

S K E N È

Journal of Theatre and Drama Studies

4:1 2018

Transitions

Edited by Silvia Bigliuzzi

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Published in May 2018

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ISSN 2421-4353

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SKENÈ Theatre and Drama Studies

<http://www.skenejournal.it>

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Dir. Resp. (aut. Trib. di Verona): Guido Avezzù

P.O. Box 149 c/o Mail Boxes Etc. (MBE150) – Viale Col. Galliano, 51, 37138, Verona (I)

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CLARA MUCCI*

***The Duchess of Malfi:* When a Woman-Prince Can Talk¹**

Abstract

The Duchess of Malfi (1623) by John Webster presents the case of a woman-prince, an anomaly in the symbolic and political structure of early seventeenth-century England, who is endowed with powerful language and therefore directs the action of the play and her consequent persecution. Her ambivalent position bears resemblance to the case of Elizabeth I and her threatening symbolic position, since her body politic is male and her body natural is female, with all the contradictions of the construction of the feminine in early modern Europe. What is most threatening in Webster's representation is the Duchess's ability with language (see the wooing scene among the others) so that she is viewed as a dangerous subject to be kept under strict control by the males of the family, another element of similarity with Elizabeth. As an heiress, she detains a power which is in contrast with a sex that should be weak, dominated and subservient. The play constructs masculinity as rationality and order and femininity as passion and disorder or corruption. In this way the Duchess's behaviour becomes in turn a clear metaphor of a Court and a State viewed as in decay and increasingly corrupted and ill. The metaphorical pattern created around the body-language of the Duchess is that of a femininity that is diseased, corrupted, immoral and decayed, retaining a witch-like status and a devilish body position. The corruption of the court is equated with the corruption of the woman-prince whose power is exceeding and dangerous. In a matter of years, in the real scene of England the disruption of order will be total, with the assassination of the King and the following Civil War. The theatres themselves will be closed and the threat posited by 'woman' culturally represented, as the cause of all evils in the patriarchal restoration in search of definite identity will see the final act of the persecution of women as witches and whores.

KEYWORDS: woman-prince; power; early modern England; corruption; witchcraft; body; devil

¹ A study of Webster's plays (1966) was Alessandro Serpieri's first critical work, which was also the book that introduced me to his critical method. I dedicate this paper to him and to his generous mind, with gratitude.

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1. Act 1: “A Fearful Madness”, or of the Contradictions of Being a Prince, a Woman, and a Speaking Subject

Performed in 1614 at Blackfriars and published in 1623, *The Duchess of Malfi* situates itself within the profoundly hierarchical ideology of Jacobean England, which both contains and subverts in its practices the powerful political and social tensions at its core.

I here follow the implications highlighted mainly by Stephen Greenblatt (1988), Catherine Belsey (1985), Dymphna Callaghan (1989), and by myself (2001; 2009), maintaining that theatrical praxes and play-texts can be viewed as a depository of the “circulation of the social energy”, inscribed in and imbued with the binarisms of the time, where man vs woman, order vs disorder, master vs servant were predominant. As Callaghan reminds us, not only are gender categories inscribed within the structure of order, but they may also be viewed as the representatives of order itself, in so far as, if woman rebels, or starts to speak, or is defiant and does not obey, the entire order collapses or is threatened. We should also keep in mind that this very structure had been struck at its symbolic core by Elizabeth herself, who, both a king and a woman, had represented the paradox at the heart of that structure, with her subversive body, her speeches and her social representations of power. As Leonard Tennehouse states, describing Elizabeth’s powers: “those [patriarchal] powers . . . were no less patriarchal for being embodied as a female, and the female was no less female for possessing patriarchal powers” (1986: 103). And yet, both Elizabeth and the Duchess with their subversive bodies and speech practices are emblems of a construction of femininity which remains deeply uncanny as the subversion of the very rule they are supposed to exemplify. Femininity therefore remains the sign of “real otherness . . . uncanny in that it is not the opposite of masculinity but *that which subverts the very opposition of masculinity and femininity*” (Felman 1981: 42).

In addition to this, I would like to underline how the cultural and symbolic frame within which *The Duchess of Malfi* is cast resonates with macrometaphors deeply at play in the imaginary of the time. The King himself in fact had used gendered metaphors in his official speech at the House of Commons in 1604: “I am the Husband, and all the whole Isle is My lawful Wife: I am the Head and it is my Body”. But womanhood is always dangerous or potentially ‘unruly’; even when at the symbolic and political centre (like Elizabeth), femininity is constructed as impure because of its orifices (see Douglas 1966 and Mucci 2009), and therefore is corrupted or demonic: “Murderous or demonic, whores or saints, women were placed at the margins of the social body, while at the same time, in the new model of marriage they were uneasily, silently at the heart of the private realm which

was its microcosm and its centre (Belsey 1985: 150). In Belsey's words, Act 1 opens with the description of an ideal Court, that of France, from which Antonio has just returned. The French Court is placed in opposition to the Court which is the setting of the work. This is the first contrast or opposition on which the drama is structured. The Court which the play deals with is the inverse or negative of the Court of France. In re-establishing order, says Antonio, the French King got rid "of flattering sycophants, of dissolute, / and infamous persons" (1.1.8-9).² The ideal Court then is "a common fountain whence should *flow / pure silver drops* in general" (ll. 12-13; emphasis mine). This ideal Court is placed in opposition to the real possibility that "if't chance / Some curs'd example poison't near the head / *Death and diseases* through the whole land *spread*" (ll. 13-15; emphasis mine). "The corruption of the times", illustrated through the opposite image of an ideal Court and prince which exemplify what is missing since the first scene, is in the foreground in Webster's second play. From the beginning the malcontent Bosola incarnates the conflictuality with the Court which constitutes the backdrop of the tragedy: "Here comes Bosola: The only court-gall" (ll. 22-3). His first words are addressed to the Cardinal with whom he has been in service and they express an unwavering resentment which seems to return in circles ("I do haunt him still: I have done you better service than to be slighted thus", ll. 31-2). Bosola's resentment translates into a generalized invective against the corruption of the times: "Miserable age, where only the reward of doing well, is the doing of it" (ll. 32-3). The character of the malcontent, cast as a contrast against a landscape which without him would present a false order and tranquillity and whose role has received a much greater role than it had in the sources, highlights, through irony and chiaroscuro effects, the schism between the real and the ideal that characterizes the peculiar incipit of the play.

The lack of 'courtly reward', which was central in *The White Devil*, returns uncannily in *The Duchess of Malfi*. Here, however, the malcontent is more complex and more highly defined than Flamineo. In scene 1 it is Bosola himself who furnishes us with the details of the levels of degradation he has passed through while at the service of the Cardinal, including imprisonment and poverty.

The work proceeds by developing the themes of the devouring orality, corruption, decadence and bestiality of princes and courts; it is Bosola himself who describes the two brothers from Aragon:

like *plum trees*, that grow crooked over standing pools, they are rich, and o'erladen with fruit, but none but crows, pies, and caterpillars feed on them.

² All quotations are from Webster (1986).

Could I be one of their *flattering panders*, I would hang on their ears like a *horseleech*, till I were full, and then drop off. I pray leave me. Who would rely upon these *miserable dependences*, *expectation to be advanc'd tomorrow*? What creature ever *fed worse*, than that he that hop'd for a pardon? There are *rewards for hawks*, and *dogs*, when they have done us *service*; but for a soldier, that hazards his *limbs* in a battle, nothing but a kind of geometry is his last supportation. (ll. 49-61; emphasis mine)

His words contain images of nature which suggest wealth and fertility but also deformity, bestiality, parasites and stagnant water. In the morally anomalous world, turned upside down, of the court, "reward" is in opposition with "service" (1.1.31ff.). The chosen perspective seems to be that of the typically pessimistic and sinister malcontent who has been "slighted thus", but the irony on which the drama is constructed will demonstrate, as the work develops, that Bosola's point of view is not simply the oblique perspective of a person who is socially marginalized. Rather, it opens the anamorphic vision of the world which nonetheless allows the reconstruction of the correct perspective through its margins. The trajectory may be crooked but the view is revealing in its disclosing the deformities of the grotesque, the ironic and of tragedy tottering on the brink of destruction, in a world where princes and cardinals are madmen and criminals.

Even if it would be inappropriate to apply the term 'tragicomedy' to *The Duchess of Malfi* since the fragmentation of tragedy that we find in Middleton's work is not apparent here yet, it is important nonetheless to note that the heroine dies in Act 4, while the play continues into a fifth act which is essentially a satiric protest, in which the tragic tension diminishes, after the climax has been reached with the 'masque of madmen', which represents the high mark in the rending apart of the traditional model of tragedy. The tragedy of the Duchess is 'decomposing' into a satire or tragicomedy, meaning that after 1610 representation of the tragic becomes increasingly difficult.

Melancholy is the existential condition all characters have to undergo sooner or later: Ferdinand ends up going mad, a victim of lycanthropy; Antonio defines the Cardinal as a "melancholy churchman" and describes his own melancholy to the Duchess during the 'wooing scene'; while in prison, the Duchess, according to Ferdinand, shows signs of melancholy. But melancholy leaves its deepest scars on Bosola, the 'other' protagonist of the play. From the beginning Bosola is described as suffering from a "foul melancholy" which, according to Antonio, "Will poison all his goodness" (1.1.76), since "*want of action / Breeds all black malcontents and their close rearing / like moths in a cloth, do hurt for want of wearing*" (ll. 79-81; emphasis mine).

In the first lines of the drama, therefore, it is already possible to perceive a relationship between the melancholy of the characters and the theme of

feeding/nurturing, mentioned by Bosola when speaking of the two brothers, to characterize their perverse and corrupt nature. Besides being directly connected with parasitism, “feed” links “melancholy” with the bad nurturing that comes from the court by using a word which alludes directly to a feminine activity *par excellence*. *Feeding* (another word for *breastfeeding*), *raising*, *rearing*, and *breeding* are activities which are culturally assigned to the female. From this point on, it is interesting to begin tracing a thread which links melancholy with a femininity that, rather than nurturing with good food, poisons. This operation allows us to get at the roots of melancholy which are embedded in the concept of a Nature-Femininity which is perceived as destructive and life-threatening. In *The Duchess of Malfi*, which clearly connects melancholy with bad nurturing or mothering, unlike *The White Devil*, melancholy is a state which comes to affect almost all of the principal characters. It is so ever-present that it seems to engulf the entire drama in the grotesque and macabre view of the malcontent: a view of reality which reaches its maximum intensity in the disquieting dance of the madmen, which, paradoxically, turns out to be revealing if, at the end of it, the Duchess in 4.2 declares herself to be “Duchess of Malfi still”.

In the next scene the “great Calabrian Duke” (1.2.5), Ferdinand, makes his entrance. His first remarks are sexual innuendos and we are told that he has “a most perverse and turbulent nature” (l. 94). It is evident that his tranquil exterior amounts to a mere facade, and that internally he is plagued by profound conflict: “What appears in him mirth, is merely outside” (l. 95). Even the Duke, then, is presented immediately as one who suffers from a hidden melancholy which is never given vent to (if not in his obsessive control and persecution of his sister, as we shall see). The Cardinal and the Duke can be defined as devils (Antonio remarks: “the devil speaks in them”, l. 111) or as “twins” since they share an identically corrupt and melancholic nature. The representation of the Duchess also begins with the representation of an ideal figure who is gradually defined by oppositions as in a game of reversals, of almost photographic black-and-white pairs, with dark and light effects. The first picture we receive of the Duchess is given by Antonio who comments ecstatically about the power of seduction in her words and her gaze:

But for their sister, the right noble Duchess,
 You never fix'd your eye on *three fair medals*,
 Cast in *one figure*, of so *different temper*.
 For her *discourse*, it is so full of *rapture*,
 You only will begin, then to be sorry
 When she doth end *her speech*: and *wish, in wonder*,
 She held it less vainglory to *talk much*
 Than your penance, to *hear her whilst she speaks*,

She throws upon a man *so sweet a look*,
 That it *were able to raise* one to a galliard
 That lay in a *dead palsy*, and to dote
 On that *sweet countenance*: but in that *look*
 There *speaketh so divine a continence*,
 As *cuts off all lascivious*, and *vain hope*.
 Her days are practis'd in such *noble virtue*,
 That, sure *her nights*, nay more, *her very sleeps*,
 Are more *in heaven*, than other ladies' shrifts.
 Let all sweet ladies break their flatt'ring glasses,
 And dress themselves in her.
 (ll. 112-29; emphasis mine)

A few lines below it is once again Antonio who gives a lapidary definition of the Duchess in terms of light and the opposition between *light/shadow* and *future/past*: “She *stains the time past: lights the time to come*” (l. 134; emphasis mine).

The seduction the Duchess exerts on us is a verbal charm that arises from words and gaze (*discourse – rapture – speech – talk – she speaks – she throws upon a man so sweet a look – sweet countenance – in that look speaketh so divine a continence*).

The idealized image of the Duchess is set against her brothers' diabolical nature as heaven (“noble virtue”, “so divine a continence”, “heaven”) is set against hell (the word “devil” is used several times to refer to both the Duke and the Cardinal). The description of the Duchess passes from the sweetness of her gaze to the light she generates and then to her power to seduce with words and, finally, to her virtue. In the idealized description of the Duchess that her steward gives, the feminine word is not treated as synonymous with falsification and corruption, but rather as leading to virtue, according to a traditional line of thought which views woman as a guide towards heaven and all that is good. The opposite pole of this view is that of woman as witch, whore, and creator of life and death, which is rooted in the misogynist thought of the Scriptures as well as in Plato and Aristotle, in Western culture.

At this point of the play Ferdinand orders Bosola to spy on the Duchess, explaining his decision with the terse remark “she's a young widow / I would not have her marry again” (ll. 178-9). Bosola marvels at Ferdinand's reasoning and asks what motivation lies behind it, but Ferdinand answers curtly: “Do not ask the reason: but be satisfied, / I say I would not (ll. 181-2).

The motivation for the control the brother exerts over his sister is traditionally regarded by critics as incestuous. It is also important to consider that if the Duchess were to marry again the property which she inherited

from her first husband would not go to her family. Moreover, Ferdinand's control over his sister is part of a Mediterranean culture which assigns the male of a family the duty of watching over the female because she is repository of family honour. Following this, there is an exchange of words between him and the Duchess: the first words refer to the fact that she is a "widow", a woman who has already known man ("You are a widow: / You know already what man is", ll. 217-18).

Only the most dissolute of women marry again, the Duke says, ("Marry? They are most luxurious, / Will wed twice", ll. 221-2) and for this reason the sexual desire of the young widowed sister is threatening because it is momentarily liberated from direct male control, making it dangerously similar to the unrestrained sexuality of a whore. In 1.3 Ferdinand will call her "lustful widow" and his only reason for considering her as such are his projections and his belonging to a patriarchal culture which does not admit of any other categories of women but those of virgin and chaste wife, or of dangerous and sinful being, the whore, whose sexuality is unrestrained.

After the first scene has established a symbolically feminine cause for all the evils of society, it is not surprising that the next part of the tragedy deals with the persecution of a woman over whom sexual control must be established and who is found guilty of corruption and lust even before these crimes have been committed.

As the widowed head of state of a dukedom, the Duchess finds herself in a complex position not only because of the economic power she exerts, but also due to the fact that she is neither a 'maiden' nor a 'wife' (the female statuses which are most reassuring to males). As a woman who "already know[s] what man is", the Duchess is positioned outside of the usual societal norms. At the same time, the very fact that the "Duchess" has no name seems to indicate that she is the incarnation of a category rather than a female subject. She is a "female prince" who reigns over Amalfi, representing a political question much debated since the time of Mary Stuart and Elizabeth Tudor. The writings of John Knox, particularly *The First Blast of the Trumpet against the Monstruous Regiment of Women* (1558), are indicative. This work posits the theory that since God meant women to be weaker than men it is "repugnant to nature" (1880: 11 and ff.) that women rule over men. Christy Desmet notes that in the controversy over woman's nature that raged in England towards the end of the sixteenth century (reaching a climax in the decade in which Webster published his major works), the Duchess may be associated with Bosola in that both are liminal creatures in the ambivalent anthropological sense described by Victor Turner, definable through their presence-absence in the social structure. Since she is woman and prince at the same time, she is an anomaly, a disrupting hole in the structure, "an empty category" (Desmet 1991: 85).

The duality of the Duchess as *persona mixta*, woman, with her duties of obedience and submission, but at the same time ruler of a dukedom (and of the men in that dukedom) is made even more threatening by the economic power that her status of widow confers on her. Widowhood was the only situation in which a woman's rights to property were legally recognized.

Webster places in evidence the rhetorical skill of the Duchess, which up to now has only been described by others, from the very first lines which he assigns her. We are immediately struck by her capacity with metaphors, which are suffused with the underlying sexual meanings of the day, in which feminine sexuality is equated with jewels and precious metals: "Diamonds are of most value / They say, that have pass'd through most jewelers' hands" (ll. 223-4). Feminine value is made an equivalent of sexual value (or use) in implied meanings which Ferdinand is quick to pick up on and reply to, using the same pattern of *woman/value/use/price/commerce in flesh/whore*: "Whores, by that rule, are precious" (l. 225).

To the false declaration of the Duchess, ("Will you hear me? I'll never marry", l. 226) the Cardinal reacts with scepticism and misogyny: "So most widows say: / But commonly that motion lasts no longer / than the turning of an hourglass; the funeral sermon / And it end both together" (ll. 227-30). Webster, however, emphasizes the irony of this scene by placing it in juxtaposition with the wooing scene in which the Duchess declares her love and marries in secret.

In so doing she commits a triple crime: she disregards her brother's order not to marry, she marries a social inferior and she marries in secret. The link between the Court and woman which interests us here is even more clearly illustrated by the following words of Ferdinand which connect the corruptible nature of the feminine (sexually corruptible) and the dangerous life of the Court by foregrounding the 'natural' elements which the two have in common:

You live in a *rank pasture* here, *i'th' court*,
 There is a kind of *honey-dew* that's *deadly*.
 'Twill *poison* your fame; look to't; be not cunning;
 For they whose *faces* do *belie* their hearts
 Are *witches*, ere they arrive at twenty years,
 Ay: and *give the devil suck*.
 (ll. 230-5; emphasis mine)

Once again we find the same deep associative logic present in *The White Devil* regarding the theme of woman-Nature-Court-corruption-falsity, but here it is carried to its negative extreme: the witch and the devil.

In the imagination of the melancholic *falsity/sweetness/trickery/fluidity/Court/Nature/nurturing/poisonous destructive nature/poison* belong to

the same semantic field characterized as feminine and projected outside as an exasperated fear of diabolical women, witches and devils who personify the threatening side of Nature as creator and nurturer. The association of the Court with femininity is made possible because of the links which both have to Nature and to a potential fertility: in 1.3 the Court is a “rank pasture”, a “honey dew” which reveals itself to be lethal just as woman is a nurturer who has the potential to cause death. This associative pattern serves to strengthen the connection already made between “feeding” and the Court. It is worth noting here that it was precisely woman’s connection with Nature that made it possible for John Knox to associate woman with the weak. Knox equates women with the blind and the mad (“For their sight in ciuile regiment, is but blindnes: their strength, weaknes: their counsel, foolishenes: and iudgement, phrenesie, if it be rightlie considered”: 1880: 12) and also says she is a “tendre creature, flexible, soft and pitiful” (1880: 25) who is better suited to raising children than to ruling over a State. How can woman, whom God has created as an inferior, rule over man, her ‘natural’ superior? Ferdinand believes that the logic of his speech to his sister is obvious: the Court, itself a place characterized by falsity, finds in woman’s fickle and mutable nature the natural element for corruption. From here there is only a short step to an inversion of the natural-feminine into the demonic as the unnatural. This includes the witches who, as the texts on melancholy explained, are the true nurturers of the devil (“and they give devil suck”), and so even worse than the devil. The woman witch or devil is a perversion of that natural element which should nurture but which, on the contrary, may lead to destruction and disaster. The Court is woman’s social correlative; it shares with her the same excesses of corrupt production, reproduction, and parasitical and destructive nurturing. In comparison to *The White Devil* the semantic network of a nurturing that can be harmful or even deadly (*feed/poison*) is much clearer and more generalized. We pass from the opening lines in 1.1 that give an idealized vision of the prince’s court as a *fountain* that ought to lavish “pure silver-drops” (note the feminine element of *fluidity*) of life and wealth on the nation, to the image of the reigning brothers who, rather than being providers of nourishment to their subjects, are like “plum-trees” that grow “crooked over a *standing pool*” and which have an abundance of fruit that is, however, full of disgusting parasites (“crows, pies, and caterpillars”) that “*feed on them*” (emphasis mine). At this point, we are in 1.2, Delio delivers his monstrous presentation of Ferdinand as a spider that devours whoever is caught in his web: “the law to him / Is like a foul black cobweb to a spider. / He makes it his dwelling, and a prison / To entangle those shall feed him”. The elements of the corrupted-natural-feminine association are all present: fertility-production (trees abounding in fruit), reproduction (filthy,

parasitical, and beastly as it is) and a nourishment which is a lethal deceit and imprisonment.

In essence, Woman and the Court, associated by their connections with Nature, are united in the metaphorical chain of *fertility-production-reproduction-death*.

The description of the Woman-Nature pairing would not be complete without a discussion of marriage. Like women and women rulers, marriage was the object of a great deal of critical attention on the part of scholars and clerics of the day. Their discussion constitutes a cultural macro-text which gives us a great deal of insight into the “social energy”, to use Greenblatt’s term (1988), that was at play in this period. Sexuality becomes an essential element of matrimony, even in the religious texts dealing with the subject. For the Church it is an integral part of the ‘intimacy’ necessary for the ‘companionate marriage’, which, in so far as it is a ‘chaste marriage’, has as its sole objective reproduction and is, consequently, preferable to celibacy. Plays as well as religious and secular treatises of the day express such deep rooted preconceptions with regard to femininity and sexuality that it is not surprising that any attempt to make woman and female sexuality one step closer to man and his sexuality must provoke a male reaction similar to Ferdinand’s stance towards the Duchess – femininity must be kept under control because of its relations with nature and because of the threats it poses on male sexuality. It seems that Ferdinand’s role in the play is to exert control over what masculine identity perceives as the ‘excessiveness’ of female desire, i.e. over her passion and irrationality (‘lust’ here is perceived as the opposite of ‘duty’). This places him in a position of control over a sphere of language which is ‘feminine’, a sphere which overruns its borders, overwhelmed by excess, which can lead to ruptures, to verbal and symbolic disintegration and destruction: notice, for example, how frequently the signifier “undone” is used. It is a well calculated irony that it is Ferdinand himself who ends up being a victim of this excess of passion, irrationality, limitless and misunderstood desire, in a word of madness, although it was his intention to drive the Duchess mad with the masque of madmen.

It is significant that the Cardinal intervenes in the dialogue between the Duchess and Ferdinand with a remark about marriage: “The marriage night / Is the entrance to some prison” (1.3.246-7).

The allusion to sexual pleasures, now made legal by marriage, is quite clear in the words of Ferdinand:

. . . And those joys,
 Those *lustful pleasures*, are like heavy sleeps
 Which do forerun *man’s mischief*.
 (1.3.247-9; emphasis mine)

The horror which the possible marriage of his sister provokes in the Duke is a horror of sexuality in general as well as of femininity, which he feels even stronger in himself because of his strong psychological bond with his sister; critic Nadia Setti notes that there is a problem of identity between the Duke and his sister: the Duke perceives his (culturally defined as) feminine parts, emotionality and irrationality, in opposition to rationality and control over passionality, and sees those qualities emphasized in his sister, whom therefore he has to keep under control and eventually destroy (Setti 1983). To introduce the notion of sexuality as an important unifying force for couples regardless of procreation (as some contemporary religious writers had done) is for Ferdinand an intolerable contamination by the Feminine-Natural which could easily lead to 'man's mischief'. Traditional Biblical stories linking woman (as well as feminine language) with the downfall of man were still a strong influence in the culture of the day notwithstanding the new forms of author-text relationships that had been introduced by the Reformation. Only a few decades earlier Joseph Swetnam had written such strong invectives against woman in his famous *Arraignment of Lewd, Froward and Unconstant Women*:

a woman will pick thy pocket, and empty thy purse, laugh in thy face and cut your throat: they are ungrateful, perjured, full of fraud, flouting and deceit, inconstant, waspish, toyish, light, sullen, proud, discourteous and cruel. (1807: 165)

The specific problem posited by the existence of a 'female prince' is how a woman can govern if she has a sexuality that is essentially 'on the (dangerous) side of nature' and, therefore, on the side of disorder, chaos and lack of reason. By prohibiting his sister to marry again Ferdinand really intends to try to stem feminine sexuality and its dark fluidity.

2. The Seduction of Words: Desire and the Constitution of Language

When Ferdinand leaves, we are made witness to the Duchess's seduction of Antonio. From her words it is clear that she has been hatching her plans for some time and that Cariola is a part of it. At the end of the seduction scene the Duchess says:

The misery of us, that are born great.
 We are forc'd to woo, because none dare woo us:
 And as a *tyrant doubles* with his *words*,
 And fearfully *equivocates*: so we
 Are forc'd to *express our violent passions*
 In *riddles*, and in *dreams*, and leave the path

Of simple *virtue*, which was never made
 To seem the thing it is not.
 (1.2.360-7; emphasis mine)

Here the Duchess gives us what seems to be a summary of the aesthetics of the day according to the dictates of Puttenham on art *vs* nature and on 'decorum' as a natural artifice. In her words the language of desire is placed in opposition not so much to reason as it is to virtue. The language of passion, as obscure and complex as that of riddles or dreams, is similar to that of art, particularly poetry, in which rhetorical figures – or what Francesco Orlando (1973) would call "tasso di figuralità" [figurality rate] – violate the ordinary rules of language and replace nature with artifice, a hypothetical total 'transparency' between signifier and signified with figurative 'opacity'.

According to the Duchess, the language of desire is double-faced, equivocal, ambivalent and able to be expressed only in riddles and dreams, whose obscure, enigmatic, ambiguous and unconscious nature is obvious. What is relevant, though, is that this duplicity is intimately linked with immorality, since it is placed in direct opposition not to reason but to virtue. Virtue admits of no deceit. It is something "which was never made / To seem the thing it is not", as Ferdinand will shortly observe in 1.3. The obscure word that could express a surplus of desire is accused of immorality and it is this immorality that facilitates the association of lascivious woman with ambivalent and polysemic language and with the mechanisms of punning (Mucci 2004). Terry Eagleton has observed that political instability corresponds to linguistic instability (1996). We could add that, in the imaginary cultural construction of the period, linguistic instability also corresponds to (a projected) corruption of the feminine and as a consequence requires the repression of women's language as well as their bodies. Ferdinand's words make this correspondence evident. Masculinity (as rationality) and feminine (as passion), similarly to the opposition virtue/corruption, are represented as different types of language. On the side of the unconscious are situated woman and corruption as what is opposed to virtue. If the playwright can be defined as the one who is involved with a slippery, polysemic and ambiguous poetic language, clearly this places him in the same zone where imagination, woman, and corruption are to be found. As Shakespeare had already argued in *Midsummer Night's Dream*, "the lunatic, the lover and the poet are of imagination all compact" (Shakespeare 1997: 5.1.7-8). The theoretical status of drama is such that as a practice drama can be associated to riddles and dreams, in the same way the playwright can be associated (for his poetic, transgressive practice) to the fool, to women, and to madness. This clarifies why Puritans attacked the theatre and its 'corruption': woman/sexuality/ambiguity of language (as a sign of politi-

cal instability) and theatre all belong to the same zone of subversion of limits, therefore to be marginalized and repressed (see Mucci 1995; 2001; 2009).

3. The Problem of the Body and the Danger of Greatness in Women

The problem of language as an instrument whose rational rules are insufficient to give voice to violent passions, and so must resort to riddles and dreams to express excess, finds a correlative in the Duchess's link with nature through her body: it is her feminine body which is by definition in contrast with rule, rationality and virtue. Her words at this point of the play are telling:

This is *flesh*, and *blood*, sir,
 'Tis not the figure cut in alabaster
 Kneels at my husband's tomb. Awake, awake, man,
 I do here put off all vain ceremony,
 And only do appear to you, a *young widow*
 That claims you for her husband, and *like a widow*,
 I use but *half a blush in't*.
 (1.2.372-8; emphasis mine)

This is certainly a daring presentation of the character of female-prince who not only openly woos the man she has chosen as her husband (in violation of her promise to her brother), but also offends decorum (Antonio is her social inferior) as well as decency by expressing sexual desire in a way that would possibly be acceptable for a male character such as Richard III. In any case, this is a far cry from the proto-feminism which has sometimes been attributed to Webster. As our analysis has shown, the grouping together of the language of desire, the female body and immorality is a foregone conclusion on the part of the author and Webster certainly does not go beyond this easy, culturally sanctioned, equivalence. The necessary correlative of the passage woman/use of irrational language/lack of virtue is the body (source of corruption and death). In 1.3 the Duchess says that she is, above all, "flesh and blood", not a statue carved in alabaster. Once again it is nature which imbues the female body with its cyclic rhythms and returns that escape masculine control.

Act 1 ends with the comment of a marginal character, the female servant Cariola:

Whether the spirit of greatness, or of woman
 Reign most in her, I know not, but it shows
 A *fearful madness*: I owe her much of pity.
 (1.3.420-2; emphasis mine)

Her words synthesize the core of the conflict: it is in the opposition between greatness and woman that the tragic root of the Duchess's "fearful madness" resides.

4. "A Shop of Witchcraft": The Cave of Witches, the Body of the Duchess, and Punning

The central problems in Act 1, as we have illustrated, revolve around the relationship *Nature-Court-feminine corruption* and the tragic counterpositioning of the greatness of a female prince against the ruinous sexuality of her female body; in Act 2 this picture is enlarged into a general reflection in the apparently marginal dialogue between the malcontent Bosola and Castuchio. From a first reference to the Court and to the characteristics of the perfect courtesan we go on to Bosola's dialogue with the old midwife.

The old woman has evidently mentioned "painting" and this allusion immediately evokes witchcraft. The progression is from *painted faces-hidden corruption-destruction*, or from corrupted nature to mask and deceit:

BOSOLA Why, from your *scurvy face physic*: to behold thee not *painted* inclines somewhat near a miracle. These in thy *face* here, were deep ruts and foul sloughs, the last progress. There was a *lady in France*, that having had the *small-pox*, flayed the *skin off her face*, to make it more level; and whereas before she look'd like a nutmeg grater, resembled an abortive hedgehog.

OLD LADY Do you call this *painting*?

BOSOLA No, no, but you call it careening of an old morphew'd lady, to make her disemogue again. There's rough-cast phrase to your *plastic*.

OLD LADY It seems you are well acquainted with my *closet*?

BOSOLA One would suspect it for a *shop of witchcraft*, to find in it the fat of *serpents*; *spawn of snakes*, *Jews' spittle*, and their young children's ordure, and all these for the face. *I would sooner eat a dead pigeon, taken from the soles of the feet of one sick of the plague, than kiss one of you fasting.*

...

Observe your meditation now:
 What thing is in this outward form of man
 To be belov'd? We account it ominous,
 If nature do produce a colt, or lamb,
 A fawn, or goat, in any limb resembling
 A man; and fly from't as a prodigy.
 Man stands amaz'd to see his *deformity*,
 In any other creature but himself.

But in our own *flesh*, though we bear *diseases*
 Which have their true names only tane from *beasts*,
 As the most *ulcerous wolf*, and *swinish measles*;
 Though we are eaten up of *lice*, and *worms*,
 And though continually we bear about us
 A rotten and dead body, we delight
 To hide it in rich tissue: all our fears
 Nay, all our terror, is lest our-physician
 Should put us in the *ground*, to be made *sweet*.
 (2.1.39-64; emphasis mine)

Human deformity is more evident when human parts are grafted onto other animals. These lines anticipate the process of 'estrangement' which is the principal element of the 'masque of madmen' in Act 4: excess, with its deformed and grotesque forms, renders a clearer vision of reality that, paradoxically, goes beyond deceit and simulation. The unnatural mingling, the violation of decorum and the break with order and natural harmony reveal, with even greater clarity, the horrors that lurk beneath an apparent normality. The grotesque and estrangement afford a different gaze on truth, as the malcontent with his awry vision shows; the same gaze is celebrated in the 'masque of madmen'. In these words of Bosola's the step from the corruption of woman to the corruption of the body and death is a short one; the old woman's closet, which is as unnatural and diabolical as a witch's cave (and in Bosola's words the association of witchcraft with serpents and Jews is 'culturally' coherent, since Jews are heretics and the serpent is but another form of Satan), becomes a metaphor for a frightening nature which gives both life and death and is marked by deformity and disease. Her words in 2.1 are a powerful invective against woman and the *corruption/decomposition/pestilence* that woman represents: "I would sooner eat a dead pigeon, taken from the soles of the feet of one sick of the plague, then kiss one of you fasting".

The play goes on, once Castruchio and the old woman have gone off stage, with an apparent detour on the Duchess and the 'suspicious' swelling of her body; in the 'cultural poetics' that we are reconstructing the detour is not surprising, since it is just a way of continuing the discourse on naturality and/as deformity: the Duchess's suspected pregnancy signals an evasion of masculine/fraternal control and is therefore the sign of her corruption.

If the Duchess is pregnant, she has committed a monstrous infraction of the law as established by her brother; at a deeper level, her monstrous infraction is caused by the all too evident difference between the 'body politic' of a prince and the 'body natural' of a woman, in what is the fundamental theorization of regal power since Medieval times and which James

tries painstakingly to emphasize with his *Basilikon Doron* and in the conflicts with the Parliament. If the body natural makes any king or prince “a thing of nothing”, to echo Hamlet, the body natural of a woman-prince discloses, through its all too obvious link with nature and its negative connotations, unbearable connections with corruptibility, transformation, change, degeneration and therefore death.³ In 2.1, the theme of the body is again introduced by some puns which link the Duchess to Bosola: “I am / So troubled with the mother”, she says alluding to hysteria. Later on Bosola says: “’Tis a pretty art / This grafting” (2.1.148-9), alluding to the act of conception. Afterwards the subject of the ‘swelling’ of the female body once again becomes the focus of attention:

DUCHESS This *green fruit* and my *stomach* are not friends
 How they *swell me!*

BOSOLA (*aside*) Nay, you are too much *swell’d* already.
 (2.1.157-9; emphasis mine)

In the next scene two servants launch into a series of puns based on “pistol” “in his great cod-piece” (the pronunciation of which can be similar to that of “pizzle”, penis) and illicit visits made to the Duchess’s bedroom.

This bit of punning (in a tragedy which makes little use of this eversive linguistic practice) is completed by the misogynist remarks of Ferdinand in his dialogue with his sister: “And women like that part, which, like the lam-prey, / Hath nev’r a bone in’t” (1.2.258-9), where the ambiguous reference equates loose and lustful women with women who talk too much or too well. Woman’s connection with language also includes her susceptibility to the language of flattery: “I mean the tongue: variety of courtship; / What cannot a neat knave with a smooth tale / Make a woman believe?” (ll. 260-2).

5. Towards the Masque

In the third scene of Act 2 Bosola finds the horoscope which has been drawn up for the Duchess’s baby. The last few words of his discourse are interesting for their allusion to “masque” and “strange disguise” as well as for their obvious connotation that ‘lust’ is feminine:

Though lust do masque in ne’er so *strange disguise*
She’s oft found *witty* but is never *wise*.
(2.3.75-6; emphasis mine)

³ For a thorough elaboration of the influence of this Medieval vision carried on into English Renaissance culture and into Shakespeare’s drama, see Mucci (2009).

The implication, which is revealed by the rhyme (since the unconscious, as is well known, perceives words that sound the same as having similar meanings), is that there may be wisdom in the “strange disguise”. This foreshadows the masque that will appear further ahead and is a preparation for the theme of the masque and the celebration of madness that it entails.

Rather than the usual celebration of the rhetoric of power, the masque expresses, in all of its madness and brutality, the reality of the revenge tragedy.

The theme of madness is extended in scene 5:

FERDINAND I have this night digg'd up a mandrake.
 CARDINAL Say you?
 FERDINAND And I have *grown* mad with't.
 CARDINAL What's the prodigy?
 FERDINAND Read there, *a sister damn'd*, she's loose *i'th'hilts*:
 Grown a notorious strumpet.
 (2.5.1-4; emphasis mine)

The imagery of sickness, corruption, the plague and cholera is extended. Ferdinand says: “Rhubarb. O for rhubarb / To purge this choler! Here's the cursed day / To prompt my memory, and here't shall stick / Till of her bleeding heart I make sponge / To wipe it out” (ll. 12-16).

Ferdinand's obsession with his sister's active sexuality is developed further in this scene. He wants to treat his sister's sexuality as if it were an illness, a case of plague to be purged with extreme remedies that will purify the “infected blood” which is the foremost sign of the impurity of woman: “Apply desperate physic; / We must not now use balsamum, but fire, / The smarting cupping-glass, for that's the mean / *To purge infected blood, such blood as hers.*” (ll. 23-6; emphasis mine).

The referent “blood” connects lust to lineage and violence to incest. With the diseased imagination of a melancholic, the brother imagines his sister in the act of sin with the same intensity with which Othello imagines the entire army having intercourse with *Desdemona*:

FERDINAND Methinks I see her laughing,
 Excellent hyena! Talk to me somewhat, quickly,
 Or my imagination will carry me
To see her in the shameful act of sin.
 (2.5.38-41; emphasis mine)

When in the same scene the Cardinal tells him not to act like a man who has been swept up in the fury of witches, Ferdinand replies: “I will study to seem / The thing I am not”. If the split between representation and reality becomes a praxis in the words of the ruler (who should guar-

antee order and stability in language as in the symbolic order *tout court*), then it is a coherent conclusion that the masque, which is in this case closer to a subversive and chaotic antimasque, should represent the real state of things: the upside down world of the madmen represents the correct vision and ‘tells the truth’.

3.4, which directors often leave out of the theatre production, has two pilgrims as protagonists. There is a representation of the ceremony in which the Cardinal renounces the hat which is a sign of his power and the Duchess fulfills her vow to become a pilgrim, and she, Antonio and the children go into exile in a sort of pantomime. This is an important scene because once again Webster chooses two marginal characters to express a metatheatrical comment on the events on stage. They comment on the Duchess’s secret marriage to a social inferior, expressing political worries (“Here’s a strange turn of state”, l. 23), since she is “a so great lady” (l. 24). They also express the cruelty of the Cardinal and the State in taking the dukedom away from the Duchess and in banishing her:

FIRST PILGRIM But I would ask what power hath this state
 Of Ancona to determine of a free prince?
 (3.5.27-28)

It was, according to the second pilgrim, the Duchess’s loose morality that determined the decision.

6. The Masque, ‘A Spectacle of Strangeness’

In Act 4 the Duchess is in prison; silence and melancholy are the only external signs that mar her extremely noble behaviour:

FERDINAND Her melancholy seems to be fortifi’d
 With a strange disdain.
 (4.1.12-13)

The torturing of the Duchess begins here. Ferdinand has the severed hand of a corpse brought to her and pretends that it is the hand of Antonio. After this, wax statues of Antonio and the children are brought to her as if they were corpses. This provokes in her a series of reflections on life: it is best to have done with it as soon as possible; it is a “tedious theatre” in which we are forced to recite a role against our will; the universe is indifferent to the fate of mankind:

DUCHESS . . . I could curse the stars.
BOSOLA . . . Look you, the stars shine still.
(4.1.94-9)

Interestingly, Ferdinand's intention to torture the Duchess psychologically through the intervention of "a masque of common courtesans" takes its start from an allusion to the Duchess's body:

FERDINAND Damn her! *That body of hers,*
 While that my *blood ran pure in't,* was more worth
 Than that which thou wouldst comfort, call'd a soul.
 I will send her *masques of common courtesans,*
 Have her meat serv'd up by bawds and ruffians,
 And, 'cause she'll needs be mad, I am resolv'd
 To remove forth the common hospital
 All the mad folk, and place them near her lodging:
 There let them practice together, sing and dance,
 An act their gambods to the full o'th'moon:
 If she can sleep the better for it, let her.
 Your work is almost ended.
 (4.1.119-29; emphasis mine)

The madmen make their entrance with a song, full of rhymes and alliterations, created especially through the repetition of occlusive and fricative consonants. Then they go on with irrational discourses which seem to express that 'surplus', the inner chaos at the core of language, that the Duchess in 1.3 had defined as what could only be expressed "in riddles and in dreams":

FIRST MADMAN Doomsday not come yet? I'll draw it nearer by a perspective, or make a glass, that shall set all the world on fire upon an instant. I cannot sleep, my pillow is stuff'd with a litter of porcupines.

SECOND MADMAN Hell is a mere glass-house, where the devils are continually blowing up women's souls on hollow irons, and the fire never goes out,

THIRD MADMAN I will lie with every woman in my parish the tenth night: I will tithe them over like haycocks.

FOURTH MADMAN Shall my pothecary outgo me, because I am a cuckold? I have found out his roguery: he makes alum of his wife's urine, and sells it to Puritans, that have sore throats with over-straining.

FIRST MADMAN I have skill in heraldry.

SECOND MADMAN Hast?

FIRST MADMAN You do give for your crest a woodcock's head, with the brains pick't out on't. You are a very ancient gentleman.

THIRD GENTLEMAN Greek is turn'd Turk; we are only to be sav'd by the Helvetian translation.

- FIRST MADMAN Come on sir, I will lay the law to you.
- SECOND MADMAN O, rather lay corrosive, the law will eat to the bone.
- THIRD MADMAN He that drinks but to satisfy nature is damn'd.
- FOURTH MADMAN If I had my glass here, I would show a sight should
make all the women her call me mad doctor.
- FIRST MADMAN What's he, a rope-maker? Second madman: No, no, no,
a snuffling knave, that while he shows the tombs, will
have his hand in a wench's placket.
- THIRD MADMAN Woe to the caroche that brought home my wife from
the masque, at three o'clock in the morning; it had a
large feather bed in it.
(5.2. 73-107)

This masque has been considered by some critics dismal nonsense or in any case an incongruity with Webster's realism. Recent criticism has nonetheless proved better equipped to uncover the fundamental function of this masque which on the contrary serves the important purpose of "dramatis[ing] the self-contradictions inherent in the notion of a female ruler" (Desmet 1991: 118).

More similar to an anti-masque (with its break of decorum) than to a masque, or even similar to a *charivari*, as has been noticed, this peculiar masque of madmen expresses the decomposition of the aristocratic order through its grotesque, uncanny, and awry distortions. Rather than reinforcing order and decorum within the State (the traditional functions of the court masque), this meta-theatrical moment disrupts with its 'spectacle of strangeness' any possible recomposition of order and stability in language as in action. Sarah Sutherland, author of an important study on various forms of masque at the time, echoes Stephen Orgel's similar questioning when she summarizes the political problem posited by such a disquieting and disrupting masque mingling the representation of crime and madness in a metatheatrical action:

Why in this quarter of the seventeenth century, and not before or in quite the same way since, do the best dramatists present their audiences with spectacular scenes that throw violently together the orderly decorum inherent in celebratory court entertainment with the disordered indecorum of madness and murder? (Sutherland 1983: 117).

Webster seems to imply that the very trust in representation is destroyed and therefore the connection between theatre (through one of the most frequently used metatheatrical instruments, the masque) and an ordered and positive reality. With words resembling Gloucester's pessimistic view in *King Lear*, Bosola comments on Antonio's death:

We are merely the stars tennis-balls, struck and banded
Which may pleases them
(5.5.53-4)

His last words on the stage are the vision of a totally alienated world:

BOSOLA . . . O this gloomy world
In what a shadow, or deep pit of darkness
Doth, *womanish and fearful*, mankind live.
(5.5.119-21; emphasis mine)

In a matter of years, the disruption of order in England will be total, with the assassination of the king and the civil war; the theaters will be closed and the threat posited by ‘woman’, culturally represented as the cause of all evils for the patriarchal English nation in search of a clearer national identity, will see the final act of the persecution of women (and marginal subjects) as witches.

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