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Author(s): Christina Luckyj

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# “Great Women of Pleasure”: Main Plot and Subplot in *The Duchess of Malfi*

CHRISTINA LUCKYJ

It is a commonplace to say that Webster cannot construct plays—to agree with George Rylands, who directed the 1945 revival of *The Duchess of Malfi*, that “Webster could handle a scene but he could not compass a plot.”<sup>1</sup> Even though our notion of “plot” with regard to the Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatists has changed after the important work of Maynard Mack and Bernard Beckerman, who, among others, have illuminated the multiple, analogical nature of Shakespeare’s dramatic construction, it remains acceptable to speak of the “unplotted undulations” of Webster’s drama.<sup>2</sup> As John Russell Brown points out in his edition of *The Duchess of Malfi*, “the structure of the play is yet to be vindicated.”<sup>3</sup> Compounding the problem of dramatic construction is one of moral interpretation. Some critics like to see the play as a cautionary tale against marrying an inferior; other critics and directors invariably treat it as melodrama with a heroic martyr at its center. Webster himself included a subplot in *The Duchess of Malfi* which, though it has received little serious critical attention, may have been intended as an interpretive key to certain aspects of the main plot. An examination of the function of the subplot in *The Duchess of Malfi* illuminates both Webster’s dramatic construction and his moral emphasis in the play.

The adventures of the Cardinal’s mistress that form the Julia subplot were pure invention on Webster’s part. Gunnar Boklund tells us that Webster did not borrow the subplot from any source, used as he was to borrowing.<sup>4</sup> Nor is the subplot strictly “necessary” to the main plot, a fact which has led some critics to dismiss it as “a mere excrescence on the play.”<sup>5</sup> Yet the structural significance of the

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Christina Luckyj recently completed her doctorate in English at the University of Toronto. She is currently working on a full-length study of repetition in the dramaturgy of John Webster’s plays.

Julia subplot need not be limited to its contribution to the linear narrative. Since Webster evidently labored to invent a rough analogy to the Duchess's situation, he presumably intended it to serve a useful dramaturgical function in the play.

William Poel's contention that Julia is "designed as a set-off to the Duchess; as an instance of unholy love in contrast to the chaste love of the Duchess,"<sup>6</sup> has become virtually a tradition in Webster criticism, shared by a large number of modern critics.<sup>7</sup> In describing the Duchess in contrast to Julia, many of these critics use language which tends to misrepresent her. The Duchess's wooing of Antonio is profound and convincing precisely because it is not "chaste," as she herself points out.

This is flesh and blood, sir;  
'Tis not the figure cut in alabaster  
Kneels at my husband's tomb.

(I.i.453-55)

The Duchess is a woman of sexual energy and vulnerability; she appears pregnant on the stage in the following act. Theatrical critics have been quick to emphasize these important qualities. The reviewer of the 1971 Royal Shakespeare Company production for *The Listener* felt that the death scene failed because "Miss Dench retained stoic dignity but, never having shared her passion with us, now kept us at a distance."<sup>8</sup> Michael Billington of the *Guardian* pointed to the same essential qualities when he complained, in a review of the 1985 National Theatre production, "Even when Ms. Bron's Duchess divests herself of her wrappings, she never finds the virtuous, mettlesome, sexually-charged woman underneath."<sup>9</sup> By way of contrast, several critics praised Helen Mirren's portrayal of the Duchess in the 1980 Royal Exchange production—one called her "playful, lascivious and vain";<sup>10</sup> another alluded to "her capacity for affection and her deep sexual awareness."<sup>11</sup> The Duchess's intense sexuality, so vital in performance, has been downplayed by critics who wish to emphasize the differences between the Duchess and Julia. Clifford Leech claims that "the general attitudes [in the play] to Julia and the Duchess are polar opposites" (p. 32), citing the Cardinal's contempt for Julia and Pescara's reference to her as a strumpet (V.i.46), in contrast to Antonio's first idealized view of the Duchess's "divine . . . continence" (I.i.199). Leech's moral distinctions appear doubtful, however, when one remembers the epithets applied to the Duchess by her brothers, for whom she is a "notorious

strumpet" (II.v.4). Moreover, the structural justification for this interpretation of the subplot is dubious. If Julia were intended as a foil to the Duchess, she appears utterly redundant. As Boklund comments, by the final act of the play, "reader and spectator . . . have formed definite opinions about the Duchess' conduct, and neither praise nor blame, be it open or implied, will now affect their judgment" (p. 158).

Other critics have proposed Julia as a parody of the Duchess, designed to undercut and qualify her values. Boklund suggests that "since the main action of the play is based on the consequences of a deliberate flouting of the laws guarding social decorum, the by-plot may serve to provide a commentary in word and action on the heroine's behavior."<sup>12</sup> Such attempts to find a "tragic flaw" in the Duchess, reflected and confirmed in Julia, are difficult to support with the text. Webster's sources, Painter and Belleforest, condemn the Duchess's actions, and Webster's deliberate deviation from them in this regard brings him closer to the spirit of the Italian original, a novella by Bandello which treats the Duchess with "tolerant understanding" and sexual pragmatism. As Boklund himself admits, in Webster "there is no case for the prosecution" (p. 102). If Julia were intended as a parody or ironic reflection of the Duchess, Webster's careful construction designed to emphasize the Duchess's virtue throughout the play would seem pointless. Some critics sound alarmingly like the hysterical Ferdinand when they claim that, "Lower in her sexual drive than 'a beast that wants discourse of reason,' the Duchess of Malfi, like Hamlet's mother, steps out of the path of duty and marries for lust."<sup>13</sup> As William Empson puts it, "A play intended as a warning against marrying a social inferior would have to be constructed quite differently."<sup>14</sup> If the Julia subplot can be explained as an integral part of the play's construction, its function must transcend that of foil or parody.

Clearly, interpretation of the Julia subplot involves moral judgment of the Duchess. Yet often that moral judgment not only fails to allow for the warm humanity of the Duchess on the stage, but also reduces the status of the play as "tragedy." Those critics who emphasize the analogies between the Duchess and Julia come perilously close to reading the play as a cautionary tale. Those who concentrate on the differences tend to exaggerate the "saintliness" of the Duchess and to read the play as melodrama. Underlying both these perspectives is another implicit moral judgment—that Julia is meant to be condemned as a wanton, promiscuous, morally reprehensible woman.

Directors of the play have also tended to impose this interpretation on the character of Julia, sometimes deliberately using stage effects to undercut the immediate import of the language to the confusion of critics and theater audiences alike. For example, in the 1960 Royal Shakespeare Company production, the scene in which Julia rejects first the Cardinal, then Delio, was reinterpreted by Donald McWhinnie's staging. What began as rejection ended in mute consent, as she knelt to kiss the Cardinal's ring (II.iv.37), and later stalked off with Delio's proffered bribe (II.iv.76).<sup>15</sup> Visual effects contradicted the scene's language and made Delio's bewilderment at her "wit or honesty" (II.iv.77) incomprehensible. In the final act of the same production, Julia's open lasciviousness with Bosola made her a caricature of lust that so jarred with her tragic death that one critic commented in utter confusion, "Sian Phillips did not shirk the part of the Cardinal's mistress Julia, but what can any actress today make of the last scenes?"<sup>16</sup> In the 1985 National Theatre production, director Philip Prowse's conception of Julia was clear from the beginning when she made a dramatic entrance in the first act on the Duchess's cue, only to turn and kneel finally before a much more modest Duchess. The invented stage moment established her clearly as the Duchess's foil as well as her servant.

Critics and directors may have ceased their moral condemnation of the Duchess and instead tended to beatify her, but their moral prejudices continue to vent themselves on Julia. Her contribution to the dramatic texture and design of the play has been largely ignored in favor of the accepted view of her as a stock Jacobean whore. It is Clifford Leech's sensitivity to the text that allows him, however briefly, to entertain a third possibility in the analogical relation between the two plots. He points out "how erroneous it would be to regard the Duchess as outside the normal sphere of sexual passion," and declares that, despite the differences between them, "there is enough resemblance between the two actions of the play to keep strongly in our minds the force of the passion that urges the Duchess to speak."<sup>17</sup> Leech's tentative suggestion moves toward a realistic, human view of the Duchess essential to performance, but remains a suggestion, which he does not support with close examination of the text.

In fact, few critics provide a detailed reading of the three scenes of the play in which Julia figures. Only close attention to these scenes in their dramatic context can determine their relation to the rest of the play. And such close attention makes some critical claims about Julia's character seem surprising. For Boklund, she is "guided by the

two forces of lust and avarice” (p. 157); for Clifford Leech she is a “rank whore”;<sup>18</sup> for Richard Levin she is a “flagrant adulteress” (p. 98). However, actresses who attempt to play Julia this way must find themselves working directly against the text at several points.

Before Julia appears for the first time in II.iv, the audience is prepared by Bosola for her appearance. After Bosola has picked up the horoscope and discovered that the Duchess has given birth to a son, he gleefully closes the scene (II.iii) with a couplet which carries over into the following scene.

Though lust do mask in ne'er so strange disguise,  
She's oft found witty, but is never wise.

(II.iii.76-77)

At the opening of the next scene, the Cardinal echoes Bosola's couplet when he describes Julia as a “witty false one” (II.iv.5). At first Julia appears to be a fulfillment of Bosola's and the Arragonian brothers' degraded vision of the Duchess, which has dominated the stage since the beginning of the second act.<sup>19</sup> The device is similar to that used by Shakespeare in *Othello*, where, as Mack points out, “Bianca . . . may be thought to supply in living form on the stage the prostitute figure that Desdemona has become in Othello's mind” (p. 30). Yet just as, in *Othello*, Iago's vision of Bianca as a “notable strumpet” (V.i.78) is cast into doubt by her loyalty to Cassio, very early in the scene Julia's words and stage actions begin to contradict the Cardinal's version of her. Her first speech, with its anxious, halting rhythm, betrays the deep inner struggle of a woman who has compromised herself for uncertain gain and finds herself the victim of a cynical and abusive man.

You have prevail'd with me  
Beyond my strongest thoughts: I would not now  
Find you inconstant.

(IV.ii.6-8)

These are hardly words that convey the “lust and avarice” of a “flagrant adulteress.” On the contrary, they imply that her decision to commit adultery was a painful one, the result of an ongoing struggle between the demands of sexuality and morality. As the interview progresses, Julia defends her own constancy and integrity as the Cardinal attacks them. In the face of his cruel misogyny, she finally bursts into tears when her objections can no longer be heard.

If the scene begins as a confirmation of Bosola's degraded perspective on the Duchess, it moves away from that perspective as it continues. The scene is clearly written to overturn an audience's initial impression of Julia. The "whore" and "adulteress" cannot be quite so easily dismissed.

The Cardinal's assault on the "giddy and wild turnings" (II.iv.12) of women both echoes the satiric perspective of Bosola that dominated the previous three scenes and anticipates the crazed misogyny of Ferdinand in the following scene (II.v).<sup>20</sup> The scene suspends and extends the previous action—its precise form is unexpected, and it carries the audience away from the world of the Duchess. At the same time, however, it exploits the tension and energy that have been built up over the previous three scenes regarding the Duchess's escalating danger. The scene is an analogical replay of the situation between Bosola and the Duchess throughout the second act, since Julia is another woman victimized by the cruel cynicism of men. Again, the satiric vision is pitted against the vulnerability of human love and sexuality with their inherent compromises. In both cases, two voices are heard in opposition to each other<sup>21</sup>—the tough against the vulnerable, the deeply cynical against the merely human. As Bosola's meditation on death and decay (II.i.45-60) is set against the stage image of the pregnant Duchess, swollen with life, the Cardinal's diatribe on the inconstancy of women is contrasted with Julia's long-suffering silence. Like Bosola (and like Iago in *Othello*), the Cardinal attempts to degrade women by generalizing them and by reducing them to the level of mere animals. The Duchess and Julia both contradict this version of themselves with their stage presences.

Following the interview between the Cardinal and Julia is an exchange between Julia and Delio that has puzzled most critics. Archer simply admits that "the relevance of the passage in which Delio makes love to the Cardinal's mistress utterly escapes me."<sup>22</sup> Lois Potter claims that the exchange "must inevitably be confusing in performance,"<sup>23</sup> though she suggests that it recalls Ferdinand's bribery of Bosola in Act I and reiterates the play's "service and reward" motif. If the echo is there, it is designed to enforce a contrast; Bosola finally accepts the gold while Julia rejects it. In his edition of the play, Brown suggests that the incident is designed "to aggravate the audience's sense of a growing web of intrigue and an increasing complexity of character" (p. 62). That the exchange is designed deliberately to confuse appears a weak explanation at best. Neither critic accounts for the particular nature of the incident—another kind of exchange would presumably serve just as well to reinforce a

theme or to suggest intricacy of plot. Nor does either critic examine the dramatic rhythm of the exchange. Its dramatic impact is, however, unmistakable.

The first part of the interchange between Julia and Delio centers on Julia's old husband, Castruchio, who has already appeared twice in the play. As Ferdinand's poker-faced advisor in Act I, and as an aspiring courtier and the object of Bosola's mockery in Act II, Castruchio quickly impresses an audience as a foolish old man. His marital relationship to Julia, to which Webster suddenly draws attention in this scene, appears to be the culmination of his function in the play, since he disappears completely after his mention here. A foolish, impotent old man married to an obviously desirable young woman—whom Bosola later describes as “very fair” (V.ii.177)—recalls the marriage of Camillo and Vittoria in *The White Devil*. There, the husband's inadequacy helped to exonerate the wife's adultery. Here, the first explicit identification of Julia's deceived husband with foolish old Castruchio (whose name suggests castration) shifts the scene even further in the direction of Julia's redemption in the eyes of the audience. The terse reply Julia makes to Delio's mockery of her husband—“Your laughter is my pity” (II.iv.56-57)—with its brevity betrays her suffering.

Delio then offers her his gold, drawing attention to its physical properties by mockingly treating it as an aesthetic object. Julia rejects not only the gold itself, but also the crude materialism it represents.<sup>24</sup> In reply, she evokes a world of positive aesthetic values and refined sensual beauty—of beautiful birds, music, and fragrance. It is a world in which the Duchess also lives, and which she conjures up most eloquently just before her death in lines like these:

What would it pleasure me to have my throat cut  
 With diamonds? Or to be smothered  
 With cassia? or to be shot to death with pearls?  
(IV.ii.215-18)

The struggle between two polarized views of life, between the crudely sexual and the delicately sensual, is articulated throughout the play's main action in the characters of Ferdinand and the Duchess.<sup>25</sup> Here, its mere suggestion is enough to associate Julia with the Duchess's refined sensuality. Finally, Julia's categorical rejection of Delio's sexual offer, combined with the disclosure of her unhappy marriage to Castruchio, is clearly designed to capture audience sympathy for Julia. Together, they confirm the impression of abused integrity

suggested in her relationship with the Cardinal at the beginning of the scene. As Julia remains in the foreground, the background shifts around her so that the vulnerable victim of the Cardinal's misogyny can exhibit self-assured integrity. The question of Delio's motives is less important than the dramatic impact of Julia's reassertion of her integrity. And that integrity is not undercut by Julia's witty reply to Delio:

Sir, I'll go ask my husband if I shall,  
And straight return your answer.

(II.iv.75-76)

On the contrary, Julia's need to rely on the outward form of conventional morality by calling on her husband illuminates its inadequacy as a standard of human behavior. The courage she displays appears more significant since the audience knows that it is unsupported by the facts of her marital relationship. Delio may wonder, "Is this her wit or honesty that speaks thus?" (II.iv.77), but an audience is left in little doubt. Because Julia, like the Duchess, is forced to exceed the bounds of respectability, her "virtue" must be judged according to another standard. One might say, in the spirit of Empson, that a scene intended to portray a "flagrant adulteress" and a clear contrast to the Duchess would have to be constructed quite differently.

Just before Julia's final dismissal of Delio's offer, a servant enters to report,

Your husband's come,  
Hath deliver'd a letter to the Duke of Calabria,  
That, to my thinking, hath put him out of his wits.

(II.iv.67-69)

The audience is suddenly reminded of what has been going on in the play's main action. Bosola's report of the birth of the Duchess's "illegitimate" child has been delivered by Castruchio to the Arragonian brothers. The servant's report briefly anticipates the following scene, with Ferdinand's reassertion of his crazed view of the Duchess as a "notorious strumpet" (II.v.4). As we are reminded of Ferdinand's distorted vision of the Duchess, Delio imposes his degraded perspective on Julia, making her a sexual offer. Julia's rejection of that offer thus has the effect of salvaging the Duchess's values by association. At this point, Julia's function in the play

transcends mere analogy to anticipate the reassertion of the Duchess's integrity after Bosola's and Ferdinand's assault upon it throughout the second act.

The second act, with its opening parody of the Duchess and Antonio in the figures of the Old Lady and Castruchio, tends to modify, if not to obliterate, the delicate power of the tender wooing scene that closes the first act. While an audience may have little difficulty rejecting the Arragonian brothers' tyrannical moralism in favor of the Duchess's individualism in the first act, it finds few alternatives to Bosola's relentless cynicism in the second. Bosola takes over from Antonio as the Duchess's observer in the second act, and audience response is to some extent conditioned by his vision of life and sexuality as purely physical and subject to decay. Moreover, at both times that Julia appears, the Duchess has been absent from the stage for a prolonged period. Bosola's gift of "apricocks" to the Duchess sends her into labor in the first scene of Act II; she quickly leaves the stage and does not reappear until the following act. The only momentary reanimation of her presence is an offstage "shriek" Bosola hears at the beginning of II.iii, realistically suggesting her offstage labor, but also conveying the deeper suffering that shapes her character in preparation for the death scene. Her absence from the stage throughout most of the second act may represent this implied process of necessary psychic change, what Mack (p. 35) calls the "second phase" in the development of the tragic hero or heroine. When Julia comes onto the stage, the audience is set up to judge her as the Duchess's enemies have judged the Duchess. With this scene, however, Webster overturns the simplified prejudices of conventional morality that are inevitably part of an audience's response, a response we share with the Duchess's enemies. Webster's presentation of Julia is consistent with his portrait of Vittoria in *The White Devil* and, ultimately, with his interest in the figure of the Duchess. It allows him to draw attention to something he evidently considered very important—that "whore," a word applied by social convention to someone unchaste, does not fully exhaust the psychological reality of the woman. This is true of Vittoria, of Julia, and most of all, of the Duchess.<sup>26</sup> The first of Julia's scenes functions as analogical probability at a point in the play when the Duchess is most vulnerable to the attacks of her enemies because she is not present on the stage.

Bosola's cynical, satiric vision presents a challenge to the Duchess's values that intensifies them by contrast when they are reasserted. But Bosola's vision also serves another purpose in the play's dramatic

construction by further humanizing and illuminating the Duchess. The Duchess is above all, as she herself makes clear, an intensely sexual woman. The “apricocks” scene (II.i) becomes, in performance, not an indictment of the Duchess, but a further confirmation of the directness and sensual delight she exhibited in the wooing scene. It is precisely this sensual Duchess that Webster wanted to capture in Julia.

When Julia appears again in the first scene of Act V to request Antonio’s property from Pescara, she immediately represents those who crudely profit from the ruin of the couple. Yet the focus of the scene shifts quickly from Julia’s appropriation of Antonio’s land to Pescara’s hypocrisy. The scene centers, not on Julia’s immoral action, but on the moral turpitude of those who condemn her as a “strumpet” in order to excuse their own actions. Pescara’s guilt is thinly disguised by his abuse of Julia; his own fault is greater than hers. He grants Antonio’s land to the Cardinal’s mistress as “salary for his [the Cardinal’s] lust” (V.i.52), defending his sycophantic action with perverse self-righteousness.<sup>27</sup> The moral status of Julia is again made relative, since her moralizing accusers are unreliable. Her appearance here is intended to drain off possible moral condemnation from the audience in the following scene.

Julia’s appearance in the following scene (V.ii), as in the second act, restages for emphasis an aspect of the Duchess’s experience that threatens to disappear with her. Whereas Julia’s first appearance reflects the Duchess’s position as a victim of the cruel cynicism of men and anticipates the Duchess’s restoration, her final appearance recalls the Duchess’s fate in miniature and anticipates the futile revenge of Bosola.

Julia’s wooing of Bosola in the second scene of Act V seems deliberately designed to recall the Duchess’s wooing of Antonio in Act I. Webster goes to considerable lengths to establish visual and verbal parallels between the two incidents. In both cases, the woman is the wooer (I.i.442; V.ii.183) and uses roughly similar phrases to express her admiration for her man with striking directness (I.i.453-59; V.ii.167-72). In both cases, the woman puts herself at great risk for her lover. While Webster clearly did not intend the crude seduction of Bosola to be a direct echo of the tender wooing of Antonio, the parallels between the two scenes appear to be as significant as the differences, which have frequently been emphasized by critics. During performances of the play, the later scene is clearly linked to the earlier one, not by its reiterated images, but by its similar effect on an audience. The two wooing scenes are virtually

the only extended actions in the play to evoke laughter and delight in an audience predisposed to expect danger. As in Act I, in the last act the play's relentless machinery of crime and revenge is suspended while we watch the digressive banter of lovers.

Noting the differences between the two wooing scenes, critics have proposed interpretations of the later scene as a foil to, or parody of, the earlier one. Yet, as has been argued earlier, the dramaturgical advantages of either at this late stage in the action are limited. A foil appears superfluous, since the stature of the Duchess is by this point fixed. She is clearly exalted beyond all the characters of the fifth act. A parody seems groundless, since it would undercut the tragic intensity of her loss. There is, however, a third possibility, consistent with Webster's treatment of Julia in the second act. Here, as there, she may be intended as a mirror for the main action, reflecting its broad outlines in simplified analogical fashion from a different moral perspective. Shakespeare uses a similar dramatic strategy in the final act of *Othello*; Bianca, falsely accused by Iago of Cassio's murder, recalls Desdemona's plight as she has also been presented as a "whore" responsible for her man's destruction.

When Julia enters, pointing a pistol at Bosola and accusing him of treachery (V.ii.151), she continues the language of violence, intrigue, and deception used by the Cardinal and Bosola in their preceding interview. Similarly, when the Duchess offers her wedding ring to Antonio, visual and verbal echoes recall Ferdinand's bribery of Bosola in the same scene, and the interview is fraught with overtones of danger. In both scenes, however, the context of love and sexuality defuses the play's threatening language. The oppressive intrigue of the court is mockingly parodied and transformed by Julia. Her wit takes Bosola and the audience by surprise, as she abruptly turns apparent aggression into playful love-making. Webster sustains a tone throughout the scene that carefully avoids both romantic and sexual cliché. When Bosola attempts to seduce Julia with a conventional line, saying

Your bright eyes  
Carry a quiver of darts in them, sharper  
Than sunbeams

(V.ii.179-81)

Julia abruptly cuts him off and asserts her own status as the wooer. When he takes the opposite tack and decides to "grow most amorously familiar" (V.ii.185) with her, Julia responds with prag-

matic intelligence, again drawing the focus away from Bosola and onto her own power.

For if I see and steal a diamond,  
 The fault is not i'th' stone, but in me the thief  
 That purloins it:—I am sudden with you;  
 We that are great women of pleasure use to cut off  
 These uncertain wishes, and unquiet longings,  
 And in an instant join the sweet delight  
 And the pretty excuse together.

(V.ii.190-96)

While the scene verges on caricature, it develops a sustained contrast between Bosola's limited conventional attitude and Julia's strong unconventional one. The echoes of the wooing scene of Act I, however distorted or exaggerated, are nonetheless startling in performance. The entire scene is structured to highlight the energy, wit, and exuberance of Julia, glimpsed only briefly in her earlier interchange with Delio. In both wooing scenes, Webster challenges the popular antifeminist stereotype that "a harlot is full of words,"<sup>28</sup> and links the Duchess and Julia in their common deviation from the conventional "good" woman. In the earlier scene (II.iv), the assertion of Julia's sexual integrity was necessary to suggest by analogy the Duchess's dramatic recovery at a point when it seemed threatened. In the later scene, the "splendidly sensual" and "voluptuous"<sup>29</sup> Julia re-evokes by association quite a different quality in the Duchess. Again, the recollection is a timely one in the play's dramatic rhythm, since Bosola's perspective on the Duchess as "sacred innocence" (IV.ii.355) threatens to distort her by exalting her. With Julia in the final act as an analogical reassertion of the Duchess's strong sexuality, a balance is restored.

In the final act, Julia reanimates by association, not the Duchess of the recent death scene, but the Duchess of the wooing scene—playful, confident, sensual, and direct. If, as I have argued, Webster attempts to recall such qualities in the Duchess by exaggerating them in Julia, he does so at considerable risk. The success of his strategy rests finally on performance—on an actress who can play Julia in this scene as a strong, vital woman rather than as a vulgar strumpet. Such risks, however, are unavoidable for the dramatist. In this instance, Webster takes the risk of falling into crude burlesque, for the greater advantage of clarifying his tragic construction. The recollection at this point of the young, carefree, and childless Duchess

of the beginning of the play leads an audience to appreciate precisely what has been lost and gained in the course of the play's tragic action. The changes that are forced upon the Duchess enrich and develop her as a character who can finally face her death with courage. Yet at the same time those changes rob her of her innocent confidence that "time will easily / Scatter the tempest" (I.i.471-72). With the appearance of Julia in the final act, the audience can measure the distance it has travelled since the wooing scene. Loss of the Duchess's youthful insouciance is balanced against the recollection of the richness of her spirit in adversity. The evocation of this simple tragic paradox is the main dramaturgical function of Julia at this stage in the play.

If the wooing of Bosola is intended as an echo of the Duchess's lighthearted wooing of Antonio, then the subsequent interview with the Cardinal plunges the audience directly into the death scene. The opposed perspectives of the play's main action—the Duchess's youthful vitality and the irrational menace of her enemies—are recalled in the confrontation between Julia and the Cardinal. Julia is still witty and playful, but the Cardinal is dangerously bitter. Comic and tragic perspectives illuminate each other in their dialogue, remaining at cross purposes until the Cardinal confesses his crime:

By my appointment, the great Duchess of Malfi,  
And two of her young children, four nights since,  
Were strangled.

(V.ii.268-70)

The Cardinal's syntax imitates the dramatic suspense of the interview, delaying the final shock until the end of the sentence, thus heightening its impact. The witty innocence of Julia's playful persuasions acts as a foil to the Cardinal's bald and horrifying declaration. His admission of guilt is directly followed by a restaging of the crime, for Julia immediately pays for her indiscretion with her death. The death of the Duchess in the fourth act is painstakingly prepared for from the play's very beginning, so that its dramatic shock is greatly mitigated. For Julia, "love" is more irresponsible, knowledge of evil more sudden, and death more abrupt than for the Duchess, yet the compressed juxtaposition of these extremes of love and death recalls the Duchess's tragic fate with new force. This simplified—almost caricatured—recollection of the Duchess's life and death clarifies the essential tragic meaning of the play's action. As T. C. Worsley summarized it in a review of the 1960 Royal

Shakespeare Company production, “As we see her first the Duchess is a woman of high natural spirits and vitality, and it is that buoyancy of heart that it is so terrible to see being desolated.”<sup>30</sup> Julia’s part in the final act is a microcosm of the main action, her cruel death a striking contrast to her strength and vitality. And, unlike Cariola—the Duchess’s foil in death—Julia accepts her death with dignity, though it is undeserved.

During the final act, Bosola’s role as an onlooker and accomplice during the Duchess’s death is restaged. After Julia’s death, he argues with the Cardinal about “reward,” vows vengeance for the Duchess’s murder, and drags the body off the stage, exactly as he had done at the end of Act IV. His complaint as he picks up Julia’s body—“I think I shall / Shortly grow the common bier for churchyards” (V.ii.311-12)—reinforces the analogue. In the staging of the scene, Bosola’s vengeful soliloquy is invariably delivered as he kneels over Julia’s body, precisely as he had knelt over the Duchess’s body earlier. While it keeps the memory of the Duchess alive, the repetition of the sequence of crime and revenge also suggests the futility of Bosola’s attempt at vengeance, futility that is later confirmed in his botched murder of Antonio.

It would, of course, be dangerous to overstate the case for the parallels between the two plots. Certainly the two women belong to sharply contrasting worlds throughout the play, and such contrasts give the play its richly varied texture. Julia is involved in the petty, broken world of the Duchess’s enemies as the Duchess herself never is, and the parallels between the two women heighten their differences. Conversely, however, Webster exploits the obvious differences between them in order to reveal surprising similarities, which serve his dramatic ends. The differences between the Duchess and Julia may emphasize the Duchess’s calm self-sufficiency, but the similarities between them suggest the vulnerability of women in a hostile masculine world. The play’s final emphasis falls on Julia and, by analogy, on the Duchess—not as a single, heroic individual destroyed by crazed villains, but as an ordinary, vital young woman stifled by misogyny. Rather than undercutting or further exalting the Duchess’s stature in the final act, Julia restores the Duchess by analogy to the world of common humanity, to which she firmly belonged throughout the play.

In conclusion, the Julia subplot has an important dramatic function in *The Duchess of Malfi*. The presentation of Julia as a character is clearly consistent with the interest Webster displays in challenging conventional morality with his other heroines, the

Duchess and Vittoria. Close examination of the scenes in which Julia figures reveals not a “flagrant adulteress” but a woman of some integrity; not a fickle temptress, but a sexually vital woman. That integrity and sexual vitality are not incompatible is a major concern of *The Duchess of Malfi*. The Julia subplot clarifies and restates Webster’s primary concerns in the play’s main action. As a “glass” for events in the Duchess’s life, Julia reflects their essence in compressed, sometimes caricatured, form. In a review of the 1971 Royal Shakespeare Company production of the play, one reviewer described Julia as “the most genteel whore, cooing like a dove in a cage of hawks,”<sup>31</sup> a description which could apply equally well to the Duchess. Like the Duchess, Julia is caged and finally killed by the predatory Arragonian brothers. And like the Duchess, Julia remains fully sexually alive to the last moment.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>George Rylands, “On the Production of *The Duchess of Malfi*,” *The Duchess of Malfi*, ed. G. H. W. Rylands and C. Williams (London: Sylvan, 1945), p. vi.

<sup>2</sup>Maynard Mack, “The Jacobean Shakespeare,” *Jacobean Theatre*, ed. J. R. Brown and Bernard Harris, Stratford-upon-Avon Studies 1 (London: Edward Arnold, 1960); Bernard Beckerman, *Shakespeare at the Globe 1599-1609* (New York: Macmillan, 1962). The phrase comes from Herbert Whittaker’s review of the 1971 Stratford, Ontario production in *The Globe and Mail*, 9 June 1971, p. 15.

<sup>3</sup>John Russell Brown, ed., *The Duchess of Malfi*, by John Webster (London: Methuen, 1964), p. 62. All citations to the play refer to this edition.

<sup>4</sup>Gunnar Boklund, “*The Duchess of Malfi*”: *Sources, Themes, Characters* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1962), p. 42.

<sup>5</sup>William Archer, “Webster, Lamb and Swinburne,” *New Review* 8,44 (1893); rpt. in G. K. and S. K. Hunter, eds., *John Webster: A Critical Anthology* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969), p. 85.

<sup>6</sup>William Poel, “A New Criticism of Webster’s *Duchess of Malfi*,” *Library Review* 2 (1893); rpt. in Hunter, p. 87. Poel’s 1892 production of *The Duchess of Malfi* at the Opera Comique restored the Julia subplot for the first time since the seventeenth century. His interpretation of the subplot did not convince the critics, however. A review in the *Nation* complained that “the intrigue of the Cardinal with Julia apparently had no other use in the tragedy save to add one more corpse to the many strewing the stage in that indescribable fifth act” (10 November 1892; rpt. in *Webster: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Don D. Moore [London: Routledge, 1981], p. 128).

<sup>7</sup>See Normand Berlin, “*The Duchess of Malfi*: Act V and Genre,” *Genre* 3 (1970):356; Lee Bliss, *The World’s Perspective: John Webster and the Jacobean Drama* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1983), p. 160; M. C.

Bradbrook, *John Webster: Citizen and Dramatist* (London: Weidenfeld, 1980), p. 155; Travis Bogard, *The Tragic Satire of John Webster* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1955), p. 138; Clifford Leech, *Webster: "The Duchess of Malfi"* (London: Edward Arnold, 1963), p. 32; Richard Levin, *New Readings vs. Old Plays: Recent Trends in the Reinterpretation of English Renaissance Drama* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1979), p. 98; Jacqueline Pearson, *Tragedy and Tragicomedie in the Plays of John Webster* (Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press, 1980), p. 61.

<sup>8</sup>Charles Lewson, "Sick Stallion," *The Listener*, 22 July 1971, p. 125.

<sup>9</sup>Michael Billington, "Well-Dressed Decadence Without Relief," *The Guardian*, 6 July 1985, p. 8.

<sup>10</sup>Lucy Hughes-Hallett, "'The Duchess of Malfi,'" *Now*, 26 September 1980.

<sup>11</sup>Jacqueline Pearson, "Man Bites Man," *TLS*, 26 September 1980, p. 1064.

<sup>12</sup>Boklund, p. 78. See also Ralph Berry, *The Art of John Webster* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), pp. 38-41; Fernand Lagarde, *John Webster*, 2 vols. (Toulouse: Association des Publications des Lettres et Sciences Humaines de Toulouse, 1968), 2:851; Clifford Leech, *John Webster: A Critical Study* (London: Hogarth Press, 1951), p. 75; J. R. Mulryne, "Webster and the Uses of Tragicomedie," in *John Webster*, ed. Brian Morris (London: Ernest Benn, 1970), p. 153; Joyce E. Peterson, *Curs'd Example: "The Duchess of Malfi" and Commonweal Tragedy* (Columbia and London: Univ. of Missouri Press, 1978), pp. 88-104.

<sup>13</sup>Lisa Jardine, *Still Harping on Daughters: Women and Drama in the Age of Shakespeare* (Sussex: Harvester Press, 1983), p. 71.

<sup>14</sup>William Empson, "Mine Eyes Dazzle," *EIC* 14 (1964); rpt. in Hunter, p. 298.

<sup>15</sup>Details about this production were provided by the promptbook held by the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust, Stratford-upon-Avon.

<sup>16</sup>Philip Hope-Wallace, "The Stratford Company Goes to Town," *Guardian*, 17 December 1960.

<sup>17</sup>Leech, *Webster: "The Duchess of Malfi,"* p. 33.

<sup>18</sup>Leech, *John Webster*, p. 75.

<sup>19</sup>Hereward T. Price also makes this point in "The Function of Imagery in Webster," *PMLA* 70 (September 1955); rpt. in Hunter, p. 195.

<sup>20</sup>There are some precise verbal echoes of Bosola in the Cardinal's speeches: both use images of glass manufacture for female sexuality (II.i.6-10; II.iv.13-14), as well as animal imagery (II.i.47-55; II.iv.27-34).

<sup>21</sup>For the notion of "two voices," I am of course indebted to Mack's "The Jacobean Shakespeare," pp. 19-20.

<sup>22</sup>Archer, in Hunter, p. 85.

<sup>23</sup>Lois Potter, "Realism vs. Nightmare; Problems of Staging *The Duchess of Malfi*," in *The Triple Bond*, ed. Joseph G. Price (Univ. Park and London: Pennsylvania State Univ. Press, 1975), p. 180.

<sup>24</sup>I find it difficult to accept Peterson's view that Julia's refusal indicates that Delio "simply has not offered enough" (p. 93).

<sup>25</sup>See Roger Warren, "'The Duchess of Malfi' on the Stage," in *John Webster*, ed. Brian Morris, p. 65.

<sup>26</sup>Although she does not discuss the Julia subplot, Linda Woodbridge's view of Webster's manipulation of antifeminist stereotypes in his plays is similar to my own when she remarks that, in *The Duchess of Malfi*, "The question of female sexuality is precisely what Webster seems interested in exploring," and,

in *The White Devil*, “The moral ambiguity readers experience in the play stems partly from Webster’s attempt to achieve sympathy for a fallen woman, to turn a whore into a hero” (*Women and the English Renaissance: Literature and the Nature of Womanhood 1540-1620* [Urbana and Chicago: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1984], pp. 259-62). Furthermore, according to Woodbridge, Webster’s treatment of both his minor and his major female characters reflects a general trend in plays of the second decade of the seventeenth century. As she notes, “Even the image of prostitutes underwent a face-lifting in the drama during the *hic mulier* years” (p. 261).

<sup>27</sup>I cannot agree with the reading of this scene proposed by Bliss, who claims: “Some courtiers, or a Julia, seek to ‘fortify themselves’ with others’ ruin, but Pescara displays an innate sense of justice” (p. 163).

<sup>28</sup>Woodbridge, p. 77.

<sup>29</sup>D. H., “Magnificent Make-Believe,” review of *The Duchess of Malfi*, Royal Shakespeare Company, Aldwych, London. *Bristol Evening Post*, 16 December 1960; Milton Shulman, “Horror Unlimited Hits the Aldwych,” *Evening Standard*, 16 December 1960.

<sup>30</sup>“The Duchess of Malfi,” *Financial Times*, 16 December 1960.

<sup>31</sup>P. W., “A Tidy Murder,” *Sunday Mercury*, 18 July 1971.