

\ Still the Duchess:  
John Webster's Use of Rhetoric  
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TO MY MOTHER AND FATHER

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## I. THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND THE RHETOR

And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth.

(John 1:14)

Rhetoric is a matter of control. It is, in fact, the process of ordering the components of speech and action to produce a desired end. Drama is an ideal manifestation of rhetoric in that it shows the word becoming action in the flesh of the actors on stage. The rhetorical process (drama) is as much a concern of John Webster's The Duchess of Malfi as its thematic material: self-possession expressed in the play as familial ties, marriage customs, or noblesse oblige.

Webster's education gave him the background for being himself an excellent rhetorician. Because of the recent research of Mary Edmund in The Times Literary Supplement in which she extracts facts about the Webster family from records from the City of London, parochial records, and

livery accounts, more information is known about the life and education of the dramatist. Based on this new evidence, M.C. Bradbrook proposes in John Webster: Citizen and Dramatist that Webster began school around 1587 at the Merchant Taylor's school.<sup>1</sup>

According to Bradbrook, Webster studied under the system established by the rhetorician Richard Mulcaster. Under his method, Webster's education was centered on the teaching of languages, communication skills, and on ancient culture. Mulcaster's two works on education, Positions (1581) and The First Part of the Elementary (1582), place emphasis on English as a language comparable in value to Latin or Greek, and Webster was taught to use English for his serious reading and writing.<sup>2</sup>

Webster's use of the language was sharpened further when he was admitted to the Middle Temple around 1597.<sup>3</sup> Law not only heightened his theatrical instincts, but it heightened his sense of the language as well, the law being an exercise in rhetoric, especially argumentation. Thus Webster's education promotes the notion that he would have studied the art of language. And he would have had a variety of texts from which to study: Sir Thomas Elyot's The Book Named the Governor (1531), Thomas Wilson's The Art

of Rhetorique (1553), Roger Ascham's The Schoolmaster (1570), Sir Philip Sidney's The Defense of Poesy (1595), George Puttenham's The Arte of English Poesy (1589), Samuel Daniel's A Defense of Rime (1603), and Abraham Fraunce's The Arcadian Rhetoric (1588).<sup>4</sup>

One of the most popular treatises was Thomas Wilson's The Art of Rhetorique (1553) in which he argues that after man's fall from grace, God gave man "the gift of utterance" so that he could escape Satan.<sup>5</sup> With proper use of "the gift of utterance"--what might now be considered good rhetoric--the prophets in the Bible could guide men. The leaders in the community could persuade the people to perform uninteresting tasks that otherwise would go undone; nor would there be followers without persuasion. Moreover, according to Wilson, the gift of persuasive speech separates man from all other living creatures:

And among all other I think him most worthy fame, and emongest men to be taken for half a god, that therein doth chiefly and above all other excel men, wherein men do excel beasts. For he that is among the reasonable of all most reasonable, and among the witty of all most witty, and among the eloquent of all most eloquent, him think I among all men not only to be taken for a singular man but rather to be counted for half a god.<sup>6</sup>

Webster's background in rhetoric allowed him to create a female protagonist who adheres to Wilson's dicta for a rhetor. He makes the reasonable, witty, eloquent Duchess transcend her earthly environment in her reach for the stars; she qualifies to be counted as "half a god." In fact, since Webster is the creator of the Duchess and is a rhetor in his own right, he compliments himself by association.

Wilson also argues (based on Quintilian and Cicero) that an orator has three obligations: "to teach, to delight, and to persuade"; moreover, an orator must "utter his mind in plain words such as are usually received, and tell it orderly without going about the bush."<sup>7</sup> Thus the rhetor's purpose is the same as that suggested for poets by Sidney in The Defense of Poesy.

A rhetor, then, is one who persuades others to his point of view; for example, God, the positive rhetor, gave man the gift of rhetoric so that Satan could be defeated. A rhetor's position does not actually change, though it may appear so; rather, he creates order in his environment--linguistically or physically. And in Webster's play there is only one successful rhetor: The Duchess. The remaining characters, the Cardinal, Ferdinand, Bosola, Cariola,

Julia, and Antonio, are unsuccessful rhetors because they lack the Duchess's positive self-possession. Wilson's definition of the obligations of the rhetor--"to teach, to delight, and to persuade"--are ignored by all but the Duchess.

Webster places his Duchess (his spokeswoman) in a corrupt society that feeds on its own distorted rhetoric. Bad words make bad deeds; bad deeds make for a corrupt society. Moreover, the exposition of the play (most of Act I) points to the corrupt nature of the society; the play opens with a bawdy conversation among the low-life characters in the play. Since rhetoric is the art of using oratory so as to persuade or influence the thoughts and actions of others, the Cardinal and Ferdinand represent rhetoricians whose speech is meant to persuade the Duchess to remain caged in widow's weeds. They are her social captors, rhetoricians who pompously promote the artificial ordering of society, and they expect the Duchess to follow their empty words. Politically, the brothers control the Duchess's environs--the Duke is in charge of the court and the Cardinal-turned-soldier has connections in the Church as well as in the military. The Duchess, therefore, must move against a society which places its emphasis on social

rank, reputation, lust for power, and concupiscence--not on goodness. Bosola, in fact, stands as a representative of the corruption and disintegration in the society. Thus she moves against the content, structure, cadence, and style of the prevailing rhetoric. Placed against such a corrupt background, the Duchess's light shines; her environment is vile and vilifying, yet she negates the corruption through her self-possession as expressed in her rhetoric.<sup>8</sup> In fact, the difference between being successful and being unsuccessful in rhetoric tells the audience which character has integrity and which lacks it.

And John Webster, the playwright or poet, was well aware of rhetorical maneuverings. The Duchess of Malfi stands as testimony to his technique. Furthermore, Webster's rhetoric may be seen as operating on different levels. There is the language itself which creates images and reflects the temperament of the characters, and there are the familial ties, customs, politics, and power-plays which compose another set of physical rhetorical principles (those immediately visible to us), which are articulated through the dumb show and the madhouse scene. Webster makes the play increasingly physical to show what happens when positive rhetoric--the expression of value or

order--is thwarted. The key, then, to an understanding of Webster's art is a knowledge of how he plays one level of rhetoric against another.

One rhetorical level is the play itself, for it represents a written argument which has a rhetorical structure: a beginning, a middle, an end, and, in Webster's case, an in-between as well. From a close inspection of Webster's sources and borrowings, one sees that he snipped and pasted and reworded texts of Bandello, Painter, and Sidney (among others) in order to create his *Duchess*. He, therefore, in the simplest definition, acted as rhetor: he ordered the dialogue, the characters, the actions, the scenes.

From the characters' language, actions, and omissions, the audience sways to a particular attitude, which is the purpose of Webster's argument. The *Duchess*, for instance, elicits respect and sympathy; the brothers, on the other hand, earn disgust. Moreover, she stands as a combination of the two brothers, for she possesses both Ferdinand's energy and the Cardinal's policy-making skills. Unlike her siblings, however, she possesses each skill in balance with the others. The *Duchess* owns the noble profile of the three faire Meddalls, / Cast in one figure...."<sup>9</sup>

An audience's perception of the Duchess comes from an awareness that she uses positive rhetoric; she communicates order. She assumes this righteous rhetorical posture with her brothers and the world by her "hardest gem" speech, and it is a stance from which she does not waver. Webster's heroine turns the world askew by her wooing of Antonio (her motivation--love--brings about her downfall); later, she directs the hangmen at her execution. Bosola, in contrast, constantly exhibits negative rhetoric. He is the malcontent who from the beginning is unsure of his posture. Thus he early on bemoans the fact that his services are not properly recognized and rewarded: he is looking for justice in an unjust world.

The Duchess in her firm rhetorical stance is the source of justice. She is the positive light surrounded by negative darkness (or absence of light). The Duchess is also the rhetor of the play, the one who speaks for Webster. Such a creation can freely explore societal constraints that could have hindered her creator. Through art one can test the power of a matriarch in a patriarchal society: she pushes and examines its limits. Because Webster's rhetor speaks in positive terms, reflecting her inner-person, she assumes a stance that does not vacillate

or change, the only character in the play to do so. Even though she may appear to change--even become culpable--for her negation of the Church's marriage laws or for her depression in Act IV, she does not. She realizes that the ceremony of marriage is but rhetoric, for the consummation of the vows follows "and they twain shall be one flesh" (Matt. 19:5). And because society has a prurient interest in marriage, which prevents chaos by replenishing and ordering the individuals within, it is therefore ironic that the Duchess's marriage brings about her destruction; the Duchess follows patriarchal society's dicta for women--get married and have babies. But this small irony is part of the greater irony that is the rhetorical basis for the play: The ironies she creates produce the imbalance upon which the drama is founded.

An audience must see or think it sees imbalance, so that balance returns by Act V's end. The Duchess's supposed waverings, in fact, are for the benefit of her audience; they are essential for her "to teach" and "to delight." An audience expects the appearance of change in a rhetor because a rhetor is human, thus creating an empathy which sets the dramatic scene. An audience can empathize and sympathize with a character who is subject to

human frailty, and thus they pass with the character through irony to identification, at which time the character achieves the fullness of self the playwright has given him. The Cardinal dons the armature of a soldier and Ferdinand finally succumbs to lycanthropy, and an audience loses any feelings of identification it has for them. The Duchess, on the other hand, achieves self-actualization as she kneels in true humility before her death. Her process is slower one; the posture she assumes in Act I with her diamond's speech becomes realized for her and for the audience in Act IV. Thus an audience has longer to identify--to empathize and sympathize with her. Viewers, then, leave the theatre knowing that employers of false rhetoric, such as Ferdinand and the Cardinal, receive their just deserts, while a speaker of right rhetoric, the Duchess, remains an echo.

Another claim for the Duchess's position as rhetor is that she does not vacillate; rather, she changes or orders those around her, including her brothers and Bosola. She is always the prime mover in the play. Even when it appears that Bosola has taken over as the rhetor of the play (Act IV. 2), he does not. He assumes a physical posture on stage, which is without support even of "a

faire pair of slings," for he cannot persuade the Duchess to his argument (I. 1. 64). The Duchess in the madhouse scene has transcended his reach. She lifts Antonio to the level of her lover, though he cannot sustain the position because he has a limited vision; he is not made of the same substance. He is in a dependent position in society (and always has been); she, on the other hand, has made herself bereft of society. Her rank along with her self-possession have given her a larger vision. As Lucas states in the introduction to his edition of The Duchess of Malfi, an audience cares for him "for his mistress's sake."<sup>10</sup>

Ferdinand undergoes change; after he realizes his wrongdoing by having the Duchess murdered, he howls and unearths bones in graveyards. Perhaps the best example of a convert, however, is Bosola. Even before the slaughter of the Duchess and that of her children, he realizes her power. After he finds himself in a world void of meaning because of her death, he seeks to regain the Duchess's light by murdering the evil brothers. But revenge never works. He attempts to bring about good by destroying evil. He finds, however, that the brothers' deaths will not bring back the Duchess; she was the only source of good in his world.

The play comes down to a matter of constructive versus destructive rhetoric. Although Bosola attempts to be constructive--to bring back the good-- by murdering the brothers, his action is destructive. Likewise, in his last speech to the dying Antonio, Bosola attempts constructive rhetoric by telling him of the Duchess's and his children's death. While the news does break Antonio's heart, the final outcome is destructive. Without the Duchess, he finds himself, much like the Duchess does earlier, in a wilderness. He finds that he has been in the dark all along, which ironically points to the Duchess's wilderness as a path of light. Conversely, we follow the Duchess as rhetor because she uses constructive rhetoric; she is the closest to good--closest to the light, while her brothers are evil and remain engulfed in their own darkness.

While revenge is an example of destructive rhetoric, marriage is an example of constructive rhetoric. Unlike Bosola, who destroys (even with the best of intentions), the Duchess creates. Through her marriage to Antonio, the Duchess creates children, the products for a new society. In fact, Antonio's last words to Delio, "'And let my Sonne, flie the Courts of Princes,'" demonstrate that he wishes his heir to escape the corrupt environment of the court (V.

4. 84). After the Duchess's death there is no good; Bosola, her convert, dies. Thus the only hope for good lies with the children. Webster and the Duchess saw the potential for goodness through marriage; it represents "the word made flesh," where language is translated into physical action. In Act I, Webster plays on action and potential action in the marriage contract scene. And it is here that his legal training comes to his aid.

By exploring the language of per verba de presenti contracts, Webster plays on action and potential action. Through the means of dramatic irony, Webster has the audience believe that the Duchess's marriage is an invalid one. Lawyers, on the other hand, knew that the vows were indeed legal. Webster, though, goes beyond the mere manipulation of the language of marriage to explore the rhetorical nuances in puns and innuendo. Beyond that he shapes the language to reflect the physical images.

For example, as Bosola in Act IV, 2, tries to rationalize his actions by means of redemptive speeches aimed at the Duchess, Webster has the language generate the physical image. When the Duchess remarks to Bosola in direct language, "'Thou art very plaine,'" the horizontal image receives immediate reinforcement from Bosola: "'I am

a tombe-maker'" (IV. 2. 143, 145). Not only does Bosola's rationalization fail to sway the Duchess, but it shows the limits of language in those who seek to pervert its meaning. For rhetoricians, such as the Duchess, language has no limits, except, of course, when she tells the "'noble lie.'"<sup>11</sup> When words are ordered, they are restricted by syntax, grammar. Actions, however, are not restricted. For example, the image of "'such strange geometricall hinges, / You may open them both ways'" demonstrates that the Duchess is aware of the death sentence upon her--the death sentence brings the end of life (IV. 2. 227). But, the Duchess realizes that "'death hath ten thousand severall doores'" (IV. 2. 225). To have your throat cut by diamonds or pearls yields the same answer: death.

And, thus, once the physical limits of the actions proscribed by language have been realized, the play becomes increasingly visual. More and more Webster's medium becomes simply physical action. This rhetorical move is foreshadowed by the dumb show in Act III, 4, of the play as the pilgrims witness the Cardinal's installment as a soldier. If the audience has not received the idea through the language that the Cardinal is the devil incarnate (even

though we assume he has been wearing red all along), the physical display of the Church's highest representative taking arms, assuming more temporal power, emphasizes the concept. Moreover, physical actions are psychologically more impressive than language could be. The Duchess's stoic death as she kneels in true humility gives a lasting impression that goes beyond the written word; Webster's control of the scene elicits sympathy for the Duchess and pity for ourselves because we must carry on in a world without her.

Webster use of grotesque horror is just an example of bad rhetoric. And he uses his rhetorical skills to reiterate the play's overwhelming sense of grotesque horror at the play's conclusion. When rhetoric is used for bad ends, such as the way Ferdinand uses it, the language may be funny, but the laughter is an ironic defense. Body upon body covers the stage; the audience titters with laughter, and rightly so. Critics have tended to adopt two attitudes towards the macabre incidents in the play: some prefer to point to the gore on stage as another indication of Webster's flawed vision; others are embarrassed by the laughter and seek to ignore it. I would suggest that Webster's final act is supposed to bring laughter. To

ignore the black comedy found in the final scenes is to ignore the moral purpose of the play. And it is a very moral play. In fact, the laughter is the result of the void caused by the Duchess's death, a manifestation of the chaos that results when the ordering principle is restrained or taken away. The result is a a type of defensive humor.

The same attitude on the part of critics exists towards Webster's moral exempla, which appear to be tacked on at every opportunity by Bosola from the Duchess's death scene until the conclusion. The critics either apologize for Webster or they seek to ignore the morals. This, too, is a mistake. By his use of laughter and awkward aphorisms, Webster is attempting to suggest what is left in a world without the Duchess. The moral tags are needed, not only because the conventions of the theatre demanded them--to cue actors or to function as curtain lines--but they give the audience, rhetorically, a false sense of closure. Human beings remember them easily, but they are empty of meaning if one has not done the moral work to achieve them (if one is not good enough to come to to the proper conclusion, then the moral is lost). Without the Duchess's moral example, the aphorisms are empty of meaning--even humorous. Their purported wisdom is ironic,

creating the imbalance that keeps the drama going late in the play, while giving the false impression of stasis or order. Webster uses a standard theatrical convention to prove his point rhetorically. If an audience to this point is not aware of the Duchess's good example, then the playwright--through moral sounding words coming from Bosola, an unsympathetic character--seeks to make the audience aware of the superficiality and lack of meaning inherent in simple verbal formulations.

## II. SOME BACKGROUND MATERIAL

The Duchess of Malfi takes place in Italy in the century just previous to Webster's own, thereby giving the playwright a commanding rhetorical position from which to manipulate the characters, plot, and themes. Webster found plenty of ironic material to manipulate in this story of an effective female ruler who was apparently undone by her male relatives after her marriage--by her own choice--to a social inferior. However, because the facts surrounding Signora Joanna of Aragon's life and death are sketchy and no specific motive exists for her death, the dramatist is not locked in by details. More importantly, Webster could take the historical background and weave into the plot the ideas of politics, religion, and lust. Nor did he feel compelled to follow exactly Bandello's Novelle (1554), nor the Corona manuscripts that dealt with the Duchess's life. Francis de Belleforest presumably borrowed the story of Bandello for his Histoires tragiques in which the Duchess is presented as a lascivious woman (complete with Bandello's moral comment). And it is from Belleforest that

William Painter constructs his tale of the Duchess in the Second Time of the Palace of Pleasure (1567).

In 1490, Joanna d'Aragona was married to Alfonsao Piccolomimi, heir to the first Duke of Amalfi. In three years, he succeeded to the dukedom but died of natural causes five years later. The Duchess, then around twenty, was left with a daughter, Caterina, who was to die in childhood. A son was born posthumously in 1499 and succeeded to the throne, which the Duchess ruled as regent. Under her rule, the state prospered, and she was even able to pay her husband's debts.

The Duchess remained unmarried for some time before crossing paths with Antonio Bologna, who came of a reputable house and had been brought up in the Court of Naples. Serving as major domo to Federico, the last of the Aragonese dynasty, Antonio followed his master into exile in France. Returning to Naples after Federico's death in 1504, Antonio became major domo in the Duchess's household. The Duchess herself was a member of the house of Aragon; thus, they were of the same stock, so to speak. Soon after Antonio's arrival, the Duchess fell passionately in love with him. Dreading her brothers' anger--Lodovico, who had resigned his title to become a Cardinal, and Carlo

(Webster's Ferdinand), who had succeeded to the Cardinal's dukedom--the Duchess secretly married Antonio, with her waiting woman as the sole witness.

For years the relationship was successfully concealed; even the birth of a son went undetected. The birth of the second child, however, caused rumors to reach the brothers, so they secured spies to observe her. Growing alarmed, Antonio took his two children to Ancona to await the passing of the brothers' wrath. The Duchess, then pregnant with her third child (Webster's version does not mention the third pregnancy), could not bear the loneliness of her court, so she feigned a pilgrimage to Loretto, there proceeding to Ancona to join Antonio. Upon her arrival in Ancona, she revealed her marriage to her astonished household and renounced her title, choosing to live quietly with her husband and children as a private citizen. One of the servants informed the Cardinal of the marriage; the remainder of the servants deserted her and returned to Amalfi.

The couple was allowed to live peacefully for a few months before the Cardinal exerted pressure on the Legate of Ancona to exile Antonio. Seeing that his efforts to combat the banishment were futile, Antonio prepared for

refuge with a friend in Siena. When the decree of his banishment was issued (in the summer of 1511), Antonio set out with his family and so escaped any attempts to capture or murder them. Once the couple was settled in Siena, the Cardinal began the same pressure to have them expelled; the head of the Signiory of Siena was persuaded by his brother, Cardinal Petrucci, to banish them. On their way to Venice, the family was overtaken by armed horsemen. By assuring Antonio that her brothers would not harm her in person, the Duchess persuaded Antonio to escape with their eldest son to Milan. The Duchess, her two youngest children, and her waiting woman were taken to her palace in Amalfi and were never heard from again.

Meanwhile, Antonio, ignorant of her fate, continued to live in Milan for more than a year, first under the protection of Silvio Savelli, and later in the households of the Marchese di Bitonto and Alfonso Visconti. Even though the brothers confiscated Antonio's property at Naples, the exile continued to live in hopes of appeasing them. In vain he was continually warned that his life was in peril. One individual who gave him such a warning was Delio, a man who had been originally commissioned to have Antonio murdered. Finally, in October of 1513, Delio and a

friend passed Antonio accompanied by two servants on their way to Mass. They noted a look of dismay in Antonio's face; moments later they heard an uproar. Antonio was stabbed to death by a Lombard captain named Daniel de Bozolo (Webster's Bosola) and three others.

Another source for details of action came from Sidney's Arcadia. Webster seems to have borrowed the mental torturing of the Duchess from the persecution of Philoclea and Pamela by their aunt Cecropia. One further source may be Lope de Vega's Duquesa de Amalfi (written before 1609; printed in 1618). This play is also based on Bandello's version, and while there are certain parallels with Webster's work, on the whole it is a different play. The date of the play's publication, moreover, would seem to negate its influence on Webster's version.<sup>12</sup>

Webster's treatment of the Duchess's story takes a different approach from his predecessors'; his focus is on the integrity of the heroine and on her complete self-possession. Unlike his contemporaries, Webster does not follow the prevailing mores of Elizabethan society, where the protagonist is a strong male figure. Instead, he creates irony by placing a woman in a position of power and by making her act against the system. Webster as

playwright was fascinated with women, especially since society would automatically deem them weak, but he saw them, in actuality, performing astonishing, powerful acts, testing society's patriarchal foundations. One need only look at Webster's The White Devil, which shows Vittoria causing problems in the courtroom, to witness his admiration for strong women characters; she is devilishly charming. Webster's Duchess is a more refined, more positive image of Vittoria. The White Devil is the superior thematic, philosophic achievement of the two plays, but it was a flop theatrically. Thus, Webster took the spirit of Vittoria and transformed it into the more palpable Duchess. Webster's purpose, "to teach and to delight," then, was fulfilled with the creation of the Duchess.

Webster created such a charming female protagonist that one feels that he, like Bosola, finds the world after the Duchess's murder to be void of meaning, thereby explaining the anticlimatic nature of Act V. Moreover, the meaning that exists before the Duchess's death exists because she becomes her own rhetor, creating her own meaning out of an environment that is otherwise void of truth, substance. In other words, she rises above the

treachery of her environs--she is the light in a pit of darkness. Since light is correlated with good, with reason, with right feeling, and since light comes from God, the Duchess nears the light; she moves towards order, not chaos, in a human world. Right reason overcomes immoral desire, and the Cardinal and Ferdinand suffer from a lack of right reason. Their desires--power, lust--corrupt their reason. In contrast, the Duchess places generosity above selfishness; thus, she is the leader in the society she creates. She is ruled by right reason and rules by it.

Webster, of course, was not unfamiliar with the techniques of rhetoric, for the English in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were greatly interested in discourse. While modern man thinks of rhetoric as affected or exaggerated, inflated discourse, Renaissance man thought of rhetoric as an art. In fact, it appears as if books on the subject were popular items: once Cicero and Quintilian were rediscovered by the Renaissance, rhetorical treatises flourished.<sup>13</sup>

The Cardinal, for example, begins as an effective rhetor (though always demonic), for his fame in manipulating the rhetoric of politics receives testimony from Antonio:

"he should have beene Pope: but in stead of coming to it by the primative decensie of the church, he did bestow bribes, so largely, and so imprudently, as if he would have carried it away without heavens knowledge."

(I. 1. 163-66)

The difference between a simply effective rhetor and a good rhetor is that while an effective rhetor, even an evil one, may triumph temporarily in his corrupt path, eventually he will fail because he will have perverted "the gift of utterance." On the other hand, a rhetor who is moral will triumph in the end.

In fact, the classical Greek word for a politician is rhetor.<sup>14</sup> And his persuasive political tactics further enable him to have Ferdinand secure Bosola as their spy, yet his pontifications in Act I. 1. 318ff, fail to persuade the Duchess to remain unmarried. The language in this scene goes against Wilson's demands for straightforward language: the Cardinal makes allusions to prisons, which he means to be taken as a threat. At the play's conclusion, however, the Cardinal's false rhetoric plays him false. He attempts to trick Julia into swearing secrecy upon a poisoned book to his part in the murder of the Duchess and her children, thereby causing her demise;

thus, he obtains his just reward for falsely ordering the language. In Act V, 4, he tells Pescara, Malateste, Roderigo, and Grisolan not to come to his rescue should they hear his cries for help. While the Cardinal's real motives are for the servants to stay put while Bosola moves Julia's body to her own chamber to disguise his foul deed and then to murder Bosola, his hangman has other ideas. Bosola, who has overheard the Cardinal's plans for his death, moves to murder him in Julia's chamber. And because of the Cardinal's explicit orders for cries of help to be ignored, none come to his aid. His words do not effect the result he desires. In the cases of the Cardinal and Ferdinand, they cannot make their words into desired effects--not for want of trying, but for want of proper motive: to overcome chaos or evil.

Likewise, Ferdinand's rhetorical skills fail him. His speeches to the horsemen in Act I, 1, as well as his language to the Duchess contain sexual innuendo, which, again, is not straightforward discourse. Moreover, his intemperate tone causes him to speak "'with others Tongues, and heares mens suites, / With others Eares..." (I. 1. 175-76). Like the Cardinal, he wishes to dictate a life for his twin sister that moves against the laws of nature;

his desire, which we may presume to be lust for his sister, is for the Duchess to remain a widow. When he discovers that the Duchess is married in Act III, 2, he refuses to see her lover, and he calls for an unnatural ordering of the universe, yet his words cannot effect the deed he desires:

"What ere thou art, that hast enjoy'd my sister,  
 (For I am sure thou hearst me) for thine owne sake  
 Let me not know thee...(and tell the Duchess)  
 In they Embracements, I would have thee build  
 Such a roome for him, as our Anchorites  
 To holier use enhabite: Let not the Sunne  
 Shine on him, till he's dead: Let Dogs, and Monkeys  
 Onely converse with him, and such dombe things  
 To whom Nature denies use to sound his name."

(III. 2. 107-23)

By Act V, 2, Ferdinand's lycanthropy has made him an unnatural man. It is a physical manifestation of the perversity we have heard in his words which is concomitant with the sickness of his spirit and its manifestation in unhealthy desire. If one uses bad language, one's thinking becomes cloudy, and in drama, the body is a reflection of the spirit within. His curses upon Antonio appear to backfire, because it is Ferdinand, not Antonio, who begins to talk to the animals: his lycanthropy leads him to howl like a wolf and to carry cadaverous limbs.

Bosola, too, is tripped up by rhetoric. From the outset he is a representative of the world looking for a leader--for a rhetor; moreover, he is representative of the populace, and as such is a literalist. By his own admission, "'I looke no higher then I can reach'" (II. 1. 91-2). He is the malcontented soldier who believes that duty is above integrity. He carries out the brothers' evil torturing without considering the consequences of his actions. For Bosola, the rhetoric of a contract is a bond; his flaw lies in believing Ferdinand's promises of honor and riches. (Like Shakespeare's Shylock in The Merchant of Venice, Bosola has a mistaken notion of what the bond holds.) So, when the Cardinal is revealed as his fellow murderer, Bosola asks: "'Shall I go sue to fortune any longer?'" (V. 2. 334): And the Cardinal gives promises of honors yet to come.

Bosola, though, is eventually able to see that the only honors to be gained will be to destroy the Cardinal for the revenge of the Duchess's death; he is her best convert, for he sees in the end that it is the brothers--not the Duchess-- who are evil. Once his vision is enlarged by the loss of the Duchess, he is able to please his audience in a macabre sense. When the Duchess

rouses after her strangulation, Bosola tells her that the waxworks were phony and that Antonio has been reconciled to the brothers; his lie solaces the Duchess as well as the audience because we see a change in his attitude. He later provides the same merciful service for Antonio: as the wounded Antonio lies dying, Bosola tells him that his family has been destroyed, thus hastening his death. Rhetorically, the lie is all the literalist can muster. It is his interpretation of the generosity of imagination that language allows. It is as close to irony as he can get.

Julia, who is the Duchess's lesser counterpart, cannot fully control the Cardinal's rhetoric. When the Cardinal pointedly arouses her curiosity about his secret, she naively takes his bait and consequently dies. Her rhetoric, however, is not without its own deadly sting. As the Cardinal asks if she can keep his murderous secret, she replies, "'It lies not in me to conceale it'" (V. 2. 299). Her reply is painfully honest: she has secured Bosola as a witness to the interview.

Antonio and Cariola have been exposed to good rhetoric through their exposure to the Duchess, yet they are not believable as rhetoricians (though they are devoted to the Duchess): they are easily swayed. They are not as

imaginative or as self-willed as the Duchess. That is to say, users of language order experience. Ironically, the character who uses the language most adroitly is the Duchess; she is more of a Renaissance man than Antonio, Ferdinand, or the Cardinal. Ironically, the best example of a Renaissance man is a woman. Antonio, for example, finds it difficult to disregard the superficial rhetoric of marriage customs. He cannot comply with the Duchess's order to "'turne your eyes, / And progresse through your selfe'" (I. 1. 501-02). For example, when the marriage is discovered, it is the Duchess who devises a plan for his escape; he can only be persuaded, he cannot persuade.

Still weaker is Cariola's rhetoric; she represents the conventional female response. When the executioners arrive to murder her mistress and herself, she panics. Like Julia, who is the Duchess's shadow in the wooing scene, Cariola is the Duchess's lesser shadow in the death scene. As the murderers arrive, she cries in panic: "'Hence villaines, tyrants, murderers: alas! / What will you do with my Lady? call for helpe'" (IV. 2. 198-99). The Duchess's larger right vision allows her to make a sarcastic retort: "'To whom, to our next neighbours? they are mad-folkes'" (IV. 2. 200).

As the hangmen prepare for the Duchess's death, Cariola vacillates in her reasons why her life should be spared. No matter what they do or say, they cannot, however, alter the Duchess's ordering of reality. The Duchess stoically offers her murderers forgiveness and even gives them directions as to the tightness of the noose, and her waiting woman weakly attempts to follow suit. Cariola, in an attempt to be brave, swears to die by the Duchess's side. Her resolve, however, is short-lived, for in a humorous scene, Webster has Cariola attempt to ward off death with cries that she is contracted to be married, that she has not been to confession in two years and will be damned if they kill her, and, lastly, that she is "'quicke with child'" (IV. 2. 267). Cariola tries all the conventional pleas to avoid death.

For years critics, including Lucas, have pointed to Cariola's speech at the end of Act I as Webster's assessment of the Duchess's character:

"Whether the spirit of greatnes, or of woman  
Raigne most in her, I know not, but it shewes  
A fearful madnes. I owe her much of pittie."

(I. 1. 576-8)<sup>15</sup>

I, however, think not. Obviously, Cariola's wavering rhetoric cannot be taken as a guidepost from which to judge the play. She simply is not reliable; her discourse cannot be trusted as the whole story. More important, her statement is an example of irony. Madness is unconventionality, and indeed the Duchess is unconventional.

According to Wilson's comments on rhetoric, since the Duchess excels at it, she is "half a god." In fact, she sees herself as such, for she assumes a god-like position above the play and sees herself as an actress acting out a part: "'I account this world a tedious Theatre, / For I doe play a part in't t'gainst my will'" (IV. 1. 99-100). In other words, the Duchess is a self-realized character; she is self-possessed--she sees herself as an artist.

Her self-awareness is shown as she directs Cariola to "'Sit downe, / Discourse to me some dismal tragedy'" (IV. 2. 7-8). According to Timothy J. Reiss in Tragedy and Truth, a character will seek to overcome disbelief by telling a story. This technique is a sure indicator that the story is a lie.<sup>16</sup> She is aware of her part in the tragedy about to unfold; it is almost as if she is part of the audience watching herself perform. And she knows that

"'Fortune seemes only to have her eie-sight, / To behold my Tragedy'" (IV. 2. 37-8). Her ability to distance herself from happenings around her and her self-possession are not only an integral part of her position as monarch but also of her position as rhetor, as the interpreter of events. Her request to Cariola is an instance of her awareness of where the word and the action meet--where the word becomes flesh, which is also, incidentally the function of marriage, whether per verba de presente, as hers to Antonio is, or not. It is a place where the Duchess is the artist of her own existence--the artist of her own creation.

And while she extricates herself from her corrupt environment and is justified in seeing herself as a character in a play, Bosola is only able to see himself as a player when the rhetoric has run its course. In his summation of the plot as he lies dying on stage, he says, "'and lastly, for my selfe, / (That was an Actor in the maine of all, / Much 'gainst mine owne good nature, yet i' th' end / Neglected)'" (V. 5. 107-09). Earlier, in answer to the question of Antonio's death, Bosola compares the action to a play: "'In a mist: I know not how, / Such a mistake, as I have often seene / In a play...'" (V. 5. 118-20).

Webster's Duchess is an artist, a character, in the play. And in the play, she is an artist because she creates her own world. In Act III, 2, Webster gives the audience a chance to examine his artist; the Duchess literally lets down her hair, making the audience eavesdroppers to an intimate conversation between man and wife. She flirtingly, suggestively calls Antonio the "'Lord of Misse-rule,'" and asks, "'Alas, what pleasure can two Lovers find in sleepe?'" (III. 2. 9-13). The cozy, mirthful atmosphere of the bedroom interlude is abruptly interrupted by Ferdinand's presence; her lover and waiting woman have left her vulnerable. Antonio and the Duchess are about to make the word flesh, and Ferdinand, who desires to participate in the act too--but immorally--interrupts.

Webster also allows his audience the opportunity to witness the Duchess as she appears to be tricked by rhetoric; however, there is a difference between her failing and those of the other characters. The Duchess is tricked through Ferdinand's and Bosola's rhetorical maneuverings to show her other half--the human side of the "half a god." The Cardinal, Ferdinand, Bosola, and Julia all fail in their rhetorical technique because their

motives are evil--power, lust, greed. On the other hand, the Duchess fails at deciphering rhetoric twice because she is an innocent; she is worthy and expects others to follow suit. She is swayed not only by Ferdinand's rhetoric in Act III, 1, but she is swayed by her own emotions as well. She is angry and approaches him about the scandalous rumors concerning her honor. Ferdinand tells her, "'Let me be ever deafe to't...my fix'd love / Would strongly excuse, extenuate, nay deny / Faults, (were) they apparant in you: Goe be safe / In your owne innocency'" (III. 1. 58-64). She goes through the rhetorical motions: she goes to him to confirm her suspicions. Part of being a rhetor is being strong-willed, and because the Duchess wills Ferdinand's words to be true, she believes them to be so. Unfortunately, he is going through the rhetorical motions himself. Unfortunately, she believes him.

Her second slip in judgement is also a result of her naivete. Bosola renders her "'excellent Musicke'" when he deceitfully praises Antonio in order to gain the Duchess's confession that he is her husband (III. 2. 315). Again, it is her virtue that ultimately causes her downfall: she cannot fathom the extent of the corruption surrounding her.

The play's power does not come from these misjudgements; rhetorically, though, in order to have drama we must see imbalance--we must see her swayed. Rather, the play's power is derived from the Duchess's assertions. Her decision to marry Antonio against the wishes of her brothers leads her to state: "'I am going into a wilderness, / Where I shall find nor path, nor friendly clewe'" (I. 1 404-05). The court itself represents one type of wilderness, one of unkept promises, espionage, and death threats. Webster's Duchess realizes she is in a type of maze from which she must extract herself and her lover. Ironically, what the Duchess opts for is a wilderness as well. She fully realizes the potential for disaster that her marriage will bring, but she is willing to blaze a trail in the forest of error.

Her next two assertions occur in Act I as well. In trying to convince her reluctant lover, the Duchess confirms that she is a prince: "'I am making my will, ( as 'tis fit Princes should/ In perfect memory)...'" (I. 1 427-28). Again, she sees herself as being apart from the confines of her environment. Furthermore, to reinforce her own integrity and to show the shallow, distorted rules of the Church, she places herself above its spiritually empty

authority: "'I do here put of(f) all vaine ceremony'" (I. 1. 522).

One assertion of the Duchess's, however, is not true. And she knows it, but part of rhetoric is turning a lie into good; it is part of the creating process, part of the generosity of the imagination. In fact, her lie is for, as Chaucer would say, "the commun profyt."<sup>17</sup> In order for Antonio to escape after the discovery of her marriage, she falsely accuses him of stealing her jewels, which are, of course, her children:

"I must now accuse you  
Of such a fained crime, as Tasso calls  
Magnanima Mensogna : a Noble Lie."

(III. 2. 215-17).

A lie, no matter how noble, does not protect its teller: A lie that does more good than bad is still morally wrong. Such is the case with the Duchess.

Perhaps, though, the first "noble lie" comes earlier in the play when she tells Ferdinand:

"Why might not I marry?  
I have not gone about, in this, to create  
Any new world, or custome...."

(III. 2. 127-29)

But she has. Her present environment "'is too low built,'" and she says, "'I cannot stand upright in't, nor discourse, / Without I raise it higher...'" (I. 1. 479-82). As rhetor, she has created her own world and her own customs because the existing world and its orders are corrupt. In order to protect the sacrament of marriage, she must forge into the wilderness to make her own meaning--to make her own morality.

Her most important assertion occurs right before her execution. When Bosola appears in disguise in a series of quasi-sympathetic attempts to make the Duchess rise from her despair through Christian references to the frail nature of life, she responds by means of her own self-possession, her own sense of self: "'I am Duchesse of Malfy still'" (IV. 2. 139).

Among all the characters, only the Duchess is self-possessed--only she can make such a tautological assertion, only she is in possession of her integrity. Other characters, such as Ferdinand, who are not in possession of their integrity, fail of their unworthy purposes.

### III. THE MARRIAGE THEME: RHETORIC IN TERMS OF LANGUAGE

Marriage betrothals served as a popular topic among Elizabethan and Jacobean playwrights because it was a common topic with their audiences. William Shakespeare refers to marriage contracts twenty-seven times in his plays, and he perhaps fully explores the ramifications of betrothals only in Measure for Measure.<sup>18</sup> Likewise, John Ford's The Broken Heart and Beaumont's and Fletcher's The Maid's Tragedy explore the problems surrounding betrothals. And the problem of betrothal was a problem not only for the characters on the stage, but outside the confines of the theatre as well. When Webster creates the betrothal scene in The Duchess of Malfi (Act I, 3), mentioning a de presenti marriage, his audience was made aware of the possible repercussions from the Church, whereas a modern audience, ignorant of the customs and laws surrounding marriage contracts, does not have as much appreciation of his linguistical maneuverings. Looking at his source material, Webster settled on the marriage of the Duchess as a crisis action (we must accept the marriage as the

precipitating factor for the Duchess's demise). Thus the crisis presents a dramatic imbalance, and as such is part of the play's rhetoric. Marriage is the perfect example of the "word made flesh"; The Duchess and Antonio are made one. And while she moves against the society's grain by her initiation of the wooing and by her choice of marrying a social inferior, she is conforming to society by the marriage itself: Marriage is again a matter of conforming one's desires, one's reality, to society. And if the two become one, then she should become less than the Duchess of Malfi. But for Webster, this is not the case. In Act IV, 2, Webster's and the Duchess's position is made clear: "'I am Duchesse of Malfy still'" (IV. 2. 139). She has not been compromised; she has not dropped from her position as ruler. The tautology holds.

According to The History of English Law, Volume II, distinctions in marriage contracts came in the twelfth century between sponsalia per verba de futuro and sponsalia per verba de presenti. In the former espousal, the man and woman promise that at a future date they will become husband and wife; a per verba de futuro contract is the equivalent of a modern engagement. The latter espousal, the per verba de presenti contract, takes place if the man

and woman consent at that very instant to be married. Whereas the de futuro contract could be terminated by either party unless, of course, the relationship had been consummated, at which time it became a marriage, a de presenti espousal was not easily dissolved. In fact, one of the few alternatives out of the marriage was to enter a religious order before the marriage had been consummated. If, however, the couple had sexual intercourse, the espousal was a marriage and could not be broken.<sup>19</sup>

Henry Swinburne's Treatise of Spousals or Matrimonial Contracts, which was published in 1686 but written in 1608, states that consent was everything: a de presenti contract required no oaths, no written agreements, and no witnesses:

Ninthly, albeit the words of the Contract, neither of their own natural signification, neither yet by common use and acception concludes Matrimony; Yet whereas the Parties do thereby intend to Contract Matrimony, they are inseparable Man and Wife, not only before God, but also before Man; in case their meaning may lawfully appear.

Tenthly, albeit there be no Witness of the Contract, yet the Parties having verily, (though secretly) Contracted Matrimony, they are very Man and Wife before God; neither can either of them with safe Conscience Marry elsewhere, so long as the other party liveth); for proof is not the Essence of Matrimony; and if it were, yet their Consciences shall be a thousand Witnesses before the Tribunal of the immortal God, though it be otherwise in the Judgment of mortal Man. As aftermore at large appeareth in the handling of Secret Contracts.<sup>20</sup>

Even a clandestine de presenti marriage was a legitimate one. Again, Webster uses levels of dramatic irony: an audience believes that the vows it is hearing are not legitimate (even though it wants to believe them) and knows that this is the cue for trouble; however, Webster's associates from the Middle Temple knew otherwise--the Duchess is following the letter of the law because per verba de presenti translates "through the word from those present." The law is on her side.

Besides a clandestine de presenti marriage's being legitimate, and besides the fact that there was no need for witnesses, the actual exchange of vows did not have to be verbal. Swinburne's chapter, "Of Contracting Spousals by Signs," states that contracts could be made by signs or tokens as long as there was intention to marry. De presenti contracts put small emphasis on words--even the exchange of letters could constitute a marriage. Again, once consent was granted in a de presenti espousal, the marriage was legal and binding:

Naked Consent is sufficient to make Spousals; And therefore if bare Consent is sufficient, these Solemnities are not so necessary as without the which Spousals cannot conflict, being no more than Accidents, the which

(or the Logicians teach us) may be either present or absent, without the destruction of the principal Subject(s); So that it may be justly inferred, that the only want of Solemnity doth not hurt the Contract.<sup>21</sup>

Obviously, with such few stipulations, many contracts had unhappy consequences; it became impossible to distinguish in retrospect between the rhetoric of "I will" and "I do." The Church from the onset had sought to order the rules of matrimony. It was vehemently opposed to clandestine marriages and sought to publicize its position. In 1200, the Church condemned as sinful those marriages that had not gained the blessings of the Church in facie ecclesiae before consummation had taken place. The Church played on the fears of the potential offending couples with threats of punishment in the other world. For example, if the Church could prove that the couple had engaged in sexual intercourse before receiving its blessings, then it could impose severe penalties upon the pair. The Church, however, was fighting a losing battle with human nature and the law; in order to provide future membership, the Church had to recognize the subsequent offspring of de presenti marriages as legitimate.<sup>22</sup>

To counteract a maiden's being cast off after the novelty of the relationship had worn thin, the Church tried to make its dictates against clandestine marriages more enforceable. By 1563, The Council of Trent stipulated that marriages conducted without the presence of a priest and a sufficient number of witnesses would be void. England, however, was not directly affected by the decree, for it had already severed relations with Rome.<sup>23</sup> Thus, such clandestine marriages spread and little progress was made in stopping them. Sermons poured forth warning of fornication from secret marriages, and although the Church's power on the attitudes of the people should not be underplayed, the dictates were impossible to implement.

Since the courts had difficulties in distinguishing between the two types of contracts, it is a small wonder that the playwrights of the day would toy with the implications on stage. Similarly, it is not unusual that a modern audience could, in all probability, misinterpret such scenes from a lack of knowledge of Elizabethan betrothal customs. For example, the dramatic convention known as the bed-trick grew out of the betrothal dilemma, and since the stage maneuver was such a popular one, Shakespeare repeated it often in his comedies, not only for

its bawdy implications, but for its ominous implications for justice as well: Critics still debate the morality of the Duke and Isabella for their part in the bed-trick in Measure for Measure. And since Webster was a fan of and often a borrower from Shakespeare, it is not unlikely that Webster borrowed the notion of exploring the problems of de presenti espousals from him.

Webster, however, takes the concept and manipulates it for the fullest tragic potential. Perhaps he was thinking about how a Duchess might have wooed and married her steward and kept the secret for so long. Moreover, the scene in which the Duchess exchanges vows with her major domo acts as the empty motive for her brother's revenge. For it is her marriage to Antonio that makes the Duchess defy the rhetoric--language and actions--of the court and of the Church; she moves against the social rhythm of the court by marrying a man beneath her station and transgresses in the Church's eyes by her unblessed marriage vows.

The moments preceding the actual exchange of vows, the words of consent, are of paramount importance to an understanding of the Duchess's self-possession, for it is in Act I, 1, of the play that the Duchess is viewed as a woman

who "'staines the time past; lights the time to come--'" (I. 1. 214). Webster introduces the Duchess as she wittily banters with her brothers concerning her marital status. The brothers are vehemently opposed to the idea of their sister's remarrying because they stand to lose power and wealth. And their apparently rehearsed, unnatural arguments support the portraits of the brothers already presented. We have heard that the Cardinal's face

"is nothing but the Ingendring of Toads: where he is jealous of any man, he laies worse plots for them, than ever was impos'd on Hercules: for he strewes in his way Flatterers, Panders, Intelligencers, Athiests, and a thousand such politicall Monsters..."

(I. 1. 159-63).

He is, in fact, the devil's disciple, for according to Antonio, "'They that doe flatter him most, say Oracles / Hang at his lippes: and verely I beleeve them: / For the Divell speakes in them'" (I. 1. 188-90). Bosola earlier says of him: "'Some fellows (they say) are possessed with the Divell, but this great fellow, were able to possesse the greatest Divell and make him worse'" (I. 1. 45-8). The logic of the statement is perverse: how can a devil become worse? More important, however, are the moral

implications. While the Cardinal can "'possesse the greatest Divell,'" he cannot possess the Duchess, and for a man who is accustomed to the world doing his bidding, the Duchess's defiant attitude infuriates him. And just as the devil is capable of assuming a pleasing shape, so too can the Cardinal. His outward countenance appears always calm; his speeches are always controlled and complete. He is the Church's highest representative in the play, yet it is he who is the most fiendish character; the Cardinal acts as the grand puppeteer. He manipulates Ferdinand to secure Bosola as their intelligencer, and it is by his commands via Ferdinand that the Duchess is tortured and eventually murdered.

Antonio's description of Duke Ferdinand follows in the same vein as did his testimony for the Cardinal: the picture is less than flattering. Whereas the Cardinal appears "the Divell in crystal," Ferdinand's demeanor is irrational and impetuous.<sup>24</sup> According to Antonio, he has "'a most perverse, and turbulent Nature-- / What appears in him mirth, is meerely outside, / If he laughs hartely, it is to laugh / All honesty out of fashion'" (I. 1. 169-72). Like the Cardinal, he is a corrupt ruler, for "'the Law to him / Is like a fowle blacke cob-web to a

Spider-- / He makes it his dwelling, and a prison / To entangle those who feede him'" (I. 1. 180-83). Perhaps, though, Webster's most telling portrait of the brothers comes from Bosola:

"He, and his brothers, are like Plum-trees (that grow over standing-pooles) they are rich, and ore-laden with Fruite, but none but Crowes, Pyes, and Catter-pillers feede on them...." (I. 1. 50-3)

The standing pools that they grow from are full of corruption, and the image of fruit is carried throughout the play. Apricots are employed by Bosola as a pregnancy test, and the fruit of the Duchess's womb are her children.

In contrast to the scathing report of the sinister siblings, the portrait of "'the right noble Duchesse'" is one of a charming, witty, intelligent, sensitive woman (I. 1. 191). The delineation is made clear as Antonio speaks of the siblings, "'You never fix'd you(r) eye on three faire meddals, / Cast in one figure, of so different temper'" (I. 1. 193-4). Again, Webster employs rhetorical irony via a pun on "temper." Since the figure contains three differently tempered metals, each would react differently when subjected to the same force. All of the siblings have desires: Ferdinand's immoral desires

eventually leave him unearthing bones; the Cardinal's desires are for more power, and he will destroy anyone who inhibits his path--he is a master of evil plots; the Duchess desires Antonio in marriage, the socially acceptable thing to do, and she is subtle in her pursuit.

In the lines that follow, Antonio sings flowing praises to the Duchess's character. He enumerates her qualities, and his cataloging prepares for a presence on stage that is larger than life. (He is in love and is infatuated). Antonio is duly impressed by her "'discourse...so full of Rapture, / You onely will begin, then to be sorry / When she doth end her speech'" (I. 1. 194-96). Not only is she a charming rhetorician, but she is modest: "'She held it lesse vaine-glory, to talke much, / Then (you) pennance to heare her'" (I. 1. 197-98). And her "'sweete countenance'" can throw "' upon a man so sweet a looke'" that it can raise him from a "'dead palsey"; furthermore, such looks "'speaketh so divine a continence...(that) cuts off all lascivious, and vaine hope'" (I. 1. 199-204). In fact, according to Antonio, "'Her dayes are practis'd in such noble vertue'" that her soul resides in tune with heaven (I. 1. 194-208). Antonio's commendations are so glowing that Delio accuses

him of exaggeration, yet as the scene continues we find that his praises are well-founded.

Antonio's praises gain credence as we witness an exchange between the brothers and the Duchess concerning her marriage prospects. Earlier Ferdinand tells Bosola, "'I would not have her marry againe'" (I. 1. 273). Moreover, he wishes to have complete control over the Duchess, to monitor her every move: "'I would then have a Mathematicall Instrument made for her face, that she might not laugh out of compasse'" (I. 1. 137-8). Since such a device is not at hand, he employs the next best thing--Bosola as his spy. The Cardinal regards a second marriage for the Duchess with the same lack of enthusiasm as Ferdinand, and in what sounds like a preplanned exchange, they threaten their sister against such thoughts.

Ferdinand's and the Cardinal's arguments hinge on accusations concerning lust. Obviously, the two did not go along with Saint Paul's admonishment: "It is better to marry than to burn" (I. Cor. 7:9). The collaborated arguments start as expected; however, the currents beneath the rhetoric are tumultuous: the politics of the court and Church are at stake. In fact, the foundation of the patriarchal society is being challenged. The woman is not

supposed to be the aggressor in the courting relationship, and it is for this reason that Antonio hesitates, bumbles, as the Duchess approaches him. Antonio, however, is able to see beyond the system and accept the Duchess's proposal, which is something the brothers cannot do. They cannot tolerate a sister who will not play by their rules. Telling the Duchess that the choice whether or not to wed remains hers, the Cardinal cues Ferdinand to begin his harangue on the sins of lusty widows:

Ferdinand: "Marry? They are most  
luxurious,  
Will wed twice"

Cardinal: "Oh, fie!"

He gives up in disgust because he already knows the bottom line: This is a waste of his time and energy.

Ferdinand: "Their livers are more spotted  
Than Labans sheepe."

Duchess: "Diamonds are of most value  
They say, that have past through most  
Jewellers hands."

Ferdinand: "Whores, by that rule, are  
precious:"

Duchess: "Will you heare Me?  
I'll never marry:"

(I. i. 325-34)

The language here implies punitive action and is, of itself, punitive. Ferdinand's language grows progressively more vile in this speech and in the subsequent passages; his anger is fired when the Duchess makes light of his argument. The irony here is thick. The Cardinal appears to be in control, but the Duchess's mind is already made up. As soon as the brothers depart, the Duchess begins her wooing of Antonio. She, too, knows the bottom line: she knows her fate, and she is willing to play their game of verbal volleyball. With her charmingly flippant diamonds speech, the Duchess's presence on stage is fully established. Not only does she compare herself to a precious gem (and rightly so), but she is successful in making her brothers fools: she negates their rhetoric. And this is a position from which she will not stray; in fact, the Duchess is the only static character in the play--she takes control with these lines and never relinquishes her grip, for it is the Duchess who will direct the hangmen at her death.

The brothers, though, seem unprepared for her humorous yet pithy interjection: Ferdinand, for example, demands

that humor proceed according to his commands: "'laugh when I laugh'" (I. 1. 126). And he is not laughing. To discover that the Duchess is not malleable and that she will not passively consent to his words angers him, which causes his "'most perverse and turbulent nature'" to come forth. One can envision his presence on stage as a ranting, almost demonically possessed figure, barely in control at the beginning and completely out of control at the end. In contrast, we see the Duchess as remaining composed, and when she attempts to explain her position, exclaiming, "'I'll never marry,'" she is interrupted by the Cardinal's pontifications regarding the power of a widow's wantonness, which is complete with the underlying threat of death:

"So most Widowes say:  
 But commonly that motion lasts no longer  
 Than the turning of an houreglasse--the  
 funeral Sermon,  
 And it, end both together."

(I. 1. 335-38)

All of the siblings are employers of rhetoric. Initially in the play both the Cardinal and the Duchess are in control of it. The Cardinal, however, loses his control of the language when he seeks to pervert its meaning.

Ferdinand (and the Duchess to a lesser extent) has command of the language and its potential for imagery. He has a vivid imagination, but, like the Cardinal, he uses the language in a perverse sense, thereby losing control. And while the Cardinal's beginning speeches are controlled, calculated, Ferdinand's language is uncontrolled. He tells the Duchess, "'You live in a ranke pasture here, i'th' court-- / There is a kind of honney-dew, that's deadly.'" Moreover, if she proceeds towards marriage, she will "'give the divell sucke'" (I. 1. 340-45).

Ironically, Ferdinand and the Cardinal are the ones who bring the aroma of excrement to the court, and it is they who are in consort with the devil. Through these seemingly practiced speeches, the Duchess stands as the edifice of patience, and then replies sarcastically, "'This is terrible good councell'" (I. 1. 346). Her retort provokes another round of threats, and as if to extinguish what Ferdinand calls her "'darkest actions--nay, your privatist thoughts,'" the brothers attempt to dissuade her from seeking a secret marriage (I. 1. 349). The Cardinal tells her: "'You may flatter your selfe, / And take your owne choice: privately be married / Under the E(a)ves of night...'" (I. 1. 351-53). Yet Ferdinand quickly adds a

threat: "'Such weddings, may more properly be said / To be executed, then celibrated'" (I. 1. 358-59). Reinforcing Ferdinand's death-threatening image, the Cardinal adds: "'The marriage night / Is the entrance into some prison'" (I. 1. 360-61). It will be the Duchess, however, who will have the final word: an echo always has the last word.

Even with the passage's obviously ominous images of madness, imprisonment, and death, the Duchess retains her rhetorical posture and makes her brothers' words seem trivial. She discounts their arguments: "'I thinke this speech betweene you both was studied, / It came so roundly off'" (I. 1. 367-68). Now exasperated, Ferdinand begins to retaliate, showing his loss of control by means of lewd appeals:

Ferdinand: "You are my sister  
 This was my Fathers poyniard: doe you see,  
 I'll'd be loathe to see't looke rusty,  
 'cause 'twas his:  
 I would have you to give ore these  
 chargeable Revels;  
 A Visor, and a Masque are whispering roomes  
 That were nev'r built for goodnesse: fare  
 ye well:  
 And woemen like that part, which (like  
 Lamprey)  
 Hath nev'r a bone in't."

(I. 1. 369-76)

The Duchess, who properly catches his slippery sexual allusion, exclaims, "'Eye, sir!"; she will not abide lewd talk from anybody. An argument can be made, however, that Ferdinand does not fully understand the language he uses until the Duchess interrupts him, that this interchange foreshadows his lycanthropy--his animalistic attitude. Rhetorically, Ferdinand's apology reinforces the sexual connotations:

"Nay,  
I meane the Tongue: varietie of Courtship;  
What cannot a neate knave with a smooth  
tale,  
Make a woman beleeeve?...."

(I. 1. 37-81).

Clearly, Webster's creation is not easily thwarted, for in the following soliloquy, she reaffirms her dauntless position, her self-willed temper.

"Shall this move me? If all my royall  
kindred  
Lay in my way unto this marriage:  
I'll'd make them my low foote-steps...."

(I. 1. 382-84).

Indeed she will use them for her stepping-stones to a higher plane--her own artful plane. Her brother's earlier

"'terrible good counsell'" is rightly disregarded. The Cardinal stands in no position to offer marital advice, for he is involved in an adulterous affair with Julia. Nor is Duke Ferdinand's "advice" better: he suffers from lycanthropy and an incestuous imagination, making him long "'to see her (the Duchess) in the shameful act of sinne'" (II. 5. 55). Thus, while the brothers' threats are noted by the Duchess, they are not heeded: "'So I, through frights, and threatenings, will assay / This dangerous venture: Let old wives report / I wincked, and chose a husband'" (I. 1. 388-90).

Her eyes, however, are not blinded as she winks; she is aware of the consequences, for as she waits to begin her wooing of her major domo, she tells her waiting woman, "'I am going into a wilderness / Where I shall find nor path, nor friendly clewe'" (I. 1. 404-05). Through this statement she acknowledges that she is willfully committing an error in the eyes of the court and Church, concluding, "'I am making my will, (as 'tis fit Princes should...)" (I. 428-29). The Duchess refuses to submit to her brothers' or the Church's unsupported, inflated rhetoric; therefore, she creates her own form of rhetoric. By acting and speaking in open defiance of the accepted societal

rhythm of courtship, both by her choice of suitor and by her role of wooer, she creates chaos in her brothers' environment. At the same time, she becomes an eloquent spokesman for a higher realm; as she enters the wilderness she becomes her own rhetor, and the proof of her tautology begins.

Webster, through the Duchess, plays on the meaning of the word "wilderness" as being a chaotic place. He, of course, was not the first writer to do so. Dante in his Inferno uses the concept of the silva oscura: "'I woke to find myself in a dark wood / Where the right road was wholly lost and gone.'"<sup>25</sup> And Spenser plays on Dante's notion when Red Cross and Una are in the Wandering Wood in Book I, Canto i, of The Faerie Queen:

When weening to return whence they did  
stray,  
They cannot find that path which first was  
shown,  
But wander to and fro in ways unknown,  
Furtherest from end then when they nearest  
ween,  
That makes them doubt their wits be not  
their own.  
So many paths, so many turnings seen,  
That which of them to take in diverse doubt  
they been.<sup>26</sup>

Likewise, Webster plays on the wilderness as being filled with error, a place where the trees of the forest obscure right reason, a place where nature shows herself as vile. Ironically, the Duchess leaves a tract of real savagery when she leaves the rules of the court and of the Church to enter yet another wilderness; there is no path to guide her, for none have dared to revolt against the system. There is, however, no way out of the maze of her brothers' wickedness. Her sense of irony is a generous one, theirs is not. And if one insists upon placing the Duchess in error, this is it: She underestimates the wickedness of her siblings; because she is pure, she cannot see the evil in others. She and her brothers are brought into a direct conflict of justice and power. The Duchess cannot abide her brothers' trite orthodoxies concerning widowhood and marriage and strikes out on her own. On the other hand, her brothers cannot fathom her love for Antonio and the world she creates for it--she must be destroyed or their world collapses. They object to their exclusion from the mystery of marriage: the Duchess does not ask their blessing upon the marriage, nor do they understand the intimacy of the institution.

She is unflinching in her snubbing of the court and Church as she woos the reluctant Antonio. Just as she has winked, she now persuades Antonio to become "'stark blind.'" And with the physical gesture of lifting her major domo to the level of her lover, she has broken the rules of courtly society and of patriarchal authority. The Duchess speaks of the move in philosophical terms: "'Now she paies it-- / The misery of us, that are borne great!- / We are forc'd to wo(o), because none dare wo(o) us'" (I. 1. 506-08). And she seeks to comfort the now-stunned Antonio, whose less-than-expansive vision has trouble following her in negating the social rhetoric:

"Sir, be confident  
 What is't distracts you? This is flesh, and  
 blood, (Sir),  
 'Tis not the figure cut in Allablaster  
 Kneeles at my husbands tombe."

(I. 1. 518-21)

When Antonio speaks of the wrath from her siblings that will surely come, she tells him, "'All discord, without this circumference, / Is onely to be pittied, and not fear'd'" (I. 1. 537-38). She transcends the false rhetoric of the Church and court, for in the Duchess's universe, the lovers' arms create the only meaningful wedding band.

The Duchess's transgression--though not deserving of murder--is not that she has entered into a Per verba de presenti contract, but that she refuses to echo her vows in Church. She feels confident that her vows with Antonio will stand in court; the court's rhetoric would appear to be on her side, so she tells Antonio not to fear her maid's presence: "'Be not amaz'd, this woman's of my Councell. / I have heard Lawyers say, a contract in a Chamber, / (Per verba (de) presenti), is absolute marriage'" (I. 1. 547-49).

Obviously, the Duchess is aware of the secular law, for she takes an extra precaution by securing a witness. She, however, disregards that part of the law which demands that the marriage gain the Church's blessing. In an attempt to elevate their love above an uncaring universe the Duchess tells Antonio: "'I do here put of(f) all vaine ceremony, / And only doe appeare to you a yong widow / That claimes you for her husband'" (I. 1. 522-24). Because of the Church's corrupt nature, she perceives no need in staining their pure union with empty pomp and circumstance: she readily admits to becoming "blind" as she sets her marriage above the Church's artificial ordering of laws: "'How can the Church build faster? / We now are man, and

wife, and 'tis the Church / That must but echo this'" (I. 1. 562-64). The pun here is again part of a rhetorical play--it pits one meaning against another.

With her vows, her chamber does indeed become a type of prison, which was foreshadowed by her brothers' earlier speeches. Nicholas Brooke argues that an Elizabethan audience would see the violation of the correct wooing order to carry the effect of a tragic flaw.<sup>27</sup> According to E. M. Tillyard in The Elizabethan World Picture, chaos, the upsetting of the established order, meant "the cosmic anarchy before creation and the wholesale dissolution that would result if the pressure of Providence relaxed and allowed the law of nature to cease functioning."<sup>28</sup> This, then, is the tragic hero's story: One must break through the barrier, which may mean allowing chaos in while one climbs out. Therefore, not only does Webster introduce a flaw in his charming protagonist, but he assumes the audience's complicity in the marriage at the same instant--the audience rhetorically assumes Cariola's role and thereby gives approval to the Duchess's plan.

Her marriage, which we must assume to be the motive for the brothers' revenge, has not actually broken secular custom. Moreover, the marriage represents the irony of

comic expectation: we traditionally think of marriage in drama bringing about order, not chaos. If, however, we view the play as a mere moral lesson from Webster on the effects of clandestine marriage, we sell the playwright short. The play's operating motive is no motive at all; rather, it serves as an ingenious sidetrack to first confound us and which, if we seek truth, will enlighten us. For it is through the lack of a valid motive that the Duchess's integrity appears exemplary: she struggles in a chaotic environment what has no moral motive, no meaning. The only route for survival is to retain one's steadfast position in a corrupt world. Conversely, the only way for a morally bankrupt society to continue is to rid itself of any member possessing integrity.

#### IV. THE DUMB SHOW: RHETORIC IN TERMS OF ACTION

After Bosola tricks the Duchess into revealing Antonio as her husband, the revenge plot of the play is rhetorically introduced through the use of a dumb show at the Shrine of Our Lady of Loretto (III. 4.). Bosola's "'friendly speech'" leaves the Duchess vulnerable, for the concealment of her marriage, which while inwardly fulfilling, lacks the warmth of outward acceptance (III. 2. 342). In Bosola, she sees a confidante in which to share her secret; in reality, he is her downfall. The now vulnerable Duchess is easily swayed by his "'excellent Musicke,'" and agrees to his idea to "'faigne a Pilgrimage'" (III. 2. 315, 353). Cariola fears "'this jesting with religion, / This faigned Pilgrimage'" (III. 2. 365-6). Again, Cariola takes the conventional female approach: she is superstitious. The Duchess's reply, "'Thou art a superstitious foole,'" saddled with the Cardinal's questioning of Ferdinand, "'Doth she make religion her riding hood / To keepe her from the sun, and tempest?'" have been misinterpreted as showing the Duchess as un-Christian (III. 3. 72-3).

First, the Cardinal and Ferdinand cannot be relied upon for the truth. Second, she divorces herself from earthly religion, for she sees through the Church's perversions and seeks to raise herself to a more pure understanding. A shrine is a place of worship, and the Duchess errs when she uses visiting it as an excuse to be reunited with Antonio and her children. Thus, it is an example of the "noble lie" in action. While a feigned pilgrimage is not totally unforgiveable, her motives appear more Christian than do the Cardinal's; she perceives herself as doing more good than harm--she is trying to protect her family.

A mockery is made of religion when the Cardinal divests himself of his clerical robes and dons a soldier's armature. And it is not to make himself into a Christian soldier, either. He resigns his cardinal's hat when it suits his purpose to do so--he sees more power and gain by the move, making him even more despicable, more corrupt. This, then, becomes the turning point of the play. Those unconvinced of the Cardinal's foul nature have it neatly displayed before them; his evil nature surfaces physically emphasized and will grow in proportion until his death.

Dieter Mehl in The Elizabethan Dumb Show: The History of a Dramatic Convention points out that the visual elements found in the play are predominant, even when used concurrently with dialogue.<sup>29</sup> And the dumb show's presence appears particularly forceful in the play, for the elaborate pantomime acts as a foreboding prophecy for the action which follows. Antonio is banished; indeed, the first words of the next scene are the Duchess's astonished echo, "'Banish'd Ancona!'" And the pilgrims who first introduce, then later comment on the dumb show tell that the Cardinal violently removes the Duchess's wedding ring, swearing to sacrifice "'To his revenge'" (III. 4. 43). With this gesture, the action of the Duchess's separation from Antonio and ultimately her death are foretold. (Ironies are less subtle as one progresses to the play's conclusion.) The eavesdropping pilgrims first act as impartial viewers of the scene, commenting on the low marriage, but then the pilgrims realize the Duchess's innocence and the brothers' wickedness:

First Pilgrim: "But by what justice?"  
 Second Pilgrim: "Sure I thinke by none,  
 Only her brothers instigation."

(III. 4. 36-9)

By detaching dialogue from the action, the scene is moved farther away from the audience. Such a move, then, makes eavesdroppers out of the audience and makes them more involved in the action. Webster's manipulation of the audience here parallels the eavesdropping effect he tried to create earlier in the wooing scene. Shakespeare, for example, uses the same technique in Hamlet as we await King Claudius's reaction to the poisoning of Hamlet's father. We not only watch the dumb show; we watch Hamlet's, Claudius's, and Horatio's reactions as well.

Webster not only uses the technique of the play within the play, but combines it with other visual aids--the dead hand, the waxworks, and the mad scene--to reinforce his points. With these visuals, he is able to present certain incidents and characters in different lights.

Just as the Cardinal's exchange of hats reinforces the cruel language that has gone on before, so too are Ferdinand's rash actions emphasized by his cruel torture of the Duchess in Act IV. He cruelly plays with the Duchess by first holding out what turns out to be a dead man's hand, which he tells her to be that of Antonio's. The Duchess realizes that these tortures are part of her brothers' plans for her, for when Bosola tells her "'Your

brothers meane you safety, and pitie,'" she knowingly replies, "'With such a pitie men preserve alive / Pheasants, and Quailes, when they are not fat enough / To be eaten'" (III. 5. 128-32).

While waiting for her brothers' final revenge, she endures wax figures of Antonio and her children apparently dead. These wax presentations do not leave her as Ferdinand wishes, "'plagu'd in art"; rather, she continues in her own artful world. She is aesthetically above the world in which she is a victim. Bosola as torturer/comforter seeks to channel what he perceives as her despair into traditional Christian dogma. What he fails to recognize because of the corrupting environment surrounding him is that she has already transcended his world; she accounts "'this world a tedious Theatre'" (IV. 1. 99). She is free to "'curse the Starres'" because she is above them (IV. 1. 115). Her acceptance of her lot, however, is different from Bosola's; he continuously complains of the wrongs done unto him, whereas the Duchess stoically accepts her torturer's wrongdoings. Thus, her lack of speech--the lack of outward despair--supports the claim of the heroine's complete self-possession.

V. THE GROTESQUE: THE FINAL PERVERSION OF RHETORIC IN  
ACTION AND LANGUAGE

Masques at marriages were popular courtly entertainment. Princess Elizabeth's wedding in 1613 was complete with a masque of revelers. Webster's use of the masque, however, is ironic; it is an anti-masque, though it follows, as Ingna-Stina Ekeblad points out, the traditional order of the masque.<sup>30</sup> Webster juxtaposes what is supposed to be a gay occasion against the Duchess's forthcoming death; her marriage masque is delayed from Act I until Act IV and becomes, in fact, her death dance. As Ferdinand says earlier in Act I, "'Such weddings, may more properly be said / To be executed, then celebrated'" (I. 1. 358-59). Instead of marriage vows, the Cardinal earlier warned of a funeral sermon if she were to enter into marriage; in other words, her marriage condemns her to death. Following the tradition of the masque, the revelers offer the Duchess a present--death, a present which she willingly accepts.

Bosola, disguised as a Father-time figure, invites the Duchess to join in the madness and she rises from her

silence to amusingly jest with Bosola about the fashion of her coffin: "'Let me be a little merry-- / Of what stuffe wilt thou make it?'" (IV. 2. 148-49). Bosola's plan to bring her "'By degrees to mortification'" does not work because the Duchess is above his rhetoric; she has already turned inward for comfort. Like his speech of man's insignificance, "'Thou art a box of worme-seede, at best, but a salvatory of greene mummey...,'" his new tactics are worthless: Her resolve is stronger than his (IV. 2. 123-4). And when Bosola ushers in the executioners with a coffin, cords, and a bell, and becomes "'the common Bellman,'" the Duchess sees through his metaphor, saying, "'Even now thou said'st, Thou wast a tombe-maker?'" (IV. 2. 174-8). Bosola cannot escape his misdeeds by changing roles; the Duchess has no need to change, for again, she has already transcended by looking inward.

And because she is self-aware and sees no need for escape, Cariola's cries for "'helpe'" amuse her:

Cariola: "Hence villaines, tyrants,  
murderers: alas!  
What will you do with my Lady? call for  
helpe."

Duchess: "To whom, to our next neighbours?  
they are  
mad-folkes."

(IV. 2. 198-201)

Bawdy, funny, and abstract are terms which characterize the madmen's antics, but the Duchess is not amused. As earlier in the first interchange with her brothers, she will not tolerate lewdness. But this time she is their prisoner and must listen and bear their torture:

2 Mad. (Lawyer) "Hell is a meere glass house, where the divells are continually blowing up womens soules, on hollow yrons, and the fire never goes out."

3 Mad (Priest) "I will lie with every woman in my parish the tenth night: I will tithe them over, like hay-cockes."

4 Mad. (Doctor) "Shall my Pothecary out-go me, because I am a Cuck-old? I have found out his roguery: he makes allom of his wives urin, and sells it to Puritaines, that have sore throates with over-strayning."

(IV. 2. 81-9)

Underlying the humor of the dancing manics are phrases which are pivotal to the brothers' obsessions: hell, death, religion, and sex. Not to be overlooked on yet another visual level is that these manics are but representative figures of the madness that causes the brothers to torture and to slay the Duchess as well as

their resulting madness after her death. Unity--rhetorical unity coupled with visual unity--controls this scene.

Moreover, not only are the obsessions highlighted, but events are foreshadowed. As madman number one points at the Priest, he asks, "'What's he, a rope-maker?'" (IV. 2. 101). Thus, the Cardinal's orders for strangling the Duchess make him the rope-maker. Likewise, the various cures for sleeplessness and cuckoldry will be similarly repeated as cures for Ferdinand's madness.

Bosola's role in the masque is much the same as the role of the pilgrims in the dumb show: he comments on the action before him. Avowed "'never in mine owne shape'" to return to the Duchess until her death, Bosola takes on a disguise, hiding beneath a costume. The Duchess, who sits patiently, calmly throughout the garish dance, does not have need of changing shapes; instead, she reaffirms her position.

Bosola's disguise represents an inward moral change; he cannot face the Duchess in his own person, so he must find a new perspective--he is a person for having known her. Thus his conversion to the Duchess's point of view has begun:

"Thou art not mad sure, do'st know me? Who  
am I?

Am not I, thy Duchesse?  
I am Duchesse of Malfy still."

(IV. 2. 121-39)

Surrounded by the insane and the soon-to-be-insane, the Duchess retains the same rhetorical posture that she assumed with her diamond speech--she remains self-possessed. The Duchess is terrified "'Not a whit'" by the noose Bosola presents her: She is ready for her brothers to "'feede in quiet'" upon her, for her death will be the beginning of their torment. In the final moments before her death, she, in Christ-like fashion, forgives her executioners and directs Cariola to "'looke thou giv'st my little boy / Some sirrop, for his cold, and let the girle / Say her prayers, ere she sleepe'" (IV. 2. 207-08).

Unlike her brothers, she is not afraid of death, for she thinks Antonio and her children to be already dead: "'who would be afraid on't? / Knowing to meete such excellent company / In th' other world'" (IV. 2. 216-17). And just as the Duchess earlier asks Bosola questions about the grave, he now reciprocates, probing her feelings about death.

Bosola: "Yet me thinkes,

The manner of your death should much affect you,

This cord should terrife you? Duchess: Not a whit--

What would it pleasure me, to have my throate cut

with diamonds? or to be smothered

With Cassia? or to be shot to death, with pearles?

I know death hath ten thousand severall doores

For men, to take their Exits: and 'tis found

They go on such strange geometricall hinges, You may open them both wayes...."

(IV. 2. 219-28)

The rope has the same function as "'The apoplexie, cathar, or cough o' th' loongs'" as far as the Duchess is concerned; she perceives death as the "'Best guift is, they can give, or I can take--'" (IV. 2. 231).

Interestingly enough, the phrase "'strange geometricall hinges'" of which the Duchess speaks ironically echoes the function of geometry, making a rhetorical figure much as Bosola had in Act I, as well as foreshadowing visually the gallows with its dropping door. Geometry is but a set of exacting rules, yielding but one answer. For the Duchess, jewels or a cord yield the same death. And the door that the Duchess passes through on the gallows swings both ways: for her it is a release from

earthly tribulations; for her brothers, the reverberations of the door will lead to their death. Moreover, another dichotomy is accomplished by the image. The Duchess understands geometry, Bosola does not:

Bos. "There are rewards for hawkes, and dogges, when they have done us service; but for a Souldier, that hazards his Limbes in a battaile, nothing but a kind of Geometry, is his last Supportation."

Del. "Geometry?"

Bos. "I, to hang in a faire paire of slings, take his latter-swinge in the world, upon an honorable pare of Crowtches, from hospitall to hospitall--fare ye well, Sir. And yet do not you scorne us, for places in the Court, are but (like) beds in the hospitall, where this mans head lies at that mans foote, and so lower, and lower."

(I. 1. 59-69)

While Bosola progresses "'lower and lower'" through each progressive murder, the Duchess maintains the integrity of self. Thus, she can direct the hangmen:

"Pull, and pull strongly, for your able strength,  
Must pull downe heaven upon me...."  
(IV. 2. 237-38)

And when she halts her executioners--

"Yet stay, heaven gates are not so highly arch'd

As Princes pallaces--they that enter there  
 Must go upon their knees: Come violent death,  
 Serve for Mandragora, to make me sleepe...."

(IV. 2. 239-42)

--she is not kneeling in Christian repentance, though she knows the Biblical reference: "Because straight is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it" (St. Matt. 7:14). Rather, she kneels in Christian humility. She enters a state of grace. And in doing so, converts Bosola and brings the Cardinal and Ferdinand to their knees. Her integrity enables her to rise above suffering to face death with dignity--a rhetor is an organizer to the end.

Besides, though, the moral impact of the Duchess's kneeling is the visual impact of the scene. In order to hasten death, she stoops so that her tormenters can bring her peace. The Duchess is in control--still.

When Ferdinand is commanded by Bosola to fix his eyes upon the Duchess's body, he does "'Constantly'" and will continue to bear the image throughout the play: "'Cover her face: Mine eyes dazell: she di'd yong'" (IV. 2. 281). Of the three figures cast in one medal, only the Duchess radiates outward. She is the diamond of most value.

Lucas maintains that the weakness of the play lies in the plot: "It lives too long, when it outlives the heroine."<sup>31</sup> Perhaps Lucas's observation is based on the traditional Shakespearian fifth act where the tragic hero meets his end, for although her physical presence is removed from the stage in Act IV, the Duchess returns in Act V as a hauntingly beautiful echo. And with this echo (echos have the last word), Webster rhetorically reinforces the notion that the Duchess continues past death: She is "'Duchess of Malfy still.'"

Like the dumb show which casts the audience as eavesdroppers on the action, the echo scene fulfills a similar function. In terms of the rhetorical organization of the drama, it fulfills part of the traditional composition of the revenge plot, the voice that refuses to be quieted until revenge is gained. As echo, she can only repeat what is said; she is a reflection of the rhetoric surrounding her. But more than that, it focuses in on the de contemptu mundi theme of the play. Earlier, Bosola's worm speech addressed to the Duchess speaks of the body's eventual decay to "'puffe paste.'" Now the backdrop is the ancient ruins: the echo parallels the body to a ruined building:

"But all things have their end:  
Churches, and Citties (which have diseases  
like to men)  
Must have like death that we have."

(V. 3. 18-20)

Thus, art and religion are tainted with mortality. And like the crumbling edifice before them, Antonio must fall. The Duchess's voice from the grave attempts to warn Antonio; she willfully attempts to buck Fortune's Wheel (as she did in life), telling him, "'Be mindful of thy safety'" and "'O flye your fate'" (V. 3. 33, 35).

Ironically, Antonio tells the echo, "'I will not talk with thee,'" and he speaks of his Duchess as being asleep in her chamber. Indeed, she is dead, for the last words of the Echo are "'Never see her more'" (V. 3. 54). Rhetorically, the Echo can only repeat what has last been spoken, yet Antonio attempts conversation. In death as in life, Antonio cannot comprehend the Duchess's message: in life Antonio was never successful in looking inward.

Nicholas Brooke argues that cues for what he calls "horrid laughter" are planted throughout the fifth act, and thus laughter from the audience is to be expected, not denied.<sup>32</sup> And, I think, welcomed. As in Hamlet, there lies an excess of bodies on the stage for the play to be

taken with complete seriousness. All that is left after the Duchess's death are grotesquely funny characters who stab one another by mistake or whose elaborate plots backfire. And to top it off, Bosola utters a plot summation along with more than a few moral platitudes. The farce, I think, is intentional: it reinforces the Duchess's position in the universe in the sense that it provides a proper rhetorical conclusion. After the Duchess's death, we are left with chaos; without her integrity, we are left in a world where there is no balance:

"when thou kill'dst thy sister,  
Thou tookst from Justice her most equall  
ballance,  
And left her naught but her sword."

(V. 5. 52-4)

As Norman Berlin in "'The Duchess of Malfi': Act V and Genre" states, "With no Duchess physically present to directly engage our emotions, although always with us in spirit, we are left to witness a world where the death of men means nothing to us and could, in fact, make us titter because of its absence of terror, its staginess, its regularity."<sup>33</sup>

Moreover, the play needs the humor, although macabre, in order to balance an audience's emotions. In Webster's play, the purge comes early--Act IV--the moral comes in Act V. Without the Duchess, there is only horrid laughter.

It is only natural that John Webster's play would contain horrid laughter; it was a defense of the playwright's against the times. By the time of The Duchess of Malfi (c. 1614), the worlds both inside and outside the theatre are crumbling. Elizabeth dies. James ascends the throne. The "'strange geometrical hinges'" of the early seventeenth-century begin to "'open both ways.'" And the orderly world of the Renaissance takes a chaotic shift, leaving its inhabitants world-weary.

In this fragmented, incoherent universe Webster creates a female protagonist who asks the playwright's questions, who tests the limits of her environment, who "'stains the time past, lights the time to come'": the Duchess of Malfi. Webster's creation serves as the playwright's spokeswoman, and her conspicuously amoral behavior reflects the power of the age and its dissolution. The Duchess confronts the sinister, idiosyncratic, patriarchal worlds of the court and of the Church and snubs both, preferring, rather, to make her own world, creating

her own meaning and morality. She is totally self-possessed; she resists the irrational demands of her male siblings; she defies the social codes of matrimony; she negates the authority of the Church's representative, the Cardinal. Ultimately, she defies the rhetoric of her environment: its content, its structure, its rhythm, its style. And in doing so, she becomes her own rhetor, creating and ordering a noble world apart from an uncaring universe. As a rhetor she is successful, maintaining her own argument, causing others to change. For example, Bosola is a better person for knowing her. Yet she cannot change the entire corrupt environment. She dies, but an audience is better for its exposure to her and realizes its loss at her death in Act V.

It is, however, the play's final act that disturbs most critics. They have objections to what they perceive as Webster's flawed vision, chief among them his dependence on the grotesque and melodramatic in Act IV of the play and the resulting anticlimatic nature of Act V. But his vision is not flawed at all: the grotesque elements of Act IV and the melodramatic conclusion in Act V are pivotal to the irony operating in the play. The play reflects its age; therefore, the precise verbal irony must dissolve into gross action.

Just as any fiction depends on levels of meaning, so does John Webster's The Duchess of Malfi. Webster, however, converts the meaning into levels of irony, verbally and physically. There are the early conversations between the Duchess and her brothers where language produces multi-level meaning, but as the play progresses, action assumes more of that function of language. For example, the Cardinal dons a soldier's armature wordlessly. The waxworks show planned by Ferdinand allows the Duchess to believe that her family is dead. The actions in the masque provide multiple interpretations. At the Duchess's execution, she directs the hangmen; she determines her own physical posture. She goes down on her knees to hasten her demise.

Then the play goes on after the Duchess dies, which creates another irony. The world goes on without goodness or the near hope of regaining it. Webster wanted to demonstrate what happens in a world that destroys its rhetor, its morally organizing force. The irony is cosmic.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>M.C. Bradbrook, John Webster, Citizen and Dramatist (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1980), pp. 20-27.

<sup>2</sup>Bradbrook, pp. 23-24.

<sup>3</sup>Bradbrook, xi.

<sup>4</sup>Hyder E. Rollins and Herschel Baker, eds., The Renaissance in England (Lexington: D.C. Heath and Company, 1954), pp. 588-657.

<sup>5</sup>Rollins and Baker, p. 591.

<sup>6</sup>Rollins and Baker, pp. 590-591.

<sup>7</sup>Rollins and Baker, p. 591.

<sup>8</sup>Susan C. Baker in "The Static Protagonist in The Duchess of Malfi," Texas Studies in Literature and Language, 22 (1980), 343-57, provides a related argument for the protagonist's lack of movement in the play. Baker's argument centers on a comparison of Bosola's movement to the Duchess's lack of motion.

<sup>9</sup>John Webster, The Duchess of Malfi, ed. F.L. Lucas (1927; rpt. London: Chatto and Windus, 1967), p. 50. All further references to the play will be given parenthetically within the work. Hereafter this text will be referred to as Lucas.

<sup>10</sup>Lucas, p. 32.

<sup>11</sup>Lucas explains Magnanima Mensogna in a note on p. 174 that the reference is from Tasso. Because an image of the virgin is stolen by the tyrant of Jerusalem and it vanishes, the tyrant, in revenge, begins to persecute Christians. A pious Christian maiden tells the magnanima menzogna, and in order to save her fellow Christians, she falsely shoulders the blame. Tasso's reference is from Horace, who applied the same theme to Hypermnestra. Of the fifty daughters of Danaus, only Hypermnestra broke her word to her father and saved her husband--instead of slaying him--on their marriage night. Like the Duchess, Hypermnestra and Tasso's Sofronia place the good of others before themselves; moreover, all three women defie a patriarchal system.

<sup>12</sup>The historical information of this chapter comes from Lucas's introduction.

<sup>13</sup>Donald Lemen Clark, Rhetoric and Poetry in The Renaissance (New York: Russell and Russell, Inc., 1963), p. 139.

<sup>14</sup>Jerrold E. Seigel, Rhetoric and Philosophy in Renaissance Humanism (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1968), p. 9.

<sup>15</sup>Lucas, p. 35.

<sup>16</sup>Timothy J. Reiss, Tragedy and Truth (New Haven and London: Yale Univ. Press, 1980), p. 163.

<sup>17</sup>Geoffrey Chaucer refers to the "commun profyt" in The Parliament of Fowls. The phrase is based on the concept of ideal Christian love.

<sup>18</sup>Davis P. Harding discusses at length the conventions of betrothal in "Elizabethan Betrothals and Measure for

Measure," Journal of English and German Philology, 49 (1950), 139-58.

<sup>19</sup>Sir Frederick Pollock and Frederick William Maitland, The History of English Law, Vol. II, (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1968), p. 368.

<sup>20</sup>Henry Swinburne, A Treatise on Matrimonial Contracts (London: Printed by S. Roycraft for Robert Clavell at the Peacock in St. Paul's Churchyard, 1686), p. 87.

<sup>21</sup>Swinburne, p. 195.

<sup>22</sup>Pollock and Maitland, pp. 370-379.

<sup>23</sup>Harding, p. 143.

<sup>24</sup>John Webster's image of the "divell in Crystal" appears in The White Devil (IV. ii. 86).

<sup>25</sup>Robert Kellogg and Oliver Steele, eds., Books I and II of The Faerie Queene (Indianapolis: The Oydsey Press, 1965), p. 83. Kellogg and Steele provide a note explicating Spenser's reference to Dante.

<sup>26</sup>Kellogg and Steele, p. 83.

<sup>27</sup>Nicholas Brooke, Horrid Laughter in Jacobean Tragedy (London: Open Books, 1979), p. 50.

<sup>28</sup>E.M.W. Tillyard, The Elizabethan World Picture (New York: Vintage Press, n.d.), p. 16.

<sup>29</sup>Dieter Mehl, The Elizabethan Dumb Show: The History of a Dramatic Convention (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1966), pp. 143-145.

<sup>30</sup>Ingna-Stina Ekeblad, "Webster's Constructional Rhythm," English Literary History, 24 (1957), pp. 165-176.

<sup>31</sup>Lucas, p.34.

<sup>32</sup>Brooke, pp. 62-63.

<sup>33</sup>Norman Berlin, "The Duchess of Malfi: Act V and Genre," Genre, 3 (1970), p. 361.

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STILL THE DUCHESS: JOHN WEBSTER'S USE OF RHETORIC

by

Constance Bailey

(ABSTRACT)

Rhetoric is a matter of control. It is, in fact, the process of ordering the components of speech and action to produce a desired end. Drama is an ideal manifestation of rhetoric in that it shows the word becoming action in the flesh of the actors on stage. The rhetorical process (drama) is as much a focus of John Webster's The Duchess of Malfi (c. 1614) as its apparent thematic material: self-possession, which is expressed in the play as family relations, marriage customs, and noblesse oblige.

John Webster knew rhetoric and was himself an excellent rhetorician. And he creates a female protagonist who "stains the time past, lights the time to come": the Duchess of Malfi. Webster's creation serves as the playwright's spokesperson, and her conspicuously amoral behavior reflects the power of the age and its dissolution. The Duchess confronts the sinister, idiosyncratic, patriarchal worlds of the

court and of the Church and snubs both, preferring, rather, to make her own path, to make her own meaning, to make her own morality. She is totally self-possessed; she resists the irrational demands of her male siblings; she defies the social codes of matrimony; she negates the authority of the Church's representative, the Cardinal. Ultimately, she defies the rhetoric of her environment: its content, its structure, its rhythm, its style. In doing so, she becomes her own rhetor, creating and ordering a noble world apart from an uncaring universe. As a rhetor she is successful, maintaining her own argument, causing others to change. Yet she cannot change the entire corrupt environment. She dies, but an audience is better for its exposure to her and realizes its loss at her death in Act V.

Critics, however, object to Webster's dependence on the grotesque and melodramatic elements in Act IV and Act V of the play. Webster's dramatic vision is not flawed at all: the grotesque elements in Act IV and the resulting anticlimatic nature of Act V are pivotal to the irony operating in the play. The play reflects the age and its dissolution; therefore, the

precise verbal irony must dissolve into gross action. Without the Duchess physically present to maintain justice in the world, only physical horrors remain. Webster wanted to demonstrate what happens in a world that destroys its rhetor, its morally organizing force. The result is defensive laughter. The irony is cosmic.