

ARDEN EARLY MODERN DRAMA

THE DUCHESS OF MALFI

BY JOHN WEBSTER

EDITED BY LEAH S. MARCUS



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General Editors: Suzanne Gossett,
John Jowett and Gordon McMullan

THE DUCHESS
OF MALFI

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THE DUCHESS OF MALFI
EVERYMAN and MANKIND
PHILASTER

edited by Leah S. Marcus

edited by Douglas Bruster and Eric Rasmussen

edited by Suzanne Gossett

ARDEN EARLY MODERN DRAMA

THE
DUCHESS
OF MALFI

John Webster

for the King's Men at Blackfriars and the Globe

Edited by

LEAH S. MARCUS



Arden Early Modern Drama
1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2



Arden Shakespeare is an imprint of Methuen Drama

Methuen Drama
A & C Black Publishers Limited
36, Soho Square
London W1D 3QY
www.ardenshakespeare.com
www.methuendrama.com

ISBN 9781408119471 (hardcover) 9781904271734 (paperback)

Editorial matter © 2009 Leah S. Marcus

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Printed in Croatia by Zrinski

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The Editor

Leah S. Marcus is Edwin Mims Professor of English at Vanderbilt University. Her previous publications include *Childhood and Cultural Despair* (1978), *The Politics of Mirth* (1986), *Puzzling Shakespeare* (1988), *Unediting the Renaissance* (1996), two co-edited volumes of the writings and speeches of Queen Elizabeth I (2000, 2003) and a Norton Critical Edition of *The Merchant of Venice*. At present she is completing a Norton Critical Edition of *As You Like It*.

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GENERAL EDITORS' PREFACE

Arden Early Modern Drama (AEMD) is an expansion of the acclaimed Arden Shakespeare to include the plays of other dramatists of the early modern period. The series publishes dramatic texts from the early modern period in the established tradition of the Arden Shakespeare, using a similar style of presentation and offering the same depth of information and high standards of scholarship. We define 'early modern drama' broadly, to encompass plays written and performed at any time from the late fifteenth to the late seventeenth century. The attractive and accessible format and well-informed editorial content are designed with particular regard to the needs of students studying literature and drama in the final years of secondary school and in colleges and universities. Texts are presented in modern spelling and punctuation; stage directions are expanded to clarify theatrical requirements and possibilities; and speech prefixes (the markers of identity at the beginning of each new speech) are regularized. Each volume contains about twenty illustrations both from the period and from later performance history; a full discussion of the current state of criticism of the play; and information about the textual and performance contexts from which the play first emerged. The goal of the series is to make these wonderful but sometimes neglected plays as intelligible as those of Shakespeare to twenty-first-century readers.

AEMD editors bring a high level of critical engagement and textual sophistication to their work. They provide guidance in assessing critical approaches to their play, developing arguments from the best scholarly work to date and generating new

perspectives. A particular focus of an AEMD edition is the play as it was first performed in the theatre. The title-page of each volume displays the name of the company for which the play was written and the theatre at which it was first staged: in the Introduction the play is discussed as part of a company repertory as well as of an authorial canon. Finally, each edition presents a full scholarly discussion of the base text and other relevant materials as physical and social documents, and the Introduction describes issues arising in the early history of the publication and reception of the text.

Commentary notes, printed immediately below the playtext, offer compact but detailed exposition of the language, historical context and theatrical significance of the play. They explain textual ambiguities and, when an action may be interpreted in different ways, they summarize the arguments. Where appropriate they point the reader to fuller discussions in the Introduction.

CONVENTIONS

AEMD editions always include illustrations of pages from the early texts on which they are based. Comparison between these illustrations and the edited text immediately enables the reader to see clearly what a critical edition is and does. In summary, the main changes to the base text – that is, the early text, most often a quarto, that serves as the copy from which the editor works – are these: certain and probable errors in the base text are corrected; typography and spelling are brought into line with current usage; and speech prefixes and stage directions are modified to assist the reader in imagining the play in performance.

Significant changes introduced by editors are recorded in the textual notes at the foot of the page. These are an important cache of information, presented in as compact a form as is possible without forfeiting intelligibility. The standard form can be seen in the following example:

31 doing of] *Coxeter*; of doing *Q*; doing *Rawl*

The line reference ('31') and the reading quoted from the present editor's text ('doing of') are printed before the closing square bracket. After the bracket, the source of the reading, often the name of the editor who first made the change to the base text ('Coxeter'), appears, and then other readings are given, followed by their source ('of doing *Q*; doing *Rawl*'). Where there is more than one alternative reading, they are listed in chronological order; hence in the example the base text *Q* (= *Quarto*) is given first. Abbreviations used to identify early texts and later editions are listed in the Abbreviations and References section towards the end of the volume. Editorial emendations to the text are discussed in the main commentary, where notes on emendations are highlighted with an asterisk.

Emendation necessarily takes account of early texts other than the base text, as well as of the editorial tradition. The amount of attention paid to other texts depends on the editor's assessment of their origin and importance. Emendation aims to correct errors while respecting the integrity of different versions as they might have emerged through revision and adaptation.

Modernization of spelling and punctuation in AEMD texts is thorough, avoiding the kind of partial modernization that produces language from no known period of English. Generally modernization is routine, involving thousands of alterations of letters. As original grammar is preserved in AEMD editions, most modernizations are as trivial as altering 'booke' to 'book', and are unworthy of record. But where the modernization is unexpected or ambiguous the change is noted in the textual notes, using the following format:

102 trolls] (trowles)

Speech prefixes are sometimes idiosyncratic and variable in the base texts, and almost always abbreviated. AEMD editions expand contractions, avoiding confusion of names that might be similarly abbreviated, such as Alonzo/Alsemero/Alibius from *The Changeling*. Preference is given to the verbal form that prevails in the base text, even if it identifies the role by type, such as 'Lady' or 'Clown', rather than by personal name. When an effect of

standardization is to repress significant variations in the way that a role is conceptualized (in *Philaster*, for example, one text refers to a cross-dressed page as *Boy*, while another uses the character's assumed name), the issue is discussed in the Introduction.

Stage directions in early modern texts are often inconsistent, incomplete or unclear. They are preserved in the edition as far as is possible, but are expanded where necessary to ensure that the dramatic action is coherent and self-consistent. Square brackets are used to indicate editorial additions to stage directions. Directions that lend themselves to multiple staging possibilities, as well as the performance tradition of particular moments, may be discussed in the commentary.

Verse lineation sometimes goes astray in early modern playtexts, as does the distinction between verse and prose, especially where a wide manuscript layout has been transferred to the narrower measure of a printed page. AEMD editions correct such mistakes. Where a verse line is shared between more than one speaker, this series follows the usual modern practice of indenting the second and subsequent part-lines to make it clear that they belong to the same verse line.

The textual notes allow the reader to keep track of all these interventions. The notes use variations on the basic format described above to reflect the changes. In notes, '31 SD' indicates a stage direction in or immediately after line 31. Where there is more than one stage direction, they are identified as, for example, '31 SD1', '31 SD2'. The second line of a stage direction will be identified as, for instance, '31.2'. A forward slash / indicates a line-break in verse.

We hope that these conventions make as clear as possible the editor's engagement with and interventions in the text: our aim is to keep the reader fully informed of the editor's role without intruding unnecessarily on the flow of reading. Equally, we hope – since one of our aims is to encourage the performance of more plays from the early modern period beyond the Shakespeare canon – to provide texts which materially assist performers, as well as readers, of these plays.

PREFACE

It has been nearly half a century since the last full-dress edition of *The Duchess of Malfi*, by John Russell Brown, appeared in 1964. When Suzanne Gossett asked me whether I would like to edit this magnificent play, I jumped at the chance. Little did she know how much labour she had condemned herself to as the Arden Early Modern Drama General Editor responsible for supervising my work. Every Arden edition is a collaboration among many diligent people, and this one is no exception. My primary debts, gratefully acknowledged, are to Richard Proudfoot, who helped me think outside the box when wrestling with Webster's metrics; to David Kastan, who convinced me in a dark moment that the book would, one day, be published; and to Suzanne Gossett, whom I affectionately term my 'handler', and who sacrificed weeks of golden summer in Italy to correction and proofing. Suzanne read every word and notation symbol multiple times, improving the edition every time. I also owe warm thanks to John Jowett, who made several crucial interventions, particularly in his wonderful suggestions about early staging. The series publisher, Margaret Bartley, has been helpful at every point through difficult times of transition. Linden Stafford is the most wonderful and sharp-eyed copy-editor anyone could reasonably hope for. She has also doubled as my expert on French spelling and British ornithology – not an insignificant matter in a play full of references to birds and bird life. Jane Armstrong, Hannah Hyam and Damian Love have saved the edition from numerous errors. Charlotte Loveridge and Anna Wormleighton located and prepared many of the illustrations.

I also owe thanks to a number of other colleagues who contributed to the project along the way, especially Lynn

Enterline, who taught me about melancholy and hyenas, Kathryn Schwarz, Holly Tucker, Katharine B. Crawford, and the rest of the Vanderbilt GEMCS crew, who patiently endured much exposure to material from the edition in our seminars over the years and offered many insights. Laurie Maguire, Tiffany Stern, Carolyn Dever and Michael Neill supplied me with their research and advance publications just when they were needed. David Gunby, whose name occurs many times in this volume to record my debts to his edition of Webster, read and critiqued the Introduction. Cynthia Cyrus of the Blair School of Music at Vanderbilt offered enormously valuable advice about the musical setting for the song in Appendix 3. Her student Christine Smith ably prepared the final version of the song text.

I also owe a considerable debt of gratitude to my own graduate students, those who kept freshening my thinking about the play over the years and those who intervened more concretely as research assistants. Donald Jellerson helped prepare the playtext in its early stages and did the first transcriptions of the texts in Appendices 1 and 2. Jennifer Clement helped with research. Both of them will find themselves credited in the commentary for suggestions I adopted. Bethany Packard checked all the textual notes, and Jane Wanninger checked the commentary. For any errors that remain I am, of course, responsible, and promise never, ever to attribute even one mistake to them.

Research for the edition was done primarily at the Harry Ransom Center of the University of Texas, the Bodleian Library, the British Library, the Morgan Library in New York, the Houghton Library at Harvard, and the New York Public Library. I owe special thanks to all of the library staffs for help above and beyond the call of duty. Special mention also goes to the Vanderbilt Interlibrary Loan Office, which has the magical ability to conjure up manuscript microfilms and even eighteenth-century books at very short notice. My thanks also to the editors and publishers of *Shakespeare Studies* for permission to reprint, in revised form, several paragraphs from my article ‘The author

and/or the critic', in *Shakespeare Studies Forum: The Return of the Author*, ed. Patrick Cheney, *Shakespeare Studies*, 36 (2008), 90–100. I would also like to thank Vanderbilt University for granting me leave time and money to carry out research for the edition.

Finally, as always, I would like to thank my family: my daughters Emily, who was luckily already off at university when the real work began; and Lauren, who lost much quality time because of notes and collations; and my husband David, who offers emotional support and, even more crucial, fixes dinner. This edition is dedicated to my own private Duchess, my great aunt Dr Mary Leah Cook of Waynesville, Ohio (1869–1964), who was an old woman before I was born and nevertheless transformed my life. She was a teacher, physician, writer, amateur botanist, zoologist, farmer and philanthropist whose cheerful practicality, high intelligence and strength of character touched all who knew her. In small-town America, as at the court of Amalfi, though there is a vast difference in scale, 'Integrity of life is fame's best friend, / Which nobly beyond death shall crown the end.'

INTRODUCTION

John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* is the most frequently performed of all non-Shakespearean plays of the early modern period. It has its share of violence and of intriguingly strange props – a poisoned holy book, a severed human hand. But it also has as its central figure one of the most luminous and charismatic of all early modern stage heroines. The Duchess who dominates her eponymous play is never called by any name other than her title, but she is far from being a stereotypical aristocrat. She breaks the social rules and evades her aristocratic brothers' attempts to control her by contracting a daring clandestine marriage and managing to keep it secret through a number of years and the births of two children.

The Duchess's brothers are so corrupt that they verge on the ludicrous – a melancholy Cardinal who flouts his vows of celibacy and openly keeps a mistress; a duke, Ferdinand of Calabria, who suffers from a strangely incestuous attraction for his sister and eventually goes mad, believing himself to be a wolf-man. But their vices are chilling as well as ludicrous and the two brothers are very dangerous, sending their spy Bosola to pry out the Duchess's secrets and surrounding her with an atmosphere of suspicion and paranoia. The miracle is that she manages to build and sustain a happy and productive life for herself even as spies and corruption swirl around her. She is unquestionably a proto-feminist in her evasions of her brothers' attempts to control her, yet she places such a low value on the power tactics by which they attempt to enforce their will upon her that she refuses to use similar tactics even to save herself and her family. The Duchess of Malfi is only one of many unforgettable characters with which John Webster has filled his dramatic masterpiece.

She starts out as a charming, witty woman who lights up the play with her love of life whenever she comes onstage; she grows over time and persecution into a figure of almost superhuman courage and endurance as her brothers attempt (with a singular lack of success) to break her spirit, reduce her to madness and depravity, and turn her into one of themselves.

WHO WAS JOHN WEBSTER?

The 1998 film *Shakespeare in Love* portrays John Webster around 1593 as a terrifying lad who enjoys torturing small animals. While dangling a mouse before a hungry cat, Webster informs Shakespeare that he acted a part in *Titus Andronicus* in which he was beheaded. That most macabre of Shakespearean plays has evidently shaped Webster's aesthetic sense: he confides, 'I like it when they cut heads off. And the daughter mutilated with knives.' The implication is that Webster as a dramatist in later life will remain mired in adolescent fantasies of blood and dismemberment while Shakespeare moves on to greater things.

For casual viewers, perhaps, *Shakespeare in Love* offers a fair enough characterization of Webster's work, or at least of his best-known plays, *The White Devil* and *The Duchess of Malfi* (hereafter referred to as *Malfi*). In *Malfi* alone, we are treated to a severed hand, a waxworks display of corpses, a parade of madmen and a courtesan murdered by kissing a poisoned Bible, in addition to the standard Jacobean complement of deaths by sword or dagger. But the film portrait of Webster, however hilarious as parody, is far removed from the historical figure, who was as much an idealist as he was a specialist in violence, and whose major tragedies evoke bizarre images of mutilation and death as part of a carefully calibrated response to specific Jacobean issues and problems.

Before 1976, when researcher Mary Edmond put the two figures together, we had known of a John Webster (died 1614) who was a wealthy coach-maker in London and of a younger

John Webster (born *c.* 1580 and died *c.* 1626–34) who was a dramatist and man of letters, but we had not known that the two men were father and son. Webster the elder was an influential member of the Merchant Taylors Company, one of the largest and most powerful of the London livery companies, which could boast among its honorary members the heir apparent to the English throne, Prince Henry, made free of the company in 1607, and many other notables. John Webster the younger was evidently the elder of at least two sons. A second son, Edward, devoted his life to running the family's coaching business, which left John free to follow other pursuits.

John Webster the playwright probably attended the Merchant Taylors' School, which was run by his father's company. Its famous headmaster, Richard Mulcaster, was no longer there by Webster's time, but it was still one of the best of London's grammar schools, and would have given Webster a top-class humanist education, with strong emphasis on Latin and Greek language and literature. Perhaps John Webster the elder intended his first-born son for the law. We find in the records of New Inn, Chancery, a note of the 1598 admission of a 'John Webster of London' who was 'son and heir apparent of John Webster of London, Gentleman'. This may not be John Webster the playwright, since Webster was a common name, but the dates are right, and throughout his life Webster held close ties with members of the Inns of Court (Forster, 31–56). In any case, legal training would have served Webster well if, as Muriel Bradbrook has speculated, John worked in the white-collar, legal and record-keeping side of the family's coaching business while his younger brother ran the manufacturing side. During the many decades of his activity in the London theatre, John Webster was probably also active in the family's flourishing transport enterprise.

The mainstay of the business was the manufacture, rental and sale of coaches and 'caroches' (large coaches), which were elaborately fitted out with upholstery (hence the link to the Merchant Taylors). Coaches were newly fashionable in London

and clogged the city streets; in plays of the period there were running jokes about their wild popularity and also their potential, when curtained for privacy, to serve as brothels on wheels (see 4.2.103–5n.). The Websters also dealt in horses for posting long distances at great speed and built carts used for a variety of purposes, from the rough conveyances used to display scolds and sexual malefactors about the streets of London and carry the condemned to the gallows, to the much heavier vehicles that bore the elaborate pageants in the annual Lord Mayor's Show and James I's 1604 royal entry into London (Bradbrook). Given Webster's background in the coach and carting business, it is amusing to recognize his plays' many references to coaches, caroches and post-horses as a seventeenth-century version of product placement – inspiring desire for the sumptuous vehicles referred to (but not as a rule displayed) onstage.

It was quite common for leading actors and playwrights to have membership in the London livery companies: actor Edward Alleyn was probably a freeman of the Worshipful Company of Innholders, like his brother; Robert Armin and John Lowin were both free of the Goldsmiths; Ben Jonson was (infamously) a Bricklayer; James Burbage and possibly also his son Richard Burbage were Joiners; John Heminges was a Grocer, and so on (Kathman, 'Freemen'). But John Webster's connection to the Merchant Taylors was closer than that of most actors and playwrights to their respective livery companies and he appears to have been quite proud of it, at least by fits and starts. After his father's death in 1614, he was made free of the company by patrimony. In 1624 he wrote and staged the London Lord Mayor's Show for John Gore, a Merchant Taylor who had just been elected Lord Mayor. The printed version of Webster's show, *Monuments of Honour*, called a 'Magnificent Triumph' on its title-page, was printed by his neighbour Nicholas Okes, who also printed several of Webster's plays. The title-page announces that the show was '*Invented and Written*' not by John Webster Poet but '*by John Webster Merchant-Taylor*' (Webster, 3.253).

What did it mean in Jacobean London to be both an active member of a livery company and an active participant in the world of the theatre? For one thing, Webster's dual career no doubt accounted at least in some measure for the intermittence of his record as a playwright. He usually worked collaboratively, as was standard for the period, writing around 1602 with a varied group of dramatists: Michael Drayton, Thomas Dekker, Thomas Middleton, Thomas Heywood and others. With the exception of *Westward Ho* and *Northward Ho!*, both collaborations with Dekker printed in 1607, and Dekker's *Sir Thomas Wyatt* (1607), which reworked another collaboration, all of these earliest plays are lost. We do have Webster's 1604 revisions of John Marston's *Malcontent*, which are adroitly designed to relocate the play from the playing conditions of an Elizabethan boys' company to those of a Jacobean adult company, the King's Men. The fact that Webster was the dramatist who did these revisions suggests that he was already regarded as someone familiar with the London theatre and the requirements of its different venues; Webster's additions include an Induction in which five actors from the King's Men, among them Richard Burbage and John Lowin, amusingly play themselves (Webster, 3.309–56). For several years after 1607 we have nothing, then in a great burst Webster's single-authored plays *The White Devil* (1612) and *The Duchess of Malfi* (1613–14), a published verse tribute on the death of Prince Henry called *A Monumental Column* (1613) and prose additions to Sir Thomas Overbury's enormously popular *New and Choice Characters* (1615), including a Character of 'An excellent Actor' explicitly aimed at defending the profession of actor against a defamatory earlier character by an Overbury imitator who had called actors ignorant rogues (Webster, 3.483; Forker, 546–7, n. 33).

There follows another quiet spell from 1615 to 1623, during which Webster may have composed *Guise*, which is lost; *Anything for a Quiet Life* with Middleton (c. 1621); and one more single-

authored play, *The Devil's Law-Case* (1617–19). Significantly, this period of relative inactivity in the theatre followed Webster's 1615 inauguration into full membership in the Merchant Taylors Company. Then from 1623 onwards Webster again became active in the theatre, publishing two of his three surviving single-authored plays that had not previously been published, writing his *Lord Mayor's Show* and beginning a renewed career of collaboration with William Rowley, Thomas Heywood, Philip Massinger and others that lasted at least until 1626, the last year in which we have reliable records that he was still alive (Webster, 3.xl–xli). Given the infrequency with which he wrote as a single author, it is a remarkable tribute to Webster's formidable talent that his name stands in the canon alongside or above those of dramatists who were much more prolific than he.

Unlike Shakespeare but like Ben Jonson, Webster has left a body of critical commentary about his work as a dramatist and man of letters. His dual career also probably accounts for a certain defensiveness we can sense in these critical pronouncements. Most of the theatre people who were also members of livery companies tended to conceal or at least downplay their membership, since it was likely to detract from their claim to the status of gentleman. A satiric poem, 'Notes from Blackfriars' (printed in 1618), describes Webster, among other frequenters of Blackfriars theatre, as 'Crabbed (*Websterio*) / *The Play-wright, Cart-wright: whether? either? ho –*' implying that his dual professions undercut one another and make him impossible to categorize (*Certain Elegies*). Another satire of 1615 glances derisively at the family business by referring to Webster's style as 'dressed over with oyle of sweaty Post-horse' and guilty of 'hackney similitudes' (Stephens; see also Forker, 546–7, n. 33). If anything, Webster's constant need to negotiate between two professions, one of them more frankly and grittily commercial than the other, appears to have made him more sophisticated than most in understanding that drama had to be marketed like any other commodity and in articulating tensions

relating to the playwright's need to accommodate the tastes of various audiences, both in stage performances and in print.

Lukas Erne's study of *Shakespeare as Literary Dramatist* cites Webster repeatedly to explicate the seventeenth-century shift by which control and 'authority' over playtexts gradually shifted from the dramatic companies that owned them to the authors who had written them. For Erne, Webster is effectively a critic who articulates what Shakespeare should have written about the printing of his plays but didn't. Already in his preface to the 1612 edition of *White Devil* Webster explains that he has taken the 'liberty' of publishing the play not to 'affect praise' but to redeem his work from a poor performance at the Red Bull theatre, where it was deprived of a 'full and understanding Auditory'. He warns readers not to expect the play to conform to the classical rules and corresponding *gravitas* of a 'true Drammaticke Poem' because of his need to fit it to the scruffy venue of its performance. He also defends himself against the charge of slow composition: 'Alcestides *objecting* that Eurypides had onely in three daies composed three verses, whereas himselfe had written three hundred,' Euripides retorts, '*heres the difference, thine shall onely bee read for three daies, whereas mine shall continue three ages*' (Webster, 1.140). The self-comparison to Euripides is based on more than habits of composition, and has been discussed by critics at least since Thomas Campbell and Swinburne (see Moore, 49–51; Swinburne, 297). Like Euripides, the last of the three great classical Greek dramatists, Webster overturns classical convention by focusing in a realistic mode on women and women's issues, creating low-born characters who sometimes exceed their betters in intelligence and acuity, and displaying the weaknesses of 'heroes' whose exalted status is not matched by personal worth (see also Loraux).

In his preface to *The Devil's Law-Case* (printed 1623) Webster struggles with the conundrum of representing dramatic action in a literary text designed for readers: '*A great part of the grace of this (I confesse) lay in Action; yet can no Action ever be gracious,*

where the decency of the Language, and Ingenious structure of the Scene, arrive not to make up a perfect Harmony' (Webster, 2.78). This statement nicely balances a recognition of the power of action onstage and the power of a competing 'grace' of inferred action, poetry and structure as communicated in a literary text for readers (Erne, 77). When Erne discusses the distinction between a 'play', which is staged, and a 'poem', which is read, he again calls upon Webster, whose preface to *Malfi* (1623) insists on calling the published text a 'poem' destined to last 'when the poets themselves were bound up in their winding-sheets' (p. 122). The title-page specifies that the version offered readers is 'The perfect and exact copy, with diverse things printed that the length of the play would not bear in the presentment' or performance. If we put preface and title-page together, we can infer that in Webster's view 'plays' are likely to be shorter and 'poems', their printed versions, longer and more elaborate, designed to be perused by succeeding generations of readers who can linger over felicitous details in a way that audiences in the theatre cannot (Erne, 145). At the same time that he was being chided by contemporary wits for his ignoble participation in the world of London manufacturing, Webster, like Ben Jonson, was also in the process of defining a new literary role for the playwright as publishing critic and man of letters.

We have come a fair distance from the Webster of *Shakespeare in Love* and his alleged fixation on stage dismemberment and strange images of death. The historical John Webster's critical pronouncements do not sound like those of one who is particularly invested in such matters; indeed they sometimes express Jonsonian scorn for the lumpish bottom strata of London viewing audiences, whose tastes ran to mindless violence and noise. The two plays that have earned Webster his reputation as connoisseur of the bizarre are also his acknowledged masterpieces, *White Devil* and *Malfi*, both of which were written and performed around 1612–15, during the brief, incandescent period of Webster's most concentrated literary output. His

literary productivity during those years was at least in part a response to political crisis that he also demonstrably experienced as a deep personal loss. The final, climactic tableau of Webster's 1624 *Lord Mayor's Show* focuses on Prince Henry as a paragon of virtue and accomplishment, a pattern to the livery company of which he was an honorary member and to London at large – and this despite the fact that Prince Henry had at that point been dead for twelve years (Webster, 3.247). Both the *Lord Mayor's Show* of 1624 and Webster's earlier verse tribute to Prince Henry published in 1613, shortly after Henry's death, use striking images for the dead prince that Webster also applies to another virtuous dead 'prince', the Duchess of Malfi (Neill, 334–8). The verse tribute refers to Henry as a paragon whose 'beames shall breake forth from thy hollow Tombe, / Staine the time past, and light the time to come' (Webster, 3.383); in the play, Antonio describes the Duchess as someone whose 'worth' 'stains the time past, lights the time to come' (*Malfi*, 1.2.127). In creating his Duchess, Webster was also evoking a set of ideals that appeared to many in England to have died with Henry.

To tie Jacobean stage 'melancholy' to broader crises of the time is by now a critical platitude. And yet the images of fragmentation and dismemberment that characterize Webster's *Malfi* are prominent in other plays of the period as well, and link up with contemporary issues like Protestant fear of engulfment by Catholicism and Londoners' perception of a growing estrangement between court and city. Balanced as he was between his two professions of 'playwright and cartwright', Webster may have felt this estrangement more keenly than most. The court was a natural magnet for those involved in the London playhouses, providing them with income, patronage and visibility and at least nominally underwriting all of their activities, since James I on ascending the English throne had made the drama a royal monopoly and attached each of the London dramatic companies to a member of the royal family. The City was another magnet, increasingly estranged from

the court. The work of its 'industrious sort of people' (Hill) provided the primary source of Webster's family income and prestige. London was a centre of manufacturing and civic pride, a laboratory for emerging values that challenged royal prerogative powers in the name of citizens' liberties.

WEBSTER AND JACOBAN NOSTALGIA

In 1603 James I came down from Scotland and claimed the English throne to nearly universal applause and a collective sigh of relief. After the final years of the reign of Elizabeth I, which had seen widespread famine, war with Spain and an increase in the perennial anxieties over the childless Virgin Queen's refusal to name a successor and thereby secure the nation's religious status as Protestant rather than Catholic, Londoners in 1603 were treated to the sight of a married monarch already blessed with an heir and a spare in Princes Henry and Charles, apparently staunchly Protestant, and offering an implicit promise of national renewal and vitality. As is the nature of sudden bursts of political euphoria, the enthusiasm quickly began to fade, particularly among the more militant Protestants. James made peace with Spain in 1604 and showed no interest in continuing the Continental wars in support of beleaguered Protestantism that Elizabeth, who had defeated the Spanish Armada in 1588, had continued to tolerate during the 1590s by offering them some financial support. James delivered a mixed message on Protestantism, appearing to favour broader tolerance of Catholicism, at least until the uncovering of the Catholic Gunpowder Plot conspiracy in 1605 forced him to retrench. To critics, he appeared to continue to show undue preference to pro-Catholic factions at court. He developed a reputation for bounty – great generosity towards his favourites and seemingly limitless spending at court – that gradually soured his relationship with London and Parliament, who were expected to support his financial largesse. His relatively open erotic attachment to male favourites and his tolerance for drunkenness and

debauchery at court also helped to alienate the more strait-laced among his subjects.

While for many in England James I represented a break with the Elizabethan past, his heir apparent Prince Henry offered elements of continuity with the goals of Elizabethan Protestantism. Henry was particularly popular with strongly anti-Catholic elements at court and in the City; he was a militant Protestant, at least by comparison with his father; a good sportsman whose projection of an aura of virile masculinity suggested a contrast with his father's appearance of effeminacy, a 'Renaissance man' whose many talents and interests appeared poised upon his succession to reunify the nation. But in 1612 Henry died – so suddenly and unexpectedly that many suspected poison.

Much has been written about the Jacobean cult of Elizabeth that, particularly after the death of Prince Henry, began to flourish among those who were becoming alienated from the Stuart regime. With the loss of the prince, the one remaining member of the royal family who appeared to carry a continuing dedication to the goals of the militant Protestants was Henry's sister Elizabeth, who married the staunchly Protestant Frederick V, Elector Palatine, shortly after Prince Henry's death. The fact that she was named after Elizabeth I perhaps encouraged a conflation of the two figures in the public mind. At any rate, Princess Elizabeth was celebrated as Elizabeth I *rediviva* and many of the symbols associated with the reign of the dead queen were applied to her: poets lauded her as Astraea, goddess of justice, a second phoenix, and so on. At the same time, Elizabeth I's shortcomings as a monarch were retrospectively forgotten or at least placed in altered perspective, and militant Protestants and others disaffected with Stuart rule came increasingly to focus on her reign as a lost golden time of military triumph and goodwill between monarch and people.

An increased interest in female protagonists in drama of the Jacobean era can be correlated with nostalgia for the reign of Elizabeth I and values she had posthumously come to represent

(Watkins; Shepherd; Hageman and Conway). The most obvious case is writer Thomas Heywood, who produced a number of literary works in various genres that took their inspiration from the portrayal of Elizabeth I as Protestant martyr in John Foxe's *Book of Martyrs* (1563) and emphasized the dead queen's role as a unifying symbol for her subjects and as a bulwark against Catholicism. The two plays of Heywood's popular sequence *If You Know Not Me, You Know Nobody* (1604–5) commemorated Elizabeth by replaying high points of her reign and tying her to a fantasy of London liberty and autonomy that the historical Elizabeth would, no doubt, have repudiated. Thomas Dekker's *Whore of Babylon* (1607) brings Elizabeth onstage in another guise as the heroically virtuous 'Titania the Faerie Queene', who battles victoriously against the 'inveterate malice, Treasons, Machinations, Underminings, and continual bloody stratagems, of that Purple whore of Roome', the eponymous Whore of Babylon (Dekker, 2.497). Critics have linked even the skull of Gloriana in Middleton's *Revenger's Tragedy* (1606) with a combination of Jacobean nostalgia for a lost world of virtue associated with the Virgin Queen, for whom 'Gloriana' had been a frequent epithet late in her reign, and rage over the sad truth that such a glorious figure had, in the end, died and decayed (Mullaney; Allman; Hyland).

Webster was working closely with Middleton, Heywood and Dekker on other projects when they produced these plays. Of course artistic proximity is no guarantee of political commonality. But if we look at Webster's dramatic career over time, we see his plays repeatedly advocating citizen as opposed to courtly values, portraying Catholic rituals and institutions as inherently corrupt, and valorizing individual probity as opposed to inherited rank as a guarantor of personal worth. Simon Shepherd has identified *Malfi* as the last and most eloquent in a series of plays written and staged around 1610–13 centring on virtuous, heroic women who challenge corrupt men that attempt to assert political and sexual dominance over them: George Chapman's *The Revenge of Bussy*

d'Ambois (1610–11), Middleton's *The Lady's Tragedy* (1611), Dekker's *Match Me in London* (1611–12), Cyril Tourneur's *The Atheist's Tragedy* (1611) and finally *The Duchess of Malfi* (1613–14). All of these works at least implicitly replay elements of Jacobean nostalgia for Elizabeth by associating female autonomy with virtue, and domination by courtly males with corruption and oppression. Of course, as Andrew Gurr has noted, some of the new stage emphasis on women can probably be attributed to a shift in audience sympathies as more women attended plays (Gurr, *Playgoing*, 71–2). But men in Jacobean audiences were also drawn by the new theatrical emphasis on women's issues; arguably, they too could potentially identify with political subjects who were abased and implicitly feminized as a result of tyranny. The 1610–13 plays that Shepherd has noted as leading up to *Malfi* carry an element of muted political critique in which female autonomy calls up associations with the lost court of Elizabeth I, and male sexual and political dominance resonates with the corruption and absolutist ideology of the court of James I.

Of course, Webster's *Duchess of Malfi*, as a wife and mother of several children, departs strikingly from official images of the sterile Virgin Queen. In Webster's play we are in the realm of the cultural imaginary: the Duchess's fecund, happy life as a wife and mother enacts a fantasy of Tudor dynastic succession that Elizabeth had obstinately refused to fulfil. There had, however, been persistent rumours of Elizabeth's sexual dalliances, of her secret affairs or marriages, of children born surreptitiously while she went on progress; there were also aspirants to the throne who claimed to be the queen's natural children (Levin). The clandestine marriage of Webster's *Duchess* recalls these rumours and redeems a female ruler from the most scurrilous of them in that her children are born in wedlock; at the end of the play, the eldest son of the Duchess and Antonio is poised to succeed her. The Duchess also sometimes echoes the language of Elizabeth I. Like the monarch, she frequently refers to herself as 'prince' rather than the more gender-specific 'princess'; the Duchess also

refers to witchcraft practices against herself that parallel forms of witchcraft actually used against Elizabeth (4.1.61–4 and n.; Marcus, *Puzzling*, 53–105); and Webster's contemporaries may also have sensed echoes of Elizabeth's excommunication by the Pope in the scene of the Duchess's banishment (3.4). Some of the pathos of *Malfi* comes from the fact that it offers a vision, albeit fleeting, of a radiant female ruler who has used her sexuality productively – kept her virtue and authority intact and still managed to produce heirs, as Elizabeth I never did. Early in the play, Antonio offers an idealized image of what a court could be: 'a common fountain, whence should flow / Pure silver drops in general' to nurture and sustain both courtiers and commonwealth. The Duchess's brothers exemplify Antonio's contrasting vision of a corrupt court, polluting the 'common fountain' and spreading 'death and diseases' through their 'cursed' example (1.1.11–15). Only the Duchess and those closest to her somehow manage to escape the worst of the general contamination.

Webster's later writings continue in the same vein of guarded anti-court sentiment. A decade after its initial composition, the 1623 First Quarto edition of *Malfi* reiterates a critique of traditional aristocratic hierarchy across several layers of its printed text (see Quarto Paratext, pp. 114–26). In Webster's dedicatory letter to 'George Harding, Baron Berkeley, . . . Knight of the Order of the Bath to the Illustrious Prince Charles', the playwright discounts these courtly connections, 'The ancientest nobility being but a relic of time past and the truest honour indeed being for a man to confer honour on himself, which your learning strives to propagate and shall make you arrive at the dignity of a great example.' Webster's dedicatory letter is echoed within the play through the Duchess's marriage to Antonio, a man of low birth, and her repeated statements that it is not rank but virtue that counts. Thomas Middleton's commendatory poem printed in the 1623 edition strikes a similar note, claiming that individual merit rather than royal and aristocratic connections is the best guarantor of artistic worth:

. . . for every worthy man
Is his own marble; and his merit can
Cut him to any figure and express
More art than death's cathedral palaces,
Where royal ashes keep their court.

(p. 123)

Anyone reading Webster's play a year after its publication in 1623 would receive an even stronger political message from the Middleton endorsement. Middleton's *A Game at Chess* (1624) satirized James I and Prince Charles's enormously unpopular machinations for a marriage between Charles and the Spanish Infanta. William Rowley, who also contributed a commendatory poem to the 1623 *Malfi*, probably played the fat Archbishop of Spalato in the same production of *A Game at Chess* (Middleton, 2.293). The play was a phenomenal box-office success, but was shut down as seditious after a nine days' run and Middleton himself was forced to go into hiding. He never wrote another play. After the debacle of *A Game at Chess*, Webster went on to further collaborations with Heywood, Dekker, Rowley and other dramatists whose work had long been associated with critique of the Jacobean court.

All of which is not to suggest that *Malfi* can be reduced to the status of an anti-Catholic or anti-Jacobean tract. Were the play no more than that it would scarcely have survived to fascinate subsequent readers and critics across a very wide spectrum of political and social prejudices from the seventeenth century to the present. But to place the play within its first historical milieu, however provisionally and speculatively, is to become attuned to resonances that can help us understand why it was so important to its contemporaries. *Malfi* places relatively good people (the Duchess, her husband Antonio, his friend Delio) in a nightmarish stew of Italian political and ecclesiastical corruption characterized by a peculiar devotion to bizarre displays of madness, fragmentation and truncation. Although the Duchess and Antonio do not manage

to survive to the end of the play, Webster offers the Duchess as an exemplar of heroic constancy in a twisted world that incarnates Protestant England's worst fears about Catholicism.

THE PLAY AND THE HISTORICAL SOURCES

Thanks to the research of Barbara Banks Amendola, we now know a great deal about the historical Duchess of Malfi and her immediate family. She was born into the glorious world of the Italian Renaissance, which was also the cut-throat world of Niccolò dei Machiavelli. The historical duchess was Giovanna d'Aragona, Duchess of Amalfi from 1493 until her disappearance some time after 1511. She was of royal blood, a daughter of the Spanish House of Aragon, which ruled the Kingdom of Naples more or less continuously between 1442 and 1501. The Duchess's grandfather was Ferrante I of Naples, who attained that title in 1458 and hung on to it tenaciously for thirty-six years. Her father, Enrico d'Aragona, was the eldest son of Ferrante I, but illegitimate. He was well regarded by his father, despite his irregular birth, and given the title of Marquess of Gerace. The Duchess's mother was Polissena Centelles, the daughter of Baron Antonio Centelles, a renegade magnate in a perennial state of rebellion against the House of Aragon. The marriage of the Duchess's parents was part of a peace treaty during which the rival families united against the threat posed by French invaders. Shortly after the wedding, however, Antonio Centelles was arrested and imprisoned by Ferrante I and his son Enrico, the new bridegroom, who would go on to become the Duchess's father. Baron Centelles was never heard from again. The Duchess's father ultimately reaped an appropriate reward for his Machiavellian tactics against his father-in-law. He was poisoned, probably by his own half-brother, a few weeks before the Duchess's birth. She was the elder of fraternal twins born in 1478; her elder brother Luigi, who inherited his father's title

but went on to become a Cardinal and aspirant to the papacy, had been born four years earlier.

The Duchess herself probably received a good education, since humanist learning was highly valued by the House of Aragon. At the age of twelve she was married to Alfonso Piccolomini, son of the Duke of Amalfi, who succeeded his father as duke in 1493. At the age of fourteen, therefore, Giovanna became Duchess of Amalfi. She had two children with Piccolomini, a girl who died at the age of eight in 1498 and a boy born the same year who eventually succeeded his father as Duke of Amalfi. Meanwhile, the Kingdom of Naples had been plunged into turmoil by the French invasion of 1495; the Duchess's husband was wounded in battle and died three years later, probably as a result of lingering ill health brought about by his war wounds, and several months before the birth of his son and heir. Upon the birth of her son, the Duchess of Malfi was named regent, and held the Duchy of Amalfi until her disappearance around 1511.

Giovanna Duchess of Malfi was young and beautiful; a portrait attributed to the workshop of Raphael and titled *Giovanna d'Aragona* probably represents her (Fig. 1; Amendola, 194–206). So far as we know, she avoided the sexual profligacy that characterized the behaviour of some of her close relatives and led an exemplary life, even as a widow – until she became front-page news in Italy and indeed around Europe as a result of the revelation of her scandalous secret marriage. A Neapolitan chronicler reported:

On Sunday November 17th 1510, it was common talk throughout the city of Naples, that the illustrious Signora Giovanna d'Aragona, daughter of the late illustrious Don Enrico d'Aragona, and sister of the most Reverend Monsignor Cardinal of Aragon, having let it be known that she wished to make a pilgrimage to Santa Maria of Loreto, had gone thither with a retinue of many carriages and thence departed



- 1 Portrait of Giovanna d'Aragona (oil on canvas), attributed to the workshop of Raphael

with Antonio da Bologna, son of Messer Antonino da Bologna, and gone with the aforesaid, saying that he was her husband, . . . leaving behind her one male child of ten, who was Duke of Amalfi.¹

- 1 Cited and trans. from Notar Giacomo della Morte, *Cronica di Napoli*, in Amendola, 149.

This initial account apparently came before there was public knowledge of the Duchess's children with Antonio da Bologna. We do not know the exact date of the Duchess's secret marriage – perhaps late 1505 or 1506. By the time she made it public in 1510, she and her husband had had two children whom they had miraculously managed to keep secret and she was pregnant with a third, who was probably born in 1511. After their public announcement the couple fled to Siena, trying to evade capture by agents of the Duchess's family. She and her two younger children were intercepted on their way from Siena to Venice and imprisoned in Amalfi; they were never heard from again. Her husband escaped to Milan, where he was murdered by a Daniele da Bozzolo in 1513, very likely at the behest of Cardinal Luigi d'Aragona, the Duchess's elder brother.

The story of the Duchess of Malfi captured the imaginations of many writers and readers even generations after her death and exists in a number of versions, beginning with the narrative of a Dominican friar, Matteo Bandello. Bandello appears to have known Antonio personally in Milan in the few years before his murder; Bandello wrote a novella in 1514 about the love story of Giovanna and Antonio in which Bandello himself figures as Antonio's friend Delio. This was a fictionalized account, not a historical narrative, and Bandello's rendering of Antonio, whom he actually knew, squares better with what we know from archival sources than his account of the Duchess and earlier portions of her story. Bandello is quite sympathetic to the lovers, lamenting the 'great cruelty' of the sexual double standard by which

we men always want to satisfy every whim that comes to our mind, and we do not want poor women to satisfy theirs . . . It seems to me a great stupidity that men consider that their honour and that of their house be vested in the appetite of a woman. If a man makes a mistake, however great, his relations do not lose their noble status . . . There was, for example, that

count (I will refrain from giving his name) who took a baker's daughter for his wife, and why? Because she had a great deal of property, and no one reprimanded him. Another count, noble and rich, took for his wife the daughter of a mule driver without even a dowry, for no more reason than it pleased him to do so, and now she has the place and rank of a countess and he is still a count as before.

(Bandello, trans. in Amendola, 111)

The earliest retellings of the tale of the Duchess of Malfi were those of the so-called 'Corona manuscripts' (Amendola), which circulated widely in different versions and largely repeated Bandello, but with some additions. In later life, Bandello lived in France in close proximity to the court of Queen Margaret of Navarre. One of her protégés, François de Belleforest, made a loose translation of Bandello's *Novelle* into French. The 'Unfortunate marriage of Seigneur Antonio Bologna with the Duchess of Malfi, and the piteous death of both' appeared as the first story in the second volume of his *Histoires tragiques* (Paris, 1565). Belleforest added long speeches and passages of moralization and was much more critical of the Duchess than Bandello had been. John Webster's main source of the story was likely William Painter's rendition of Belleforest into English in *The Palace of Pleasure* (see Appendix 1). The Spanish dramatist Lope de Vega also created a play based on the Duchess's story, *El mayordomo de la duquesa de Amalfi*, at about the same time as Webster's, though it is unlikely that the two dramatists knew each other's work (Garcia).

Painter's version of the story follows Belleforest in blaming the Duchess for her fate. Painter puts her in the same category as the Babylonian Queen Semiramis, who, he claims, is remembered not for her princely exploits but for her shameful record of 'vice', sexual licentiousness and cruelty. Similarly, the Duchess is a modern exemplar of the destructiveness of unbridled lust:

Thus I say, bicause a woman being as it were the Image of sweetnesse, curtesie & shamefastnesse, so soone as she steppeth out of the right tracte, and leaveth the smel of hir duetie and modestie, bisides the denigration of hir honor, thrusteth hir self into infinite troubles and causeth the ruine of such which should be honored and praised, if womens allurements solicited them not to follie.

(Appendix 1, p. 347)

Painter's account of the Duchess and Antonio casts her as the courtly seductress and him as the largely innocent victim who, after serving Frederick of Aragon during his exile in France, had retired to his house 'to live at rest and to avoyd trouble, forgetting the delicates of Courtes and houses of great men, to be the only husband of his owne revenue' until he was fatefully recruited as head of the Duchess's household (p. 348). Her folly and shameful lust drove her to seduce him, and both were destroyed by their passion. 'Who wold think that a great Ladie wold have abandoned hir estate, hir goods and childe, would have misprised hir honor and reputation, to folow like a vagabond, a pore and simple Gentleman . . . like a female Wolfe or Lionesse . . . and forget the Noble blood of Aragon?' (p. 372)

Mapping Painter's rather simplistic value system on to Webster's play, some critics have viewed Webster's Duchess as a cautionary example of the destructive power of lust, particularly in a high-born woman who can bring down the lives of others along with her own. But Webster's portrayal of the Duchess is much closer to Bandello's version: by wishing to marry, she is not demonstrating some monstrous illicit passion, 'like a female Wolfe or Lionesse', to quote Painter, but instead containing her sexuality in a productive way within marriage. Webster relocates the monstrous lust excoriated in Painter to the Duchess's brothers instead: the Cardinal is a sexual connoisseur, flaunting his disregard for his vows of ecclesiastical celibacy; Ferdinand

burns with incestuous lust for his sister and actually becomes a ‘Wolfe’ through his lycanthropy by the end of the play. The evidence we have of the play’s impact in early performances suggests that audience sympathy was solidly with the Duchess. The play was a success onstage, revived probably twice before it saw print in 1623 and several times thereafter (see pp. 91–6). Middleton’s commendatory verse calls the play a ‘*masterpiece of tragedy*’ and asks rhetorically, ‘who e’er saw this Duchess live and die / That could get off under a bleeding eye?’ (p. 123): that is, who could see the Duchess onstage without weeping at her fate? A manuscript poem by William Heminges, son of John Heminges, a shareholder in the King’s Men, the company that had staged Webster’s play, wittily refers to continuing sympathy for the Duchess around 1632, when the play had recently been revived. Heminges’s poem is a mock elegy mourning the ‘death’ of poet Thomas Randolph’s little finger, which had been severed during a brawl. Heminges quips that the company of London poets wishing to give the finger proper burial applied to Webster’s brother Thomas for coaches, only to find that all had been conscripted for the funeral of the Duchess of Malfi:

but websters brother would nott lend a Coach:
hee swore thay all weare hired to Convey
the Malfy dutches sadly on her way
(Smith, 12)

Webster’s version of the Duchess’s story makes use of Painter and also revises him; Webster may well have had access to Bandello, Belleforest or other versions of the story that were available in print (see Boklund; Forker; Amendola). But, like all playwrights of the period, he freely altered his source texts when it suited his dramatic purposes. Yet, mysteriously, in several instances he seems to have had access to historical information not in the published materials. Webster’s play includes the detail that the Duchess and Antonio’s eldest son survived them – a fact mentioned in none of the printed sources but only in some

of the Corona manuscripts. Similarly, Webster posits that the Duchess and the younger of her two brothers were twins – something that is likely to have been true, but is mentioned in none of the sources. Finally, Webster gives the Cardinal, the Duchess’s older brother, a mistress named Julia. Cardinal Luigi d’Aragona did in fact have a mistress named Giulia – yet another mysterious correspondence, since her name is not given in any of the major retellings of the story (Amendola, 176, xxii, 114). Perhaps Webster had access to oral reports by travellers returning from Italy or written sources of information that have not yet been uncovered. Or perhaps he was so preternaturally attuned to the Duchess’s story that he ‘invented’ circumstances that were, unbeknownst to him, supported by the historical record.

THE ARAGONIAN BROTHERS

Webster also altered numerous elements of the Duchess’s story, usually to intensify the horror that surrounds her. His portrait of her elder brother the Cardinal deviates from the sources by having Luigi d’Aragona murder his mistress as well as his sister: the episode in which he disposes of Julia by means of the poisoned Bible in 5.2 appears to be Webster’s own concoction. Similarly, Webster has the Cardinal in 3.4 formally divest himself of ecclesiastical authority through an elaborate religious ritual so that he can take up arms alongside the Pope. The historical Cardinal had no need to compartmentalize his life in that way. He had started out as a secular aristocrat, but gave up his wife and title as Marquess of Gerace for a bishopric and then a cardinal’s hat in the hopes of ascending to the papacy and consolidating the House of Aragon’s power over the Papal States. He was, after his ordination, a man of the church but also a man of action, putting on armour over his cardinal’s robes to sally into battle. He was also a *bon vivant* – one of the secular young cardinals of the period who doffed their ecclesiastical garb when it suited them and devoted themselves to high living, women and song.

Castiglione's *Courtier* shows the illustrious Luigi d'Aragona playing practical jokes at carnival time along with a merry band of tricksters (Castiglione, book 2, 87).

Webster's character is instead a brooding figure whose corruption is darkly corrosive rather than light-hearted, a 'melancholy churchman' whose apparently youthful face is 'nothing but the engendering of toads' (1.2.75–6). Webster portrays the Cardinal's use of ecclesiastical objects and rituals as vehicles for his own vice: he orchestrates the elaborate rite at the Shrine of Loreto to justify his abandonment of his cardinal's hat and office; he employs a Bible or some other sacred text to poison his unwanted mistress. Horatio Busino, a Catholic priest who served as chaplain to the Venetian ambassador in London in 1617–18, witnessed a performance of *Malfi*, probably in early 1618. The English, he complained, 'deride our religion as detestable and superstitious, and never represent any theatrical piece . . . without larding it with the vices and iniquity of some Catholic churchman, which move them to laughter and much mockery.' At the performance of *Malfi* they

represented the pomp of a Cardinal in his identical robes of state, very handsome and costly, and accompanied by his attendants, with an altar raised on the stage, where he pretended to perform service, ordering a procession. He then re-appeared familiarly with a concubine in public. He played the part of administering poison to his sister [Busino's error for 'mistress'; his diary had earlier complained that it was difficult for him accurately to describe distant things because of his short-sightedness (Busino, 138)] upon a point of honour, and moreover, of going into battle, having first gravely deposited his Cardinal's robes on the altar through the agency of his chaplains. Last of all, he had himself girded with a sword and put on his scarf with the best imaginable grace. All this they do

in derision of ecclesiastical pomp which in this kingdom is scorned and hated mortally.

(Busino, 145–6)

As Gibbons has suggested (3.4.0.1–2n.), the ‘altar’ may have (daringly) displayed a statue reproducing the Black Virgin of Loreto and Child – in which case the image would resonate with the wax bodies of 4.1 and doubtless increase the scene’s anti-Catholic frisson.

Webster’s portrayal of the Duchess’s twin brother Ferdinand also departs from the historical record in order to intensify the threat he represents. Ferdinand is Webster’s fiction. The Duchess’s twin brother was named Carlo, and was not directly implicated in her death along with his elder brother, Cardinal Luigi; the historical Carlo was married rather than single and also not, so far as we know, incestuously inclined, nor given to madness and lycanthropy (Amendola, 158). The name ‘Ferdinand’ instead evokes another member of the House of Aragon, Ferdinand d’Aragona of Spain; he and his queen were the Ferdinand and Isabella who sponsored Christopher Columbus’s voyages to the New World in 1492, two years after the Duchess of Malfi had married her first husband. But the Spanish Ferdinand was better known for his shrewdness and unscrupulousness as a political operator. Machiavelli praises him for his great and extraordinary successes:

Always in the name of religion, he resorted to a pious cruelty, despoiling the Marranos and driving them from his kingdom. There could be nothing more pitiful or unusual than this. Under the same cloak of piety he attacked Africa; he undertook his Italian campaign; and lastly he has made war on France. Thus, he has always planned and executed great things which have filled his subjects with wonder and admiration.

(Machiavelli, *Prince*, ch. 21)

This was, in other words, the Ferdinand who expelled the Jews and Muslims from Spain and set in motion an elaborate system of rules by which his countrymen eventually had to demonstrate *limpieza de sangre* – purity of blood from Moorish or Jewish admixtures – in order to assume any type of government post (Sweet). The historical Ferdinand’s emphasis on the purification of Spanish blood resonates strongly with Webster’s Aragonese brothers and their obsession with the purity (and corruptibility) of their own and their sister’s blood:

CARDINAL Shall our blood,
The royal blood of Aragon and Castile,
Be thus attained?

FERDINAND 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.

(2.5.21–6)

For even slightly paranoid Protestants among Webster’s contemporaries, the stage evocation of a territorial magnate descended from the House of Aragon may also have resonated with the reign of the Catholic ‘Bloody Mary’ Tudor, whose mother was Catherine of Aragon and who had claimed sovereignty over Naples by virtue of her marriage to Philip of Spain, also a descendant of the House of Aragon.

Unlike the Cardinal in the play, however, Webster’s Ferdinand appears to have no sexual outlet beyond incestuous yearning for his sister. His many expressions of narcissistic involvement in his sister’s body have been interpreted differently over time. During the heyday of Freudian criticism, Ferdinand was commonly understood as suffering a displaced Oedipal attachment to her (Lucas; Murray, 161–5). Other critics have explained his seemingly incestuous desires as displaced homoerotic attachment to the ‘strong-thighed bargeman’ and other male lovers he fantasizes his sister in bed with (2.5.42–5; see Calbi, 1–31) or