Bosola:* Must I see her againe?  
*Ferdinand:* Yes.  
*Bosola:* Never.  
*Ferdinand:* You must.  
*Bosola:* Never in mine owne shape,  
That's forfeited, by my intelligence,   
And this last cruell lie: when you send me next,   
The businesse shalbe comfort. (IV.i.158-64)

Thus, in a manner wholly characteristic, Webster provides a naturalistic explanation of the disguises which Bosola will adopt—disguises whose purpose is not only to make him unrecognisable, but also to symbolise his role in the Duchess's purification and preparation for death.

For the Duchess, IV.i is a spiritual nadir; thereafter, as Bosola predicted, 'Things being at the Worst, begin to mend' (IV.i.92). Hence when IV.ii opens we find her in a more composed state of mind, self-pity and hysteria replaced by quiet resignation:

I am acquainted with sad misery,  
As the tan'd galley-slave is with his Oare,  
Necessity makes me suffer constantly,  
And custome makes it easie— (IV.ii.29-32)

Not even the madmen, symbols of a world disordered and depraved, can shake her composure. In one sense, therefore, she is prepared for death. In another she is not. Bosola still has to free her from pride. In III.v consciousness of rank had helped to keep her from despair and suicide. Now it is a hindrance, an impediment to be set aside if she is to enter heaven. Now, therefore, Bosola directs all his efforts towards instilling in the Duchess an awareness of the insignificance of rank by comparison with the lasting reality of death. First he must convince her that she is 'sick':

*Bosola:* I am come to make thy tombe.  
*Duchess:* Hah, my tombe?  
Thou speak'st, as if I lay upon my death bed,  
Gasping for breath: do'st thou perceive me sicke?  
*Bosola:* Yes, and the more dangerously, since thy   
sicknesse is insensible. (IV.ii.115-20)

As yet the Duchess is unwilling—and unable—to understand. It is important, however, that we should appreciate his diagnosis. We can do so by glossing his statement with this passage from an anonymous devotional work, *The House of Mourning*:

Consider the evil of this security you are in, of this disposition of heart, when you cry, peace, peace, to your selves in the midst of God's displeasure. It is an evil disease, a spiritual Lethargy. That disease we know in the body, it takes a man with sleep, and so he dieth. . . . It is more dangerous, because it is a senseless disease, a disease that takes away the senses from the soul: and diseases (we know) that take away the senses, are dangerous: for it is not only a sign that nature is overcome by the disease, but besides, it draweth men from seeking for cure. Thus it is with the spiritual Lethargy; it shews not only that sin hath prevailed in the heart…, but it hindreth you from seeking the means to escape out of it. [**(16)**](http://www.johnwebster.galeon.com/40_essays.htm#(16))

Clearly the Duchess's sickness is security or spiritual lethargy, scarcely less dangerous to the soul than despair. As Lancelot Andrewes remarks in one of his Sermons:

Now perseverance we shall attain, if we can possess our souls with the due care, and rid them of security. ... And, to avoid security, and to breed in us due care, St. Bernard saith, 'Fear will do it.' Vis in timore securus esse? securitatem tisne; 'the only way to be secure in fear, is to fear security.' [**(17)**](http://www.johnwebster.galeon.com/40_essays.htm#(17))

Bosola's task is to make the Duchess recognise her peril. So when she asks the question, 'Who am I?', he replies:

Thou art a box of worme-seede, at best, but a salvatory of greene mummey: what's this flesh? a little cruded milke, phantasticall puffepaste: our bodies are weaker then those paper prisons boyes use to keepe flies in: more contemptible: since ours is to preserve earthwormes: (IV.ii.127-31)

This stark vision is, however, offset by what follows:

didst thou ever see a Larke in a cage? such is the soule in the body: this world is like her little turfe of grasse, and the Heaven ore our heades, like her looking glasse, onely gives us a miserable knowledge of the small compasse of our prison. (IV.ii.127-31)

Here Bosola is speaking wholly in the *contemptu mundi* tradition, placing, as Donne often does in his sermons, human existence in an eternal perspective.

The Duchess, however, still seeks to assert herself: 'Am not I, thy Duchesse?' Bosola again refutes her claim:

Thou art some great woman sure, for riot begins to sit on thy fore-head (clad in gray haires) twenty yeares sooner, then on a merry milkmaydes. Thou sleep'st worse, then if a mouse should be forc'd to take up her lodging in a cats eare: a little infant, that breedes it's teeth, should it lie with thee, would crie out, as if thou wert the more unquiet bed-fellow. (IV.ii.133-8)

Once more the Duchess tries, crying 'I am Duchesse of *Malfy* still', and once more Bosola replies, more bluntly than before:

That makes thy sleepes so broken:  
'Glories (like glowe-wormes) afarre off, shine bright,   
But look'd to neere, have neither heate, nor light.' (IV.ii.139-42)

This time he is successful, and the Duchess answers quietly, 'Thou art very plaine'. Bosola drives home his point by introducing what might seem gratuitous satire:

*Duchess:* Do we affect fashion in the grave?  
*Bosola:* Most ambitiously: Princes images on their tombes  
Do not lie, as they were wont, seeming to pray  
Up to heaven: but with their hands under their cheekes,  
(As if they died of the tooth-ache)—they are not carved  
With their eies fix'd upon the starres; but as  
Their mindes were wholy bent upon the world,  
The selfe-same way they seeme to turne their faces.  
(IV.ii.152-9)

The Duchess recognises a little, at least, of the deeper significance of this passage, for she says quietly:

Let me know fully therefore the effect   
Of this thy dismall preparation,   
This talke, fit for a charnell— (IV.ii.160-62)

This long exchange has indeed been a preparation. Its success we may judge from the Duchess's reception of the 'present' her brothers have sent: the coffin, cords, and bell:

Let me see it—  
I have so much obedience, in my blood,  
I wish it in ther veines, to do them good. (IV.ii.167-9)

The Duchess has attained humility. Consequently Bosola can drop the role of tomb-maker, and take up his second disguise:

*Bosola:* I am the common Bell-man,   
That usually is sent to condemn'd persons   
The night before they suffer:  
*Duchess:* Even now thou said'st,   
Thou wast a tombe-maker?  
*Bosola:* 'Twas to bring you   
By degrees to mortification: (IV.ii.173-9)

Having been brought 'by degrees to mortification', the Duchess must now have her thoughts directed towards eternity—the purpose of the bellman in Jacobean England. [**(18)**](http://www.johnwebster.galeon.com/40_essays.htm#(18)) In the famous dirge, intoned to the tolling of the bell, Bosola calls on the Duchess to 'don her shrowd', contrasting the turmoil of this life with the serenity to come:

*A long war disturb'd your minde,  
Here your perfect peace is sign'd*— (IV.ii.186-7)

Then he re-emphasises the vanity of earthly concerns:

*Of what is't fooles make such vaine keeping?  
Sin their conception, their birth, weeping:  
Their life, a generall mist of error,  
Their death, a hideous storme of terror*—(IV.ii. 188-91)

and ends with a renewed call to purification before the journey to eternity.

Bosola's preparation of the Duchess is complete. Although Webster never explicitly states that she has attained a state of grace, we can infer this from her composure in the face of death, composure which enables her to counter Bosola's question, 'Doth not death fright you?' with the calm assurance of

Who would be afraid on't?  
Knowing to meete such excellent company  
In th'other world. (IV.ii.216-18)

A more specific indication, however, is the degree to which she is now free from earthly concerns, and able to focus her thoughts upon heaven. For as Richard Baxter says in his treatise upon 'that Excellent unknown Duty of *Heavenly Meditation*', The Saints Everlasting Rest:

Consider, A heart set upon heaven, will be one of the most unquestionable evidences of thy sincerity, and a clear discovery of a true work of saving grace upon thy soul. [**(19)**](http://www.johnwebster.galeon.com/40_essays.htm#(19))

Or again:

How shall I know that I am truly sanctified? Why, here is a mark that will not deceive you, if you can truly say that you are possessed of it; Even, a heart set upon Heaven. [**(20)**](http://www.johnwebster.galeon.com/40_essays.htm#(20))

Unlike Cariola, therefore, who clings to life, lying, begging, and fighting for a moment's respite, the Duchess faces her executioners with no more than a momentary tremor, revealed in a longing to be 'out of your whispering', and kneels to accept the gift of death:

Pull, and pull strongly, for your able strength,  
Must pull downe heaven upon me:  
Yet stay, heaven gates are not so highly arch'd  
As Princes pallaces—they that enter there  
Must go upon their knees: (IV.ii.237-41)

The Duchess's pilgrimage is over. What is left of the lives of Bosola and his masters illustrates that in the Duchess's death evil did not vanquish good, but was itself defeated.

Had I time, I would now seek to demonstrate this view, showing how justice is done—and seen to be done—according to a pattern of retribution as apt as it is all-embracing. I would try to show that in every respect the fate which befalls Ferdinand and the Cardinal can be related to what has happened earlier. I would show (as critics have in part done) [**(21)**](http://www.johnwebster.galeon.com/40_essays.htm#(21)) that Ferdinand's 'cruell sore eyes' and fear of the light were directly related to his need for darkness in IV.i, and to the famous 'Cover her face: Mine Eyes Dazell'. I would emphasise the significance of the Duke's Lycanthropia—its connection with wolves and witchcraft, with his incestuous passion for his sister, and through the traditional beliefs that wolves disclose murders by digging up the victims and that those suffering from Lycanthropia have wolf's hair under the skin like the hair shirts of penitents, with the twin emotions of guilt and remorse. I would emphasise, too, that the diabolic impulses underlying the actions of Ferdinand and the Cardinal lead them, as the two men clearly see, into the mouth of hell. I would dwell particularly, in this connection, on the fact that the brothers suffer finally from the despair which they had tried to induce in their sister, and that the Cardinal finds himself, like Marlowe's Faustus or Shakespeare's Claudius, unable to pray for mercy:

...O, my Conscience!  
I would pray now: but the Divell takes away my heart  
For having any confidence in Praier. (V.iv.30-32)

Since, however, I have space to develop none of these points, I will conclude my commentary with a discussion of one aspect of the last act: the roles of Antonio and Bosola. In doing so, I will try to refute the view, persuasively argued by Gunnar Boklund, that Bosola's sense that 'We are meerely the Starres tennys-balls (strooke, and banded / Which way please them)', represents the play's final message. Boklund writes:

The theme of retribution that occupies Webster throughout the act is simple only if superficially considered. No religious significance can be extracted from it, for the perversity of superhuman intervention is demonstrated as thoroughly as is the bankruptcy of human intelligence. The Aragonian brothers are killed, but so is Antonio. Not only does providence lack a tool in *The Duchess of Malfi*, it does not even operate, even in the form of nemesis. What governs the events is nothing but chance. [**(22)**](http://www.johnwebster.galeon.com/40_essays.htm#(22))

On the contrary, it is perfectly possible to reconcile the confusion and futility of the last act with a providential order.

I described Bosola earlier as a man divided against himself. He has 'loath'd the evill' he has had to commit, yet carried out his orders, partly in hopes of reward, and partly, as he tells Ferdinand, because he rather sought / To appeare a true servant, then an honest man' (IV.ii.358-9). When the Duke proves ungrateful, Bosola no longer has an anodyne for his conscience, and is stricken with remorse:

What would I doe, we[r]e this to doe againe?  
I would not change my peace of conscience  
For all the wealth of Europe: (IV.ii.365-7)

Since he is obviously penitent, and since, too, his role has been that of an agent of God as well as of the Devil, we may wonder whether he will escape damnation. When the Duchess stirs, it seems briefly as though he will, and all his long-frozen humanity breaks forth in joy and hope:

...She stirres; here's life:  
Returne (faire soule) from darkenes, and lead mine  
Out of this sencible Hell: She's warme, she breathes:  
Upon thy pale lips I will melt my heart  
To store them with fresh colour: who's there?  
Some cordiall drinke! Alas! I dare not call:  
So, pitty would destroy pitty: her Eye opes,  
And heaven in it seemes to ope, (that late was shut)  
To take me up to mercy. (IV.ii.367-75)

Yet heaven only 'seemes to ope.' The Duchess's recovery is only momentary, and her death confirms Bosola in despair and remorse:

Oh, she's gone againe: there the cords of life broake:  
Oh sacred Innocence, that sweetely sleepes  
On Turtles feathers: whil 'st a guilty conscience  
Is a blacke Register, wherein is writ  
All our good deedes, and bad: a Perspective  
That showes us hell; that we cannot be suffer'd  
To doe good when we have a mind to it! (IV.ii.382-8)

His chance of salvation has gone, his change of heart comes too late. He is damned.

Yet even with his 'estate . . . . suncke below / The degree of feare', Bosola tries to warn Antonio of the plot against him, and to join him in 'a most just revenge'. His motives are mixed: he wishes to destroy the brothers, but he also wants to atone for what he has done, and hopes, however faintly, that atonement wilI bring the fruits of penitence:

The weakest Arme is strong enough, that strikes  
With the sword of Justice: Still me thinkes the Dutchesse  
Haunts me: there, there! . . . 'tis nothing but my mellancholy.  
O Penitence, let me truely tast thy Cup,  
That throwes men downe, only to raise them up. (V.ii.379-83)

Only when his plans miscarry, and by a stroke of bitter irony he slays 'the man I would have sav'de 'bove mine owne life!' (V.iv.62), does he recognise the futility of his efforts, and abandon hope.  
  
Bosola's part in the death of Antonio, an 'accident' if one may call it that, proves conclusively both to him and to us, that the time is past when atonement is possible. To understand why Antonio should be the victim we must consider his character.

The Duchess's husband is an honest man, a loving husband and father, and a faithful friend, but he is also hesitant and ineffectual in a crisis, and unimpressive beside his more vigorous wife. As Boklund's study of the source-material shows, the original Antonio was a glowingly cavalier figure; at Webster's hands he is transformed into a character of thoroughgoing ordinariness.[**(23)**](http://www.johnwebster.galeon.com/40_essays.htm#(23)) In part, no doubt, Webster's motives for this are dramatic. The Duchess must stand alone. Yet one may also suspect didactic considerations, since there are hints that Antonio is intended to illustrate the limitations of neo-stoic philosophy. The more oblique of these, the stress placed on Antonio's lack of ambition, and his bloodless and hesitant approach to life, both of which might be related to the neo-stoic belief in the contentment that retirement brings, and to the ideal of the golden mean, or *mediocritas*, can be quickly passed over, since to linger would be to exaggerate the strength of the argument. Rather more attention is due, however, to what Antonio says on matters religious and philosophical. At one point the Cardinal remarks that Antonio accounts 'religion / But a Schoolename' (V.ii.136-7). This is patently untrue, yet it may not be oversubtlety to detect in Antonio's utterances on religion a generality which makes them as likely to be the product of a stoic as of a Christian outlook. There may be nothing more than orthodox piety in his view of the enforced parting as a move by heaven to bring himself and the Duchess 'in better order' or in his conviction that 'Heaven fashion'd us of nothing: and we strive, / To bring ourselves to nothing:' (III.v.97-8). But alongside these remarks stands another with a distinctly stoic air:

Make Patience a noble fortitude:  
And thinke not how unkindly we are us'de:  
'Man (like to *Cassia*) is prov'd best, being bruiz'd. (III.v.87-9)

Later in the play the stoic element becomes more explicit, with Antonio talking in terms of 'Necessitie' (V.iii.41-4), and seeing his predicament less in terms of submission to heaven than in relation to the stoic doctrine of will:

Though in our miseries, Fortune have a part,   
Yet, in our noble suffrings, she hath none—  
Contempt of paine, that we may call our owne. (V.iii.70-72)

Pain, Antonio seems to assert, is pain only if the sufferer chooses to acknowledge it. The distinction is the traditional stoic one between external circumstances and the individual's response to them.

For all his philosophising, however, Antonio cuts an increasingly sorry figure as the play progresses, and by the last act he is drifting aimlessly in the vague hope of reconciliation with his persecutors. Nor do his dying moments raise his stature, particularly when they are compared with those of his wife. For where in her last minutes we can discover a deep sense of the value of death in relation to the life to come, Antonio's last speech is essentially negative:

... I Would not now  
Wish my wounds balm'de, nor heal'd: for I have no use  
To put my life to: In all our Quest of Greatnes ...  
(Like wanton Boyes, Whose pastime is their care)  
We follow after bubbles, blowne in th'ayre.  
Pleasure of life, What is't? onely the good houres  
Of an Ague meerely a preparative to rest,  
To endure vexation: I doe not aske  
The processe of my death: onely commend me  
To *Delio*. (V.iv.73-82)

To him death seems not a prelude to something highly prized, but an end to what he no longer cares about. Like the Cardinal, he wishes to 'be layd by, and never thought of' (V.v.113). Here, I suggest, is the core of Webster's criticism of the amalgam of Christian and stoic beliefs upon Which Antonio seems to base his attitudes. The Jacobeans believed, traditionally, that the chief end of philosophy was to teach men how to die. Measured by this yardstick, Antonio's beliefs are unimpressive.

It is now clear Why Antonio dies as he does. Without the Duchess he is aimless and apathetic, only half-alive. Yet his death needs to he a fitting one, and in the apparently casual irony of an 'accident' we can find a reflection of the aimlessness which has preceded it.

With this in mind, we see the fifth act not as Gunnar Boklund's game of blind chance, but as a carefully organised sequence of events demonstrating at all points the guiding hand of providence. To say this, of course, is to raise a crucial issue, that of responsibility. As the agent of providence, Bosola has acted (like Hamlet and Vindice) as both a minister and scourge, one through whom God works both to save and to destroy. [**(24)**](http://www.johnwebster.galeon.com/40_essays.htm#(24)) Like Vindice (if not like Hamlet), he ends his life in the jaws of hell. Is this just? Logic says that it is not, if Bosola has not been a free agent, but acting under divine compulsion. Theologically, however, this view of Bosols's role is untenable. It is true that the Church of England believed quite literaliy that there was a special providence in the fall of a sparrow,' and that it exhorted the faithful to eschew belief in chance and see God's hand in all things:

Thus must we in all things that be done, whether they be good or evil (except sin, which God hates and causes not,) not only look at the second causes, which be but God's means and instruments whereby he works, but have a further eye, and look up to God. [**(25)**](http://www.johnwebster.galeon.com/40_essays.htm#(25))

It is also true, however, that Anglicans believed in man's freedom of will. As Thomas Rogers puts it in *The Catholic Doctrine of the Church of England*:

We deny not, that man, not regenerate, hath free will to do the works of nature, for the preservation of the body, and bodily estate; which things had and have the brute beast, and profane gentile.[**(26)**](http://www.johnwebster.galeon.com/40_essays.htm#(26))

How these two beliefs were reconciled is explained by Peter Baro, Lady Margaret Professor of Divinity at Cambridge from 1574 to 1596, in the course of a disputation on the theme 'God's purpose and decree taketh not away the liberty of man's corrupt Will':

God the creator and governor of all things is not the destroyer of the order by him appointed, but the preserver. For he would that in the nature of things that there should be divers snd sundry causes, namely some necessary and othersome also free and contingent: which according to their several natures, might work freely and contingently, or not work. Whereupon we conclude, that secondary causes are not enforced by God's purpose and decree, but carried willingly and after their own nature. [**(27)**](http://www.johnwebster.galeon.com/40_essays.htm#(27))

Bosola, it is clear, is one of these 'secondary causes'. God has worked through him, taking advantage of his divided nature, his desire to serve Ferdinand yet comfort the Duchess. Yet Bosola has never been under compulsion: he has not been 'enforced by God's purpose and decree, but carried willingly and after his own nature'. His free moral choices have come first, and God's use of them second. He must therefore bear the responsibility for what he has done.

Were this not so, of course, we would find Bosola far less interesting than we do. As it is we can respond simultaneously to his agony of soul and to the reassurances that our understanding of the action gives us, and in our recognition of the latter discover an added poignancy in his ignorance of the extent to which he has really served the cause of good. There is a similar complexity in our response to his final attempt to make sense of his life, With all its confusion, horror, and lost chances:

*Malateste:* Thou Wretched thing of blood,   
How came *Antonio* by his death?  
*Bosola:* In a mist: I know not how,  
Such a mistake, as I have often seene  
In a play: Oh, I am gone—  
We are only like dead wals, or vaulted graves,  
That ruin'd, yeildes no eccho: Fare you Well—  
but no harme to me to die,  
In so good a quarrell: Oh this gloomy World,  
In what a shadow, or deepe pit of darknesse,  
Doth (womanish, and fearefull) mankind live!  
Let Worthy mindes nere stagger in distrust  
To suffer death, or shame, for what is just—  
Mine is another voyage.(V.v.116-29)

For we know, as Bosola does not, that Antonio's death was meaningful, just as we also know that he has been the unwitting instrument in assuring the triumph of that cause which part of him always longed to serve. His may be 'another voyage' from that of 'worthy mindes', but it has not been made entirely in vain.

Bosola dies confused and lost. But we are able to respond fully to the note of optimism upon Which *The Duchess of Malfi* ends. Firstly there is the presentation of the surviving child of the Duchess and Antonio; a symbol, like Giovanni in *The White Devil*, of hope, innocence, and renewal. Then follows what can be read simply as moral comment:

... These wretched eminent things  
Leave no more fame behind 'em, then should one   
Fall in a frost, and leaves his print in snow—  
As soone as the sun shines, it ever melts,   
Both forme, and matter: I have ever thought   
Nature doth nothing so great, for great men,   
As When she's pleas'd to make them Lords of truth:  
'*Integrity of life, is fames best friend,  
Which noblely (beyond Death) shall crowne the end*.  
(V.v. 138-46)

There is also, however, a deeper and more specifically religious level of meaning in this last, choric utterance. Through what is, significantly, the only sun image in a dark play, Webster offers a confident assertion of the power of God to counter and destroy evil. That this confidence is not wrongly or lightly placed, the play as a whole has testified.

**NOTES:**

**(1)**. - John Russell Brown, ed., *The Duchess of Malfi*, The Revels Plays (1964), p. xlix.

**(2)**. - '*The White Devil* and *The Duchess of Malfi*' in *Stratford-upon-Avon Studies I: Jacobean Theatre*, ed. John Russell Brown and Bernard Harris (1960), pp. 200-25.

**(3)**. - *The Moral Vision of Jacobean Tragedy* (Madison, Wisc., 1960), p. 134.

**(4)**. - My quotations are from Lucas's edition of *The Duchess of Malfi* (1927).

**(5)**. - The importance of some, at least, of these groups of images is discussed by Moody E. Prior in *The Language of Tragedy* (New York, 1947), pp. 121-32. Prior concentrates, however, more on their atmospheric than their architectonic value.

**(6)**. - 'A Webster Villain', *Orpheus*, III (1956), 131.

**(7)**. - For reliable summaries, see McD. Emslie, 'Motives in Malfi', *Essays in Criticism*, IX (1959), 391-405; and J.R. Brown's introduction to the Revels Plays *Duchess*, pp. lii-liv.

**(8)**. - See M.C. Bradbrook, 'Two Notes Upon Webster', *MLR*, XLII (1947), 281-94.

**(9)**. - For a valuable discussion of the significance of despair, see Arieh Sachs, 'The Religious Despair of Doctor Faustus', *JEGP*, LXIII (1964), 625-47.

**(10)**. - References to *A New Way* are cited from the Falcon Press Edition, ed. M. St Clare Byrne (1949).

**(11)**. - On these issues, see Emslie, op. cit.; Clifford Leech, *Webster: The Duchess of Malfi* (1963), pp. 51-7; and F.W. Wadsworth, 'Webster's Duchess of Malfi in the Light of Some Contemporary Ideas on Marriage and Remarriage', *PQ*, XXXV (1956), 394-407

**(12)**. - John Calvin, *The Institution of Christian Religion*, tr. Thomas Norton (1611), p. 70.

**(13)**. - Elizabeth M. Brennan, ed., *The Duchess of Malfi*, The New Mermaids (1964), p. xxi.

**(14)**. - Williams Perkins, *Works*, 3 vols. (1616-18), i, 492.

**(15)**. - *The Complete Works of John Webster*, 4 vols. (1927), ii, 179.

**(16)**. - PHNOIKO, *The House of Mourning* (1672), p. 155.

**(17)**. - *Ninety Six Sermons*, ed. J.P.Wilson and James Bliss, 5 vols. (Oxford, 1841-3), ii, 72.

**(18)**. - It is worth noting that when, in I605, a certain Robert Dove, Merchant Taylor, made a deed of gift providing that a bellman should visit condemned felons in Newgate Prison on the eve and morning of their execution, one of the witnesses to the charity was a 'John Webster'. (See F. P. Wilson, *Elizabethan and Jacobean* (Oxford, 1945), p. 106.) And though, as Wilson points out, 'the name is too common for us to be sure that he is the dramatist', this could well be, since Webster tells us, in the dedication to his mayoral pageant, *Monuments of Honor* (1624), that he was 'borne free' of that guild (see *Works*, iii, 315). What makes Dove's bequest so pertinent, however, is the requirement that the bellman put the condemned 'in minde of their mortalitie', and so 'awake their sleepie senses from securitie, to saue their soules from perishing'. (See *London's Dove*, 1612, C4v.).

**(19)**. - 4th ed. (1653), pt. 3, p. 207.

**(20)**. - Pt. 3, p. 207.

**(21)**. - See, for instance, Prior, op. cit., pp. 124-6.

**(22)**. - *The Duchess of Malfi: Sources, Themes, Characters* (Cambridge, Mass.,1962), pp.129-30.

**(23)**. -op.cit., pp. 92-6.

**(24)**. -For an excellent discussion of this subject, see F.T. Bowers, 'Hamlet as Minister and Scourge', *PMLA*, LXX (1955), 740-49.

**(25)**. - James Pilkington, *Works*, ed. J. Scholefield (Cambridge, 1853), p. 227.

**(26)**. - ed. J.J.S. Perowne (Cambridge, 1854), p. 104.

**(27)**. - Quoted by H.C. Porter in *Reformation and Reaction in Tudor Cambridge* (Cambridge, 1958), p. 377